

# Preludes to a Science of Insurrection

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# 1 Preludes

1. The aphorism may have to become a genre of special importance to any sincerely radical intellectual, for the simple reason that anyone committed to writing down dangerous truths can only do so by snatching them quickly and irregularly from one's ever fleeting and dwindling free time. Obviously the blog post as a genre testifies to this, but the mundane group psychology and attention economies of the web impose various conservative pressures on those who would try to think through blogging. When so much of our thought and feeling is pre-channeled into status quo institutions (thoughts and feelings which we subtly but irredeemably falsify as the price we pay to have them taken seriously by the relatively more powerful), one of the only ways to maintain an honest, living, dangerous intellectual project is to constantly overflow the cup of one's life—already filled to the brim by alienated work—and accumulate every little splash on any old rag at hand. Despite the unpolished, incomprehensible, inane, and even incorrect elements which will be inevitable, one's strung-together, splash-soaked rags will constitute a work of intellectual quality in crucial ways superior to most systematic works. While systematic works may be nicely filled cups, they are almost always funded by quotidian status quo hypocrisies which are required for their production but erased from the product; aphorisms are crystals formed on those splashes of honesty and truth squeezed out by such hypocrisies, preludes to something larger and more dangerous. In my life so far I have probably spent too much time making my silly little splashes and not enough tending the cup, but whether that has been my error, my crime, or my brilliance, only time will tell.
2. To seek truth passionately does not imply one is uniquely capable of attaining it; so often such a passion is interpreted as arrogance. On the contrary, it indicates a uniquely energetic and honest form of modesty.

3. I have no vision for the future of society but this does not make my political philosophy any less of a world-historical, revolutionary rupture certain to change everything—for clearly it is!—it only means I am not a megalomaniac.
4. Anyone who would wish to be an artist or intellectual is responsible for generating energy in others, an energy which is essentially ethical. As status quo institutions continue to strangle anyone childish enough to pursue such a task—as the institutions become exponentially more efficient since the information revolution—we observe nothing less than a society immunizing itself against the very possibility of becoming ethical. That such a remarkable process has also become so invisible, not even palpable by some of the most sensitive souls, only reflects how rapidly and completely several core human faculties have been destroyed in the course of about forty years.
5. State, party, faction, cadre, “safe space”—a lineage.
6. There are still people on the radical left who do the selling newspapers thing. Just saying.
7. Being who one truly is: always the most radical thing one can do, individually. At first this sounds trite, until one recalls that it invokes authenticity, a non-starter for many.
8. Most of the benefits supposedly provided by status quo institutions fail to deliver their advertised satisfactions, but everyone goes on pretending to receive them, lest one be judged as incapable of happiness. The more success one has within the institutions, the more intense is this phenomenon. To have a comparatively decent perch in the world yet find almost all of its offerings unsatisfying appears as an absurd kind of ungratefulness. But this could not be more wrong: for people to traverse supposedly desirable stations and publicly out them for their emptiness is a first-class insurrectionary tactic. Such passings-through, which are also passings-over, concretely increase the truth

and freedom of those touched while also leaving the enemy terrain even less habitable for all who will traverse it in the future.

9. In the bourgeois professions it is hard to complain about work with a straight face, so the dissatisfactions pile up repressed behind smiles until the face grows weak and dull, for the face is no longer hiding a true self but rather revealing what one's self has truly become.
10. Every generation eventually begins to suspect all is going to hell in a hand basket. The ignorant and the highly educated tend to agree in dismissing such pronouncements as unreliable, cyclical conservatism; because they have recurred like clockwork since time immemorial, such judgments are no longer seen as possibly indicating any real, new, objective degeneration of culture but only relative differences of perspective across generations. For this reason, neither the naive nor the "critical" can take seriously what now seems the most objectively likely possibility. Even after controlling for cyclical generational dynamics in perception, with every passing generation the world *does* fall a little closer to hell, in a hand basket. Global warming indeed.
11. Whenever I am with a group, I always ask myself: What degree of this is theater? If a lot, I stay. If very little, I stay. Otherwise, I run for the door.
12. I have made something, I have priced it at negative infinity and I am smacking it out of your hand while saying "you break it, you buy it."
13. One must always keep the thread which runs from the beginning of one's life to the end. At any time, it can always be re-spun from whole cloth, but if one does not have—or cannot create—some thread running from the beginning to the end, this is the definition of being lost.
14. Hatred will never be a liberating force without the generosity to love one's enemies, for it is only through generosity that one can desire to destroy the evil in someone *for their own good*. One reason why

neither theoretical critique nor radical political projects do very much today is that people are far too happy to merely hate their enemies.

15. Listening to someone whose ideas I cannot take seriously, I go into a daze which is kind and attentive but also akin to sleep; I become surrounded by a haze of fog, composed of love, contempt, self-righteousness, and nothingness—in what proportions I can never determine.
16. Happiness derived from sunlight falsely inflates optimism; grey weather is depressing but grounding and for that reason more truthful.
17. Anyone who thinks social justice is more important than seeking the truth does not understand social justice and should be given what they are asking for: to be left alone.
18. People do not get more conservative after they fall in love, they just gain something worth conserving. The old puzzle about how young revolutionaries so easily settle into politically tranquil family lives is not a puzzle: family is typically the most intensely communist organization possible for most people in any society as atomized and pacified as ours. It is illusory to imagine that “family values” are conservative and the revolutionary path requires infinite openness to unconstrained sexual exploration and flexibility of commitments, etc. The family is just one tactic among others and in many cases one family contains more revolutionary potential than most radical subcultures.
19. The more carefully one observes the police, the more one’s hatred turns to pity and pity turns to contempt. Disinterested observation implies a privileged distance for sure; nonetheless, it is only when contempt then turns to laughter and forgetting that hatred of the police has completed itself. It is much better to spread the privilege necessary for this process to permeate the body politic than valorize as political culture a stillborn hatred little more than love turned bitter.
20. There have been times I have fallen in love but then realized I was only inventing it precisely to avoid the disappointing fact that I was

not falling in love. True love is no different, except one cares enough about the other to do this for eternity. In this, one finds a precious, secret joy which becomes a new reason to remain—perhaps, finally, a true one.

21. Modernity, democracy, capitalism: elites pretend to relinquish power to individuals but really only relinquish direct control—in favor of institutional manipulations which only modulate aggregate distributions of behavior, in exchange for a net increase in power, which comes as a cut of the profits derived from the new, more efficient equilibrium.
22. One can only have good character to the degree one is a character, in other words, an actor, a fake.
23. Most people need money, not radical politics. Most “radical” politics need more people, not money.
24. In Barclay Shields I got out of my system in about one year what many other young adults are now inheriting as a norm overtaking the basic ethical substance of their lives, namely, that saying and doing things on the internet can feel good.
25. I much prefer religious zealotry to vulgar atheism or so-called progressive religion, for only true zealotry can transcend the falsity of instrumental reason. In no way is this invalidated by the promise of other-worldly rewards, which mean nothing and only serve as a bridge to allow the great mass of fallen mortals to even fathom the otherwise incommensurable mode of life which is true religion. It always appears to others as if the believer *must* be driven by the instrumental purpose of obtaining some reward—but this is only because fallen mortals simply cannot access an experience of life beyond instrumental reason; that is what makes them fallen. The mortal thinks the believer is submitting to a primitive, traditional conception of reality in order to gain the benefits of a spiritual crutch in this world and

fantastic rewards in the next, but the exact opposite is true: the faithful refuse to submit to the tyranny of empirical reality—the most insidious order of dishonest anesthetics and false prizes ever known—in favor of a *true life now*, despite all indications against its possibility and with no guarantees of any rewards whatsoever.

26. Multiple people will write with indignation “Why is nobody talking about *X*?”—pretending not to realize they are talking about *X* as soon as humanly possible after *X* happened. Why don’t they just write something about it themselves and fill the gap they pretend to be concerned about? In most cases it is because they don’t have anything new, interesting, or valuable to say, i.e. they are not talking about it for the same reason as those maligned for their silence, namely, nobody has anything worth saying because typically it is exceedingly hard and rare to find something worth saying. A thing is worth saying to the degree it feeds into some substantively active, living process of which it is a part. In an atomized and pacified society such as ours, writing and speaking are rarely if ever part of a truly living process. Therefore, it is very poorly appreciated the degree to which “critical” media personalities and even some of our most intelligent friends on social media already long ago quit the game of trying to say anything uniquely valuable. The typical “hot take” does not even try to convey new or unique information to its readers beyond the information they are already expected to have, i.e. such odd artifacts are sometimes literally, perfectly uninformative in the technical sense of the term. Well then, what are these people doing, from what land comes this fever in which one so loudly has nothing to say? Such heavy souls are selling affects for pocket change, whether symbolic or material—selling the very performance of their life—to then be pawned off by those others who possess even less ability to produce their own original affects, let alone new information. This may be all that is new in “new media.”
27. When all of one’s “free time” is robbed, the entire social game of lib-



eralism ends and becomes a race to the death. It implies certain parties to the social game of liberalism have been vanquished not only in the limited warfare of economic competition but altogether as human lives. Continuing to play such a game as if it is not already over brings a little bit of certain death every passing day. In contrast, each day one instead chooses to live is no longer a “day off” but a re-entry into the historical mortal combat from which liberal democracy was only a short-lived and illusory reprieve. This prospect is vertiginous until it is recalled one is already standing on the gallows. To risk death in a mad dash for freedom is certainly no more frightening; it only seems more frightening to those who do not think honestly about where they already stand. For it is only by choosing life that one can win a race to the death.

28. I try to live so as to optimize the insurrectionary energy that would follow if I were unjustly killed, imprisoned, or disappeared. Another way to put this: I have been lucky enough to learn first hand that revolutionary politics is probably no more and no less than building true relationships and fighting to keep them. Incidentally, this is also one reason why the decline of organized religion has been a world-historical catastrophe, for whether we like it or not religion is the only basis humans have ever had, at least so far, for forging the kinds of relationships which make resistance to evil possible—relationships which dare to exist on the level of life or death.

## **2 Essays**

### **The meaning of the revolutionary position**

If I insist on the revolutionary position, it is not to insist on the dichotomy between revolution and reform. Most of us today will agree with Gorz that there exists a class of revolutionary reforms, at which point the relevant distinction becomes the distinction between revolutionary reforms and re-

formist reforms. Today, Nancy Fraser suggests the critical distinction is between “system-conforming” changes and “system-transforming” changes, but it seems to me that the long-standing theoretical and practical difficulty remains the same: which types of projects (individual or collective) effectively oppose capitalism and push society toward justice, and which types of projects (whether through mystification, co-optation, or defeat) merely improve capitalism for some at the price of renouncing the system-level opposition which would be the maximally true, coherent, and just position.

Yet, to my mind, this is the essence of the revolutionary position: To believe that the organisation of the world’s institutions are unjust, to see empirically that a key feature of these institutions is precisely that they offer particular groups small gains in return for their renunciation of system-level opposition, to therefore locate this precise mechanism as the essential and perhaps only mechanism which is able to maintain such massive worldwide system-level injustice, and finally to assume the theoretical and practical position *to never renounce system-level opposition in exchange for any particular gain less than the absolute system-level transformations which are required for justice*, no matter how *relatively* transformative such gains might be.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the almost primordial or, in any event, perennial quality of this tension and its unavoidable need for resolution in any theoretically defensible political project, I see no way that any political theory today can innocently elide the question of revolution. I do not say that any political theory today must be explicitly revolutionary in any specific sense. I say only that distinctions between “system-conforming” and “system-transforming” beg the crucial question which will always arise for those who agree to

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<sup>1</sup>This phrasing is purposely agnostic about what exactly constitutes justice or what any ultimate institutional configuration should look like (or how this would be determined). This is because, for the moment, I am trying to sketch what is essential and specific about the revolutionary position as inclusively as possible with respect to any particular vision of political justice. Thus, the only essential premises with which one has to agree here are: 1) that there currently exist system-level injustices in the arrangement of institutions, and 2) that we can at least in principle admit the possibility of a globally just arrangement of institutions. One does not even have to agree that capitalism is the name of the currently unjust institutions, to see how a commitment to system-level injustice necessarily implicates one at least in the *question* of revolution.

pursue system-transforming collective action: when the state, the market, and/or the thousands of institutions such as the university (defined by irrevocable cognitive and material allegiances to the state and market) offer us a particular “transformation” on condition that we demobilise just enough to not threaten the equilibrium of the institutional arrangement as such, *should we accept that transformation or not?*

What are the conditions under which it is justified to demobilise system-transformative activity in exchange for some political victory which improves the world but falls short of absolute justice? This is the perennial dilemma with which all system-transforming political projects constantly struggle. The revolutionary position is nothing other than answering this question with “never.” No matter how naively romantic the revolutionary position rings to our contemporary ears, it’s naiveté and romanticism are only a function of the contingent dominance of capitalism, our aversion to the apparent romanticism of the revolutionary position is merely the cognitive inheritance of generations of mystified capitulation. Perhaps the meaning of the revolutionary position is indeed nothing more than an integral naiveté, but on the wager that real integrity to a truth is exactly the most emancipatory political force in the world. Perhaps the most dangerous romanticism existing today is the notion that humans have suddenly been absolved of having to decide whether they will negotiate with oppressive institutions or overthrow them.

## **Ethically-biased technological change**

There is a widespread consensus in the economics literature that the rise of information technology over the past several decades has been a “skill-biased technological change.” A skill-biased technological change increases the productivity of skilled workers more than it improves the productivity of unskilled workers, therefore increasing the demand for skilled workers relative to unskilled workers. This increased demand for skilled workers, *ceteris paribus*, [increases their income relative to unskilled workers](#). It is widely agreed that this is a key explanation for at least some of the

rapid increase in income inequality since the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> One key observation consistent with this theory is that it is only after the appearance of micro-computers that income inequality begins to rise in the early 1980s.<sup>3</sup> A second key observation is that more educated workers are more likely to use a computer on the job<sup>4</sup>.

Despite this growing interest in the economic implications of technological change, social scientists have failed to take seriously a surprisingly similar line of thought advanced most notably in twentieth-century German philosophy. Heidegger and, later, the Frankfurt School theorists developed critical theories of technology which argued, in different ways, that technological changes shape ethical attitudes toward the world. In particular, a specific line of thought revolves around the relationship between technological development and instrumental rationality, or in other words formal analytical rationality which renounces consideration of substantive goals and concerns itself only with calculating the optimal means toward given ends.

For Heidegger, from a phenomenological perspective, technology represents a “clearing” of Being which generates a relation to the world in which nature and other humans are merely “standing-reserve” waiting to be exploited as means to whatever ends. For Adorno, Horkheimer, and especially Marcuse, modern technological advancements were “organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination.”<sup>5</sup>

While positivist social scientists have long perceived these types of claims

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<sup>2</sup>See Card, David, and John E DiNardo. 2002. “Skill Biased Technological Change and Rising Wage Inequality: Some Problems and Puzzles” and Guvenen, Fatih, and Burhanettin Kuruscu. 2010. “A Quantitative Analysis of the Evolution of the U.S. Wage Distribution, 1970–2000.” NBER Macroeconomics Annual 24(1): 227–76.

<sup>3</sup>Katz, Lawrence F. 2002. “Technological Change, Computerization, and the Wage Structure.” In *Understanding the Digital Economy Data, Tools, and Research*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>4</sup>Autor, David H, Lawrence F Katz, and Alan B Krueger. 1997. “Computing Inequality: Have Computers Changed the Labor Market?”

<sup>5</sup>Marcuse, H. 1941. “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology.” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Vol. IX.

from continental social theory to be hopelessly speculative and empirically intractable, this is puzzling given that the core claim emerging from this particular current in the critical theory of technology is relatively straightforward: technological development increases the prevalence of instrumentalism among other possible ethical attitudes toward the world. Moreover, the theory of skill-biased technological change is a powerful heuristic for modeling this argument given that it is a well-established model of how technology can generate unequal distributions of power without any reference to Marxian bugaboos which have likely caused more confusion than clarity by now.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is perhaps more fair to observe that critical theorists indeed sometimes lack what contemporary social scientists would call “mechanisms,” or specifiable and testable triggers which effectively do the work of some variable  $X$  supposedly causing some variable  $Y$ . While this particular critique of technological development is not delivered with any particular “mechanism” which would be intelligible to many empirical social scientists working today, critical theory does supply many useful hints in this direction. Moreover, the basic argument is surprisingly consistent with well-known economic models, however disparate might be the vocabularies, thus permitting the elaboration of a critical theory of technological change empirically testable and consistent with a rational-choice framework.

To better specify the mechanism whereby technological change may plausibly generate a greater prevalence of instrumental ethics, I propose a theory of *ethically-biased* technological change. I argue that certain technological changes can increase the income paid to certain ethical orientations relative to others. As in the theory of skill-biased technological change, certain technological changes increase the productivity of certain ethical orientations relative to others, increasing their relative demand, and therefore increasing their relative income. This increase in relative income represents a premium paid to those with the ethical resources re-

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<sup>6</sup>I have in mind such perennial bad habits as lazily but self-certainly referring to Capital as a conspiratorial agent, an argument which has never boded very well for Marxism.

quired by the new technology, just as skill-biased technological change generates a premium paid to those with the technical resources required by the new technology.<sup>7</sup>

More specifically, a technological change which increases productivity but transgresses *any particular ethical value* will increase the productivity of individuals with the weakest commitment to that ethical value relative to those more firmly committed to that ethical value, thus increasing demand for them relative to the more ethical individuals, and thereby increasing their relative income. Ethically transgressive technological innovations increase the productivity of the least ethical because ethical compunctions are effectively a psychological tax on a worker. It is hard to take a job, and then demoralizing to work it, to the degree one feels ethical compunction for doing so. While an employer would have to pay very high wages to attract highly ethical workers to an ethically transgressive job, the wages they have to pay to attract relatively unethical workers will tend to be lower. The firmer one's ethical commitment, the greater is the tax one pays to work an ethically transgressive job, the less worthwhile the wage, and the less likely is one to take the job; the weaker one's ethical commitment, the lower is the tax, the more worthwhile is the wage, and the more likely one is to take the job. The overall implication is that technological change rewards individuals with weak ethical convictions relative to individuals with strong ethical convictions, and therefore exerts a direct, material pressure on the evolution of ethics within society.

There are three key, testable implications we would expect to observe

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<sup>7</sup>Indeed, the analogy between skill-biased and ethically-biased technological change is all the more apt if we, with Foucault, conceptualize the practice of ethos as itself a kind of technical game; if ethical resources are themselves understood as technologies of the self. Key examples in this context are those most bourgeois of ethical resources: the various techniques of repressing ethical compunctions and moral anxieties, and the various techniques of guilt management consequently required by this ethos. In this register, ethically-biased technological change would be essentially identical to skill-biased technological with the exception that the "skills" in question are the skills of self-management rather than economic production. The reason we must avoid this reductionism at the outset is that it would beg the most important question, namely, the question regarding *how* exactly did the contemporary human become, quite peculiar in the long-run of world history, so instrumentalist that the only activities remaining in contemporary life are exploiting and suffering exploitation?

if this model indeed captures important aspects of the historical record. First, during times of ethically transgressive technological innovation, the first workers will be individuals who before the technological innovation were already less ethically scrupulous on the relevant ethical dimension. Second, workers of the new technology will be paid a premium which would be, in principle, distinct from any skill premium, although of course these can be correlated. Third, if we add the assumption of modern capitalist institutions, wherein wage workers have no common land and no immediate means of production, then the price of integrity for committedly ethical individuals literally becomes death. This last implication means that, if technological change is ethically biased as I hypothesize, the steady-state to which it must tend in the long-run is the absolute evacuation of integrity from all participants in the labor market. Note that this can come about through two different causal pathways: ethical individuals can learn to sacrifice their integrity to compete with the unethical and survive, *and/or* ethical individuals can literally die off while unethical individuals thrive and replace them (evolutionary change). It should be noted explicitly that while observations 1 and 2 show how ethically-biased technological change reward certain ethical orientations differently and unequally,

Anecdotally, a general acquaintance with the contours of modern history seems to suggest some striking evidence for this model of ethically-biased technology change. Consider, for instance, that while a certain amount of philosophical liberalism was no doubt necessary for the industrial revolution to emerge, and this perhaps explains why it began in England, it seems equally undeniable that the industrial revolution in turn *generated* an extraordinary instrumental turn and valorization of self-interest wherever it went. It will obviously require more work to test this expectation more rigorously, but it seems highly probable.

In summary, building from insights of the Frankfurt School, I provide a specific, empirically testable mechanism which accounts for the large-scale historical variations in ethical outlook they described to the dismissal of the mainstream social scientists of the time. Working heuristically from rational-choice economic theory, my stylized theoretical model is consis-

tent with but more general than the rational-choice framework because the model here in some sense explains what rational-choice models merely assume (the prevalence of instrumentally rational dispositions).

If correct, the long-run, world-historical implication of this model could not be more staggering for understanding the ethical experience of living through modern, let alone contemporary, capitalism: if this model is correct, then it would mean that today we have inherited a world in which ethical integrity has been subjected to a roughly 300-500 year forced evacuation by labor market institutions.

### **If educated progressives are so smart, why is right-wing populism winning?**

Moderate educated progressives across the West are currently horrified by the recent successes of right-wing populist politics, from Donald Trump in the US to Brexit in the UK. But underneath this public performance of shocked horror coming from the typical cosmopolitan progressive today, hides a curiously under-discussed paradox. If the forces of ignorant hate suddenly appear to be winning, then shouldn't the sophisticated and morally enlightened be clever enough to understand what is happening and do something to stop these trends? If we are so smart and moral and our understanding of the world so much more reasonable and broad and sophisticated, then why are we so puzzled and terrified at the election of Donald Trump or the vote for Brexit? Shouldn't we be able to understand it and act with our greater moral and empirical sophistication to resist and reverse these developments? If close-minded and hateful ideas and actors are gaining political ground, then why are we not clever enough to understand what is happening and act in order to change it?

I believe the most likely answer is that educated progressives are significantly less clever than we pretend to be; indeed, if one is really shocked and horrified at the election of Trump or Brexit, the truly clever and ethical thing to do would be to think really hard and honestly about whether one has possibly been deeply mistaken about something, somewhere along the



line. Of course, almost nobody does this, largely because those whose job it is to think and speak in public get paid (in money or else cultural capital) to assume the position of knowing more than someone else. There is no market for people who want to reflect at length about the ways in which they have been dumb, so all we ever hear or read is educated progressives pretending to be smart, no matter how badly they seem to be losing their battles and misestimating events. Shock and horror are natural enough responses, but that's the problem: shock and horror are the easiest and most immediately reasonable responses to any turn of events that reveals something about one's basic worldview to be mistaken when that basic worldview nonetheless remains tightly held.

I think the real reason educated progressives are so confused and terrified is that the politics of educated progressivism is itself one of the key drivers of right-wing populism and, potentially, fascism. I will try to explain why but, at the outset, it is crucial to see how this very possibility is almost by definition unthinkable in the worldview of the educated progressive, whose most characteristic mental and political operation is to use their educational resources to navigate themselves into those positions that are the most correct, the most true, the most good. Whether they are conforming themselves to the correct and the good, or conforming the correct and good to themselves, is typically undecidable to an external observer; whichever the case may be, the crucial point is that the educated individual is able to do this more effectively than the uneducated individual, and it helps them get ahead of the uneducated, both economically and socio-psychologically; but if, in the final analysis, the educated have made certain systematic mistakes, it becomes an especially dangerous problem for the long-run dynamics of a political system. Such a problem is especially dangerous because the educated are appointed by institutions to be the chief intellectual error-correctors; if the intellectual error-correctors are systematically erring, then the only mechanism for the political system to correct itself will be through the brute force of those individuals and groups who have no resources or opportunities to sublimate their political interests into respectable language games.

It is the educated who, without knowing it, blinded by their overly effective skills in manipulating symbols, have increasingly made the world in their own image but otherwise uninhabitable for those without access to the knowledge economy and cosmopolitan sociability.

The political style of educated progressives is: convert your personal interests into a moral language that you believe is good for everyone, then do everything you can to make that moral language dominant, even against anyone who disagrees or does not understand you. A key point is that this style *is brute force*, it is simply brute force sublimated to the “higher” level of language, symbols, and morals. It is brute force because, often quite explicitly, educated progressives do not care if some people disagree or do not understand; typically, educated progressives proudly proclaim that the opinions or ignorance of bigots (defined as those who do not know, understand, or agree with the preferred vocabular of educated progressives) *should* be overridden by collective political power. The magic of this style is that educated progressives *sincerely believe* they are not operating with brute force but are simply effectuating the triumph of reason and morality.

The educated progressive gambit works for a while, and educated progressives get to feel like they are living at the frontiers of moral historical progress, but the very rope that educated progressives use to pull themselves above ignorant bigots is the very same rope with which they suddenly find themselves being hung. And that’s because you cannot effectuate real historical progress of any kind whatsoever by using unequally distributed resources (education) to promote your own interests (international jobs, working in the culture industries, etc.) while proudly dismissing the thoughts and feelings of those you find repulsive in large part because they do not have the resources to dissemble their own self-interest into respectable language as you do. If this is your method of advancing social justice, you’re actively begging right-wing demagogues to rise up, because your entire method involves using your educational privileges to push those you call bigots even further and further away from being able to promote their interests through non-violent channels. This in no way justifies or apologizes for fascists, it only seeks to give an honest and non-self-

serving account of the real causes behind such awful political formations.

Many educated progressives, openly or secretly, really do not want uneducated right-wing people to have a public voice equal to their own. Their intellectual style demonstrates this quite undeniably. But educated progressives have made the mistake to believe this can work indefinitely. Perhaps educated progressives have begun to really believe that uneducated conservatives with so many unsavory notions are sub-human. Well, it turns out no group of human beings will tolerate for very long having their thoughts and feelings and interests *defined in advance* as outside the bounds of acceptable discourse. Any group of human beings treated this way will eventually prefer to adopt an ethos of violence against any and all untrusted out-groups, rather than try to play a peaceful language game the rules of which are quite literally determined (and frequently, arbitrarily changed) by those with opposite interests.

We have underestimated the violence of the educated progressive political style; it has been at once an ethical and strategic mistake, and now educated progressives are losing because of it. For educated cosmopolitan types, it feels natural that we are all part of one world. But people do not automatically have access to the world, or even a world. Worlds are constructed. It is the implicit claim of liberal cosmopolitanism that we are in one world. Ergo, if for any reason one cannot participate in the norms of liberal cosmopolitanism, such a sorry soul is for all intents and purposes not in the world. To the degree the liberal cosmopolitan view is shared across a society, someone who for any reason is not participating in that world can and should feel as if they are literally excluded from the world. So before we find ourselves shocked and horrified at some future triumph of violent right-wing politics, let's also think harder than ever about the possibility that perhaps we are the ones who have become so skillful at the subtleties of political violence that we honestly can't believe it.

## **Social science and the radical politics of not knowing**

The amount of bullshit circulating at the moment is astounding. And to be clear, it appears to be just as bad in left-wing circles. In fact, what I see happening on the left is the most troubling to me because that's where I'm positioned. There's this idea you should "punch up" or focus one's criticisms on one's "enemies" but I think that's a fatally mistaken notion. If you and your friends are thinking or doing something incorrectly, that is the most urgent issue.

As a political scientist, the truth is I usually don't have that much to offer regarding current affairs. I think most social scientists, if they are being honest, have to admit this with respect to most issues at most times. But if there's one thing my "expertise" gives me, if I have one valuable thing to offer in a time of crisis, it's a highly refined bullshit detector. If there is one thing you learn as a well-trained social scientist, it is this: it is so hard to make correct inferences about what is going on in social phenomena. Most of the training of a social scientist is learning all the reasons why you cannot make certain inferences. So in times of crisis, when most people seem over-eager to make inferences (as a way of dealing with all of the cognitive and emotional anxieties), it is perhaps here that social scientists are most useful, to remind you that, whatever you think is going on—you are mostly wrong. To be clear, when I say most people are "wrong" about most of their inferences, I don't mean that nobody ever gets anything right, or that nobody understands anything. We all know a great deal, but it's mostly embodied, practical knowledge. We know not to put our hand in a fire, and a million other important things. But when our mind starts trying to identify causal patterns in a hyper-complex situation (and really all social phenomenon are hyper-complex), collectively we will generate thousands of hypotheses and most of them will be false. Some will be true, but remember that some would be true even by accident. Monkeys typing on a keyboard long enough would produce true statements in some portion of the text.

Recognizing our incapacity to know things shouldn't be distressing or

disempowering; it's humbling, liberating, relaxing, and empowering. It reminds you that the little ball of fat in your skull is actually a pretty faulty device and it's not really your job to figure out everything going on in the world. Nobody can do that, but a lot of people think they can (and should); if you think you have this responsibility, not only will it drive you crazy but, as I said, on net you will not actually be contributing or helping anything. Again, don't get me wrong, I think everyone has a lot to contribute—but not in the form of objective explanations of what is happening in the world. We have this ridiculous, faux-democratic notion that everyone is entitled to their own reading of what is happening, but this is wrong. We are all equal, but if anything, I would say we are all equally disentitled to our own readings of what is happening—we are disentitled by objective reality, which is ultimately chaos, and which does not allow any of us the privilege of knowing exactly what is happening or what is causing what. I think we can find a radically more true, honest, and ultimately connective/solidaristic community in the shared realization that I don't know, you don't know, but we both know we have each other in this moment. Crucially, you can adopt this attitude in good conscience as well, because it's nobody's moral or political burden—not even social scientists—to save the world or a country or a people by pretending to have knowledge nobody can have. We are seeing right now the extraordinary mass-delusional implications of a media environment in which every agent believes they are capable of understanding what is happening, there are cultural and often monetary incentives for pretending to know what is happening, and no mechanism for sorting true from false.

The primary problem isn't fake news or purposeful deceit; the problem is massive new injection of noise in the system, everyday cognitive biases, and perverse incentives to perform knowledge where there do not exist mechanisms for testing and sorting knowledge claims (and I would add, absurd Western notions about personal control and responsibility which were temporarily useful in early modernity but are now leading to a kind of mental heat death in the context of the information age). One of the other reasons an academic social scientist comes in handy here is that we

do not primarily get paid to make prognostications about what is going on in the present moment. Sometimes people think this makes us “useless,” but indeed our “uselessness” is what makes us useful in times of uncertainty, deception, and mistrust: it is precisely because we generally don’t care about pretending to be useful that if we feel compelled to comment on current affairs, if only to say it is impossible to know something with any confidence, it should be relatively more trustworthy than someone who gets paid to provide useful commentary on a daily basis. In other words, the uncertain offerings of an academic social scientist are more likely to be a signal and articles by professional commentators are more likely to be noise. There is certainly a new cottage industry for academics who wish to enter the culture market of disingenuously over-confident inferences, but our real value is that generally if we are shooting from the hip with little to gain or lose, then you should be able to trust the academic social scientist, relatively.

I would ask you to remember, especially if you are passionate about contributing to politics, that false answers are typically more responsible for evil than honest admissions of uncertainty. We have to remember that the human mind has evolved to find patterns, even where they don’t exist. This is because, for the greater part of our history, if there was a snake in the grass and we failed to identify it, we could be fucked. But if there was not a snake in the grass and we thought we identified one, no big deal. So we evolved to err on the side of identifying patterns even where there is nothing. But what’s useful for avoiding snakes may very well be collectively suicidal for avoiding an infinite set of possible global threats via the internet. Right-wing people do this with crime and terrorism but left-wing people are doing this just as badly with the new semi-global, right-wing shift. As we now have screens that fling unprecedented volumes of noise at us all day and night (and which allow us to fling noise back into it!), I think we are really underestimating the degree to which our highly faulty human cognition, combined with our individual incentives to perform knowledge, can generate extraordinary harm to individuals and groups, sending collective understandings down systematically erroneous and divergent paths, and

ultimately shaping actual behaviors of masses of people. And when the behavior of people is based on any degree of systematic error that is not being corrected over time, this is arguably the most potent recipe for almost all of the worst historical disasters.

To put it yet another way, even highly educated and otherwise trustworthy people right now are doing what social scientists call “overfitting their models.” In other words, developing theories that can fit all of the data they are observing, without realizing that a great deal of that data is noise. The thing is, a good explanation of noise is a really bad explanation of reality; what this means is that if you act or behave as if such explanations are true, almost by definition it will produce consequences other than the ones you are hoping to produce. Again, this should all be liberating and relaxing to reflect on. If there is honestly a lot of uncertainty, and one honestly does not know, then one honestly deserves to try and relax, pay attention, learn, think, consider possible hypotheses, update them as you go, and in the meantime patiently focus on what you do know (inner convictions, empathy and solidarity for the people you encounter, etc). You are not obligated to go “do something” or “say something” immediately if the actual reality is such that really you are just scared because you don’t know what is going on. Of course, be vigilant, be courageous, say and do what you believe in, but radicalism is an all-or-nothing proposition. If you want to be politically radical, you better also be radically honest, radically humble, and radically transparent. All I’m calling for is intellectual honesty regarding uncertainty. I’m not saying anyone should dampen their convictions or compromise with anything they find unjust. I’m just saying there’s nothing radical or even defensible about effectively making shit up because you want to produce some consequence, whether it be the soothing of your own anxiety, the production of “hope” for others, or the recruitment of others into your group. One of the most radical things you can do at any time is be correct. And in highly uncertain times, the most correct diagnosis of many things will be “we do not know.” You can still maintain deeply held convictions, and act passionately on various projects, while also maintaining the basic self-discipline of trying to honestly separate signal from noise. Speak

and act decisively, at the highest intensity you can sustain, but only on the most correct possible interpretation of information. This is where I think social science converges with the most radical, progressive politics.

### **Forget it: The dubious moral politics of awareness**

Since the Holocaust, we have been told to “Never Forget” more atrocities than anyone can remember. Given that the technologically-aided memory capacity of global society has expanded so dramatically in only the past two decades—hardly a nanosecond in world history—it may be time to question this moral wisdom increasingly belied by its ubiquity. At the root of this ethical commonplace is the assumption that the injunction “Never Forget” is logically followed by its declarative counterpart, “Never Again.” In other words, the positive relationship between memory and awareness on the one hand, and social progress on the other, is merely assumed. Interestingly, a formidable philosophical tradition suggests the opposite may be true, but ultimately it is an empirical question. Luckily for us, as the world now has small armies of knowledge workers maintaining for their audiences perpetual collective awareness of atrocities past, present, and even future, it offers us a kind of natural experiment for observing whether the will to remember is as closely allied with the progress of social justice as many assume. Is it possible there might exist a threshold of social awareness beyond which a remembering individual’s net contribution to social progress turns negative? And if it is possible that the globally supercharged and market-driven circulation of injustice awareness is pacifying our capacities in still poorly understood ways, then is it possible that today one of the most radically progressive gambits may very well begin with forgetting it all?

The educated cultures of the global north today are possessed by a certain *will to remember*—as if it is an obvious ethical pre-requisite of fighting for justice to be obsessed with information about injustices. But whence comes this peculiar will, and what exactly is its philosophy? The most charitable case one can make for it is that it is about the importance of aware-



ness in the maintenance of justice. We must always be cultivating the most true, accurate, and balanced picture in our individual and collective minds, a rigorous accounting of all of the good and the bad, but especially the bad, so that fair historical redress may be served and that we may know evil well enough to prevent it from recurring in the future.

This perspective is reasonable enough, but when one watches a large number of individuals share horror after horror, over the course of several years, often about the same topics — is it not fascinating that some people come to specialize in curating particular genres of non-fiction political horror? — it becomes hard to believe that such individuals are operating under the belief that every extra “share” will decrease the probability of stopping the particular horror in which they specialize. It seems more likely that such individuals are simply addicted to the consumption and transmission of information about a particular genre of horror. Of course that is their prerogative, and it is as legitimate and reasonable a technique for coping with our human predicament as any, so I have no interest in shaming or stigmatizing this particular style of living among horrors and evils. I only wish to query when, where, and how anyone ever began to think that frenzied exposure to injustice information might be a method for stopping injustice from occurring in one’s society.

The naïve empirical model in which raising awareness is supposed to lead naturally to a reduction of the Bad Thing in society, was never to my knowledge seriously developed as a thoughtful and serious model of how attitudes and behaviors, let alone social structures, change — as if people first became convinced of this model and then chose to delve obsessively into consuming and sharing horrors. It seems more likely that a segment of the population who, because of their own history and personality, prefer to cope with internet-age info-glut through publicly shaming wrongdoers, happened to connect with an equally large segment of the population whose preferred way of coping is of the masochistic variety. In this positive symbiosis, the culture of hyper-awareness as activism emerges only as a self-flattering and wishfully-thinking motive imputed to what is simply an evolutionarily selected way of surviving—that is, continuing—the par-

ticular equilibrium of the social and political status quo.

One good piece of evidence in favor of this interpretation can be found in what economists call “diminishing marginal returns.” One might believe that informing someone of a horror they did not already know about is indeed a useful and mutually empowering, progressive speech act. Maybe even sharing that piece of information a second time might be a useful way to make sure the message was definitely heard by everyone in one’s audience. But it is in the nature of information itself that every time a piece of information is repeated, it contains less and less, well, information. Famously defined by Gregory Bateson as “a difference that makes a difference,” information is information only to the degree that it sparks in a receiver something not already sparked. Beyond a certain point, by definition the circulation of information about horrors cannot be justified by the necessity of spreading awareness simply because every additional share brings diminishing marginal returns to the production of awareness. The degree to which certain people can share certain classes of information so frequently for so long, testifies to how little this phenomenon has to do with information and how much it must have something to do with the compulsion to share.

On closer inspection, then, what appears to be a model of ethical behavior based on a certain assumption about how the world and social progress function, may actually be a contingent configuration of two very particular ways of being ill, which, because of the satisfactions it gives rise to and the scale at which these satisfactions can be generated, is simply given a presumed empirical model naïvely back fit to legitimate and secure these interlocking symptoms. The will to cope and survive is certainly fair enough, the problem is that it begins to teach others, and the next generations, that this is not just a way of coping with the existence of evil and horror within the human condition, but that it is actually a model for ethical and political goodness. This is the arrogant and debilitating collective self-harm that I would like to target in the politics of political information sharing today. This is why, in a certain sense and under certain conditions, it may not only be defensible but ethically courageous and politically progressive to

re-learn with a new vengeance the old fine art of forgetting.

It is likely that the will to remember became a feature of modernity in that swirl of eighteenth-century rationalist energies we now call the Enlightenment. But it was probably Rousseau who first laid the basis for a modern opposition to memory as a socially enforced imperative. In eighteenth-century France, the Encyclopédistes were setting out to collect and organize all of the world's knowledge in their proud belief that the promotion of understanding and rationality was an obvious path to social and political progress. This was also a time when the key sites of cultural and intellectual life were still the famous salons. The salon was all about measured and quick-witted sophistication; participants would memorize cleverly crafted repartee in anticipation of the buzzwords with which they would be confronted. It is hard not to note the equivalents in contemporary culture, where as enlightened netizens we pride ourselves on having all the world's knowledge at our fingertips.

Similarly today, one can usually predict quite well, simply by Facebook circulation, which world catastrophe one's dinner party will expect one to know and care about on a particular evening, allowing us to recite lines we have already practiced online. Indeed, it is increasingly clear how much web content comes from a can of memorized repartee assorted and measured to fit the various genres of catastrophe, as if people wake up each day hoping to find the persistence of the horror in which they specialize, given how carefully they have prepared for it to never end. This is especially true and troubling with respect to the rise of paid, career writers whose "beat" is one of our diffuse and deeply ingrained types of socio-political evil, such as patriarchy or white supremacy. We now have relatively large armies of commentators who are in some crucial sense, no matter their most sincere convictions, invested in the persistence of certain deep and difficult social problems. Of course it is not that this army of content-producers caused the problems of their focus, my point is only that the way social problems arrange us psychologically and behaviorally, especially in a market society, may be capable of blocking the dynamics of personal, interpersonal, and ultimately social change for which one may sincerely be fighting.

The incapacity to forget oneself as a socially respectable problem-solver leads one to repress in oneself and others all of the psychological and behavioral needs or desires of the human animal which do not look like the socially-sanctioned appearance of problem-solving. But because deep social problems are almost always systemic—that is, they are usually an inextricable feature of larger patterns which define our most basic sense of what we call reality—whoever commits too completely to performing moral goodness comes to function as a law enforcer of the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the status quo. In his own language, Rousseau made exactly this argument, and it was demonstrated most convincingly in the waves of historical change which would follow his life.

Because he was a provincial from Geneva, Rousseau knew he would never be able to match Diderot or Voltaire in their vain performances of memorized alienation. He admitted he had only “a little memory” (“*mon peu de memoire*,” he called it). He tried reading selections of the *Confessions* to Parisian salons but they fell flat, probably because one of his main points was to explore psychological realities repressed and denied by the political ethics of superficial *politesse* and disingenuous *honnête*, precisely the ethics of the salon. Instead, Rousseau’s intellectual strategy was to embrace his poor memory and run with it, turning over the tables on his way out, as it were. “A state of reflection is a state contrary to nature, and... a thinking man is a depraved animal,” he would famously write in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Rousseau was mercilessly castigated and ostracized for such scandalous pronouncements against the march of cultivated rationality; he suffered a kind of social punishment most contemporary intellectuals in the wealthy liberal countries rarely, if ever, risk. But his disregard for what the well-bred were busy remembering was at the core of everything that made his philosophy and life concretely and empirically revolutionary and progressive, as he became an explicit inspiration in the French Revolution and the entire intellectual and ethical tradition we now call Romanticism.

If it was Rousseau who taught modernity the perniciousness of cultivation and the political power of disregard, it was Nietzsche who sketched

the most vivid portraits of what might be the polar opposite of the pious memorializer. In contrast to serious and all too human students of history, Nietzsche taught, individuals who act toward important goals with passion and commitment are exceptional primarily in their capacity to somewhat sociopathically ignore whatever would threaten to interrupt their motion forward. In the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche writes, citing a phrase from Goethe, that the person who acts is, “always without a conscience, so is he also always without knowledge; he forgets most things so as to do one thing, he is unjust towards what lies behind him, and he recognizes the rights only of that which is now to come into being and no other rights whatever.” In this view, living so as to be a good person in good conscience becomes an ethical horror in itself, for it is effectively a willfull commitment to changing nothing plus the dishonesty of retroactively labeling this paralysis a passion for social justice.

But note how this is not to invoke such cynical mantras as “you have to get your hands dirty in order to get things done.” Most people who speak such phrases are in bad faith, disingenuously exploiting the fact that action implies injustice to beautify whatever ethical atrocities they tend to commit. When a politician spends an entire career accepting bargains from devils in order to maintain their own power and deliver crumbs to their constituency, and then they package their moral degeneracy as heroic sacrifice of their privileged idealism, this is not Nietzschean realism. This is a much older lifestyle practice for which we have a different technical term. It is called lying. They are obeying status quo values, entering status quo positions, to receive status quo rewards (denominated in status quo values) *through* their offer of crumbs to constituents. When they claim to be making the difficult choices required of them, they are merely exploiting a simple fact nobody can ultimately deny and on the basis of which we already forgive our politicians in advance—the idea that effective action requires some injustice—to define their self-interest as a public good.

Memory creates a circuit between possibility and perception; it reduces the infinite possibilities of what a perception might turn out to be, to that which it is most likely to be, based on past experiences. Obviously, this

serves a crucially valuable function for the human being, for it reduces the unfathomable complexity of an infinitely rich reality to a simpler, manageable number of possibilities which we are able to learn and conquer. This conquering which memory permits has allowed for the survival of our species, but in an era where now thinking subjects are the ones who are being conquered by economic and political institutions, memory ceases to serve the survival function that was its *raison d'être* and becomes little more than a sado-masochistic ritual to help pacified populations pass the time. When we consider the basic psychological function of memory but apply it to events over which atomized individuals have no control, hyper-awareness of atrocities can do nothing other than conserve and ultimately enforce them as the most likely of an infinite number of possible, virtual futures. Memory has come to function as a prohibition on the collective creation of futures in which these atrocities will not exist.

It is not a matter of valorizing fantasy over hard-nosed empirical realities, as if we have the right to a greater quotient of delusion simply to make life more tolerable; it is rather that we achieve the most comprehensive faithfulness to empirical reality only through a certain distance from mere facts. The obsession with facts and events over-attunes us to certain empirical data and under-attunes us to other empirical data, namely the equally real facts of our immediately physical, emotional, and psychological life-worlds. While the overall balance of effects is still debated, it is increasingly well documented that contemporary internet culture has certain deleterious effects on our personal and our social psychologies and behaviors. The point is not to add yet more sweeping assertions about the effects of digital culture on society, it is rather to highlight how, for the netizen passionate about social justice, the actual and currently on-going effect that contemporary hyper-awareness is having on millions of people is, for some reason, not admitted into the orbit of their seemingly passionate concern.

The reason, I hypothesize, is that social justice netizens are exactly those who have most fully forgotten how to forget, for how else could this rather peculiar way of relating to the world become for some an almost full time vocation? An awareness so saturated with facts of horror that it is unable

to take flight from the weight of history even enough to feel and observe what is happening to oneself and those in one's immediate vicinity. Or worse, a heavy awareness so crushing that even when one periodically feels and observes what is happening to one's own relation to the world, one no longer feels oneself worthy or deserving of becoming more vital and joyous one day in the future. If this sounds harsh, I am able to write it only because I can identify it in myself as much as I observe it others.

I have a friend who spent a recent weekend volunteering at the refugee camp in Calais. They have gone a few times now in the past few weeks, making the daylong drive from the south of England and staying at the camp for several days at a time. I happen to be in a text-messaging group with this friend and a few others. On that Saturday, while my friend was busy trying to save lives, I sent this group a really funny joke. No, really, it was extremely funny. Of course my friend trying to save lives was unable to respond to my frivolous delight. It immediately occurred to me that such a meaningless amusement was criminally childish of me given that I too could have been out trying to save lives with my friend. My weekend was free and I was consciously choosing to idly enjoy it instead of helping to save lives. In some terrible sense, I was choosing to let the refugees suffer. Of course there are plenty of less offensive ways to rephrase this fact, but I am not sure they would be any more honest or politically useful than all the retrospective rationalisations I have already rejected above. If one possesses a paralyzed over-saturation of awareness, as I suspect many of us do, then one would need to forget a certain amount of suffering in order to live a life that might one day become worthy of that suffering. One must pass through to the other side of suffering rather than organize oneself around it simply because one cannot sit still in its proximity. To live up to others' suffering, one must live freely and fearlessly in the first place so as to have something meaningful to expend toward a radically different world to come, but now. I do not believe refugees in Calais need the presence of my overworked, alienated, exhausted friend to help their prison function somewhat more humanely so much as they need us, and other residents of the wealthy countries, to sincerely become human enough that nobody

from our ranks would be capable of the highly refined sociopathy required to repel refugees from a national border at gunpoint.

Again one notes a certain perversity in the distribution of memory and sociopathy. My dear and blessed friend who cannot *not* try to help the refugees in Calais is incapable of the mild sociopathy of enjoying a relaxing weekend because they are highly faithful to their memories of human suffering; this absorbs their resources for flourishing in their own life and they call it working for justice; with institutional support the border police confer to themselves an extreme sociopathy and an absolute forgetting of suffering, which also destroys their humanity, and they also call it working for justice. What if the real problem here is something so inane that we cannot remember it precisely because the public sphere is so heavy with bad memories that the light ones fear punishment for playing? I have begun to believe that the real, core problem in this example is not the refugee crisis but the fact that my friend and the border police are so willing to work on the damn weekends. My friend should be with me so I do not have to text them poor substitutes for intimacy, so they do not have to feel so anxious about whether their lonely heart is doing enough good for the world, and so that we might one day become so collectively alive and healthy and bonded that we might just start tearing down fences simply because we forgot why they are supposed to be there. And if all the border police cared enough for themselves to take the weekend off, they might just gain some real memories of their own — as if they would pick up the ones dropped by my friend if only my friend could let go of a few. They might remember, for example, that perhaps they always had been planning to quit that job, anyway.

## **When the world seems to worsen**

I cannot pretend I know how to live the most true and just life, but as many dimensions of contemporary politics appear to worsen — from fascist and nationalist movements around the West to the increasing visibility of the racist police state of the United States — I am dumbfounded by how many times a day I encounter people who are very clearly only pretending to un-



derstand what is happening in the world and what others should do. Whenever the affairs of the world seem to take an unexpected turn for the worse, one seems to find an uptick of this widespread, knee-jerk repetition compulsion: to deal with political horrors and uncertainties by increasing one's outward appearance of confidence and righteousness, while silently grasping to secure one's emotional and material interests however one can. The more I observe this, in personal encounters as well as in mainstream and social media, the more likely it seems to me that this tendency is itself one crucial reason why everything seems to be drifting in such a horrible direction while nobody seems to have any especially convincing advice for how one should live so as to maximally help redirect it.

Given this view, the last thing I would try to offer you is yet another disingenuously confident and righteous diagnosis of the world's happenings. Yet there remains a tremendous amount of room for all of us to think about and articulate within our own lived relationships that which we know to be false about the world today (a task very different than pretending to know what is true or exactly what anyone else should do); to try and fracture and chip away at all of the diverse forces that keep most of us, myself included, perpetually locked into daily routines where we know deep down inside that we are not living as fully and correctly — that is to say, as justly and dangerously and rebelliously — as we know we could if only we knew how and had the necessary emotional, physical, and material resources. So what I would rather try to offer here is a reflection on this easily forgotten reality; a reminder that nobody is ever going to save us, but that if we pull out all the stops to do so, we can and might very well save each other. We can teach each other and give each other everything we need, but almost everything in our society exists to make us forget this and to block it from developing when we remember it. One can (and I think, should) decline the path of arrogant intellectual authority while still having the confidence and courage and zeal for the truth that leads one to pinpoint and share where and how all the dominant blockages and false paths occur around oneself; how to spot them, how to avoid them, and together how to create new but currently impossible tactics for cracking them and co-creating

actually real, shared lives in the process of liberation. For collective liberation is not a far-off, possible stage of history, it refers to the concrete mental and physiological movements that sweep through any collection of bodies when those bodies are learning what is false and updating the entire course of their life accordingly. Of course there is plenty of valuable information and analysis available out there, but very few intellectuals or writers today are willing to seriously acknowledge the fact that nourishment for real processes of collective learning and liberation are almost strictly prohibited from public communications today; there is simply no oxygen for them, as infinite messages compete so ruthlessly for the shortest attention spans ever to evolve in the history of the world, and mostly for the explicit goal of monetary or cultural capital. But in this massive blindspot of popular conversation lies a vast reserve of real gold for all people today interested in thinking, writing, and living intensely for and toward radical social justice for all as soon as possible.

It is with this in mind that I write you today; perhaps my reflections will help to puncture and deflate any nonsense judgment or opinion you have come across in the past few weeks which you felt to be wrong but by which you were still weighed down. Perhaps you will take it upon yourself to seize some original insight you possess but have not bothered to write or express because you knew it wouldn't sell on social media. Perhaps you'll share it with someone you know and from there new modes of life will emerge. This is not hippy-dippy karma talk; all unhinging from falsity and exploitation in favor of radically attentive co-presence, expression and creation with others is concrete revolutionary movement, plain and simple. Such phenomena have swept away entire nations and epochs. We need to find that place where we are no longer affected by the over-confident judgments of idiots whenever our sincere examination cannot find real learning or nourishment or empowerment from them. That place where we could not not say or do what we believe. I write to find and strengthen the reality of that place, and I share what I write to make it real for myself and anyone else who finds truth in it. I want to support you or anyone else trying to do that too, even if I disagree, for if we are being truly honest than we would have

to arrive at the same place in the end.

In a private letter days after the UK voted to leave the European Union, I recently wrote to a friend and comrade about the reactions I was observing in my own circles. Here I would like to share with you something I wrote there (after some minor edits for clarity):

Everyone is definitely losing it lol, I think we all need to chill and love ourselves and each other and, as ever, figure out how to proceed from a base of calm joy. Also, reacting is always the exactly incorrect thing to do, I think. Everything today is reaction, and more than ever I'm truly and sincerely losing my capacity for this constant reactivity...

Yea, I think there is something very perverse in our perceptions and attitudes, something deep and wide, that is in us perhaps even more than in events—that is making us crazy, or something. It sounds or looks selfish and self-absorbed to many from the outside, but I have almost completely stopped reading the news and thinking/caring about all these external events and I put almost all my attention to how I and the people around me are feeling. It's not that I think I'm free of responsibility for what's going on in the world, but I definitely don't think I'm responsible for all of it! Fuck that. Like I don't think I have an ethical obligation to know about or care about every bad thing everywhere. I think that's straight up psychopathology of some kind. So I think there's this thing where activists feel like they need to know/care/attend to every horror.... then there's the mainstream moderate progressivism which is not actually rooted in any kind of deeper radical attitude/being/community so they are just scared and starting to freak. Which is fine, and natural enough. But that's because they live a generally deluded and dishonest life and are very happy to go along most days of their life as if everything is fine—so when major events touch them in unpredictable and undesired ways, they just get scared

and sad and start posturing and jostling in dissimulated self-protecting ways that throw up even more blocks to radical revealing and connection. And lots of radicals are going for that swim too, which makes me sad...

So yea, I'm OK. To be honest, I don't want to sound glib, but I want to say I kind of don't give a shit about the EU and the million things happening around the world. I think it's a pathological Western thing to flatter oneself with feeling responsibility for it all. I want to be so based, so in touch with the meaningless of existence and the absolute meaning and truth of the infinite value and potential of all human beings, so attuned to what is beautiful, what is true, what is funny, what is pleasing, what is rewarding, who I love and who loves me, and our infinite capacities for ecstatic world-creation despite whatever the psychopathic institutions might continue to throw at us—that bombs could start dropping on Southampton and I would probably just keep reading what I'm reading, writing what I'm writing, messaging you all, making things and making plans, and feeling exactly the same as I do now, but even more intensely and outwardly, because I like to think that is what it means to be a revolutionary, to be already radically more attuned with the truth than normal people (or at least less hooked into all the stupidities of the day), so that things don't surprise us and things don't knock us off the sincere search for true living: to already be horrified and enraged at everything humanity has become and also perfectly filled with joy and ideas and constantly, nonetheless, finding or making liberation come closer and closer despite everything, and to love one's fate simply because it is one's fate...

If one looks at what most "concerned" and "involved" socially and politically active people look like right now, if one looks honestly at their lives, how they are speaking and what they are doing and not doing, one really starts to see that the orientation I'm describing may really be the only possible model of revolu-

tionary being today, if by revolutionary being we mean radically attentive to reality, socially and politically engaged as deeply and widely as possible, and a revolutionarily prepared/able propensity to act justly and effectively on all possible environments at all times... the more I try to think this through, the more almost all currently existing activism really seems like a kind of crazed simulation of caring and political action that is actually not much more than the complete overheating and implosion of the Western human being, I think...

### **Is there an obligation to “speak out” if nobody is listening?**

Whenever horrific, unjust things occur, online social networks fill up with people telling you it is your duty to speak out against those things on the internet. But that is wrong: One's duty is to determine as honestly and rigorously as possible the empirical conditions that would make those horrible things stop, and then to mold one's life around increasing the probability of those conditions coming into existence. Clearly, it is hard to know for sure what exactly are those conditions and how exactly they are most likely to be brought about, so even in the most optimistic, mass revolutionary awakening we would hope to see many people doing many different things in many different ways. For some people, their honest path may involve social media activity, so that is what they should be doing. For many other people, however, social media is the exact opposite of what they would do if they honestly and freely came to their own personal judgments of how they should live against systemic injustices.

When social media activists start to think and speak as if social media is the primary yardstick of radical consciousness and public action, it is here that online social justice culture becomes a truly disingenuous and ultimately conservative racket. This is where social justice culture stops being rebellion and becomes a market of cultural entrepreneurs selling various diets for their followers to feel morally healthy in an otherwise morally in-

tolerable world. One of the best signs of this is when simple empirical observations are so confidently dispensed with; given how easy it is to see that there are many life-long, deeply committed revolutionaries and fighters for social justice alive today who do not appear to be active on social media—to declare that social media activity is the measure of a person's opposition to injustice is actually a very clever litmus test to see how many of one's followers care so much about moral approval from the poster that they are publicly willing to admit and reveal demonstrably incorrect thinking and information. Most people who make such obviously false statements are really saying, "I am so satisfied with the moral energy or comfort I have found on social media that it must be morally necessary for others also." This idea is false and conservative, primarily intended to conserve the existential needs of those speaking it. It is also conservative for blinding and discouraging others from the thousands of different revolutionary paths they could and should be off inventing.

Many of the smartest radicals I know are starting to realize that the truly ground-breaking, revolutionary paths of the twenty-first century will emerge in collective maneuvers out of this permanent state of anxious on-line reactivity. The internet is no longer a medium through which humans express and coordinate rebellion against external events, it is the medium through which external events coordinate how humans can and cannot express their rebellion. Anyone who has a good grasp of social reality and its mechanisms does not need to know every detail about every new police murder; when one understands something, one does not need to know certain details because one is already grappling with more general levels inclusive of those details. The revolutionaries of the twenty-first century will move away from weekly details in favor of becoming doubly based and sane and balanced and even joyous despite everything, because we realize that today these are precisely the most rare and most powerful capacities, perhaps the only ones, that have any chance at what we are up against. In the past year or two, I have decided to consciously abstain from commenting on current affairs precisely so I can save my neural and emotional resources for long, thoughtful, heartfelt reflections to share with people I

know and care about, or to attempt writing for larger audiences than the few dozen people Mark Zuckerberg allows to see my Facebook posts. I personally think that's a more revolutionary relationship to modern technology. But of course I think other people should do what they think is best. In my view, the point is to become capable of producing but also noticing revolutionary gestures in more and more possible modes of speaking and being.

### **“I Think We’re Really Onto Something:” Mark Fisher and My Revolutionary Friends**

Mark Fisher was a revolutionary, but I do not mean his writings were revolutionary (although they were); I mean that Mark Fisher was a revolutionary in a very specific sense of the word, a sense that does not necessarily apply to everyone who happens to be sympathetic to radical ideas or causes. We know this because, over the past two years, we have not just been friends with Mark. A number of us have been, together, in the process of concrete, organized, revolutionary political transformations. These transformations remain somewhat obscure, and before Mark's death I did not fully comprehend what he and all of us in [Plan C](#) have been doing over these past couple of years. But now, for me at least, Mark's death has been like a flash of emotional lightning that suddenly illuminates a dark forest pulsing with life, revealing with undeniable clarity *where one even is*. In an email, Mark once wrote to us: “I think we’re really onto something...” I think he was right, in fact I think he was more right than any of us have known what to do with. With Mark's passing I believe I can see more clearly now than ever what exactly we have been onto. To be honest, I did not know Mark well, and I have only a passing familiarity with his writing; that I have so much to say can only be attributed to the political processes that have been, over the past few years, sweeping a few of us away, together.

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Mark always struck me as the type whose opposition to the status quo was such that he sincerely thought, felt, and lived as if it could not be so.

For some people, opposition to the status quo can be a form of adaptation and survival. For these people, activism provides socio-psychological supports that make the experience of the status quo tolerable. But others are plagued with a humanity that will not go away no matter what you offer it, a certain inability to accept the status quo, an incapacity to integrate oneself into its consistency, resulting in a kind of maladaptation risking rather than securing survival. For these types, entry into radical politics is not about making life livable under unlivable conditions, it is about figuring out how to produce genuinely livable conditions at any cost. This is a subtle but crucial difference: the former model waters down the definition of what is considered “living” in order to survive and claim we are “living,” while the latter admits plainly the unfortunate but real challenge of an unjust political order: *either* overthrow unlivable institutions and make life together possible immediately, or we will already be dead.

In my own view, everything seems to suggest that the truly revolutionary life today must be of the latter type; it would seem that revolutionary politics today could not be anything other than a kind of minimally sustainable, reproducible type of militant maladaptation, the capacity to creatively occupy oneself as something that consciously and purposely does not belong to nearly all of that which is currently and falsely called reality. But obviously individual human organisms have limits and this tendency can lead to self-destruction; one question we have therefore been grappling with is, how to sustain this kind of creative maladaptation over time, how to make revolutionary maladaptation socially reproducible.

It seems to me that, in his intellectual work, Mark sought actively to inhabit this heady, scandalous mental space in which everything people call real is, clearly, not real. Exciting and true, but anyone who has ever sought to engage in radical intellectual work over a period of time learns quickly that this parallax is quite a load on the nervous system, because every interaction in our really existing Boring Dystopia will require far more emotional and cognitive stress than would be required if one simply took the Boring Dystopia to be real. Now, if we have any hope of living a true life together then we must at all cost hold onto this heady, stressful, critical



distance. But I think one thing Mark understood was that there do exist tactics and techniques for making true life possible despite everything. I think Mark was a maestro of such tactics, not just because I got to observe him performing them (as I will sketch below), but because to do his kind of radical theory over any period of time, you need them. That he was able to write all of those words on topics such as mental health and capitalism, in that dangerous and difficult mental space he was most known for, is evidence enough that he possessed some mastery of how to power a life that is not being fueled in the conventional way through complacent, adaptive negotiation with the status quo.

I should say at the outset that I am not interested in claiming Mark for any particular thesis or agenda; like any genuine, radical intellectual, I am sure he thought many different things that he never brought to perfect coherence. Yet I do believe, for a number of reasons I will try to articulate, that Mark was especially interested in this question about the interpersonal and social tactics that transform individual and group consciousness into weapons that perform concretely revolutionary work (however slowly and invisibly at first) on even the largest-scale political and economic institutions.

One reason I know Mark was keen on this point is that he told me so. I remember one time he was telling me about the most recent book project he had been working on. I asked him about the thesis. He summarized it by saying something to the effect of, "Basically, 1970s socialist feminism had it all figured out." We can debate what he might have meant by this, but I believe he had in mind especially the feminist consciousness-raising groups prevalent at the time. Even more specifically, I think Mark was interested in how these groups—dedicated to the sharing and making visible of once silent, privatized struggles—*really worked*, not just for "therapy" or the now more chic "self-care" but as a *bona fide* methodology for producing large-scale, revolutionary political change at the systemic level. The various movements of this one particular historical moment were crushed, yes, but the point is that *it worked*, as far as it went. Of course, there will be opponents and enemies, but the basic method is a real, concrete, and

reproducible way for even lonely individuals and small groups to immediately begin the overthrow of dominant institutions.

My memory of his characteristic, nervous excitement seemed to be saying, like, “We already know what to do! Next time, this time, we just have to figure out how not to get crushed!” That is, we have to figure out a number of auxilliary questions that our revolutionary predecessors had not fully worked out—such as how to expand, aggregate, and materially reproduce consciousness-raising dynamics against powerful reactionary forces and agents—but as to the basic nature of revolutionary movement, its primary source *and* destination as an actual activity human beings can do, we already know it. It is the concrete, immanent process of human beings seeking, through each other, their true consciousness. That might sound woo-woo, but I will argue that the status quo reproduces itself in large part by making this proposition *seem* woo-woo. Our fear of being naïve, our fear of wagering too much on our own immediate shared consciousness—more and more I think this is *the* enemy, or at least the single most real and vicious tenterhook that status quo institutions have successfully lodged in our bodies. It seems to me that radicals and activists today may be scrambling to find what is already under their noses, in the historical sense that the 1960s already demonstrated how to produce massive, global, political shockwaves, but also in the immediate interpersonal sense that all we need is exactly whoever is right in front of us.

Another minor exhibit. Within the group, I once wrote an essay that argued [consciousness-raising is effectively strike action](#), the real and concrete withdrawal of cognitive and emotional energy from the status quo. The essay was critical of many basic assumptions of contemporary leftism and I know that Mark was sympathetic to the essay. Interestingly, he was very worried about the backlash I might receive, most likely due to his own ghastly experiences taking risks on the internet (which I consider in more detail below). Of course nothing happened, my article received the much harsher fate of a generally tepid response. Nonetheless, this all suggests to me that what I was trying to articulate in that essay overlaps, at least in some degree, with what Mark had been thinking in recent years. Some-

thing difficult and apparently sensitive, something that progressive folks either don't care about or get very angry about. It all seems to indicate that we are getting closer and closer to understanding what exactly we have been onto.

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When one speaks the words “consciousness-raising,” the connotation is so strongly one of New-Age spiritualism that, from a political perspective, the conversation is usually over before it starts. I think the coming years will show this to be an error. Nonetheless, for this reason, I prefer to speak of the physiological and biochemical effects of consciousness tactics; how shared consciousness—if all parties truly take that shared consciousness to be more real than official reality and allow their future thoughts and behaviors to morph accordingly—produces concrete attitudinal and behavioral effects that immanently decrease the power flowing into the institutional center while increasing the autonomous power circulating in the commune of those who compose it. Even better, these tactics come with the exceptional virtue of being immediately palpable in the body and mind when executed correctly, and so they are self-guiding and self-reinforcing. Relationships conducted in this fashion become veritable collective revolution machines capable of spanning vast distances, but only if they are done correctly. Such relationships can and will take infinitely different forms, but I think there is perhaps one hard rule. There will be various implications from this rule, implications which will have to be identified and dealt with creatively depending on the situation, but only one hard requirement. In my own view, I summarize it with the word “honesty,” similar to “conscience” but more secular and relational, like “truth” but less formal and more pluralistic.

In a nutshell, I would venture a possible definition of consciousness-raising as interpersonal communications, on any scale, motivated by *nothing but honesty* and unconcerned with consequences. By doing this, consciousness-raising is a form of direct action, immediately available between any two people (or more), that withdraws one's labour from the status quo and immanently produces what you are welcome to call freedom, energy, joy, or

power. At a certain resolution these can all be thought of as interchangeable. While this might sound too simple to be serious revolutionary politics, the truth is it's very difficult and extremely rare. Consider the extraordinary fact that such an orientation is almost impossible to find in activist circles; almost the entirety of contemporary activism is organized around the pursuit of certain consequences, to such a degree that in activist circles if your thoughts and speech are not perceived as contributing to some future consequence, or if you are not minimally able to produce speech that has certain immediate consequences (e.g. making people feel "hope" or appearing "useful") then you might as well not even be there.

There is massive problem in the activist instinct to organize your thoughts and actions around producing consequences (a fancier term for this is "instrumental rationality," and it is basically the rationality of modernity and capitalism). The problem is that, in your attachment to those consequences, you are liable to make mistakes and tell lies without even knowing it. And once errors or lies are circulating, however tiny, everything you try to do with anyone will be doomed. First, it leads to the crucial error that you see other human beings as means to some end, whereas in fact the truth is they are ends unto themselves. Humans are not valuable for some purpose, they are the creators of these odd things called values, and if you think about it, that is one of the main reasons why we believe all humans must be free and equal in the first place. But this error is not merely an ethical mistake that does violence to others, it is a practical political mistake also because it blocks revolutionary dynamics before they even have a chance to begin. The whole problem of alienation under capitalism is that we have all been reduced to objects in a system we have no say in. We have to learn how to become revolutionary, from the starting point of having been born as objects, but when we assume that activism means making yourself an object or instrument useful for the goal of producing social change, then we are prohibiting exactly what we really want and need and the only thing that fuels macro social change anyway.

Therefore, it stands to reason that the only possible first step toward transforming the currently existing social system is to create minimal spaces,

with at least one other person, in which both parties serve absolutely no purpose. And the only way to create a zone in which all parties serve no other purpose is by committing to the only criterion than can possibly attune diverse atomized individuals: honesty. Honesty converts the most diverse individuals to the only unification that preserves all of their differences; everyone can be as radically different as they please, and yet attuned around the only thing they truly all share, namely, the objective fact that none are objects to any of the others but all are their own autonomous ends, that all are recognized as the creators of themselves, ultimately subordinate to nothing. If this feels uncomfortably “individualistic” for altruistic types, I need only remind you that this only works as a collective activity, and the truly autonomous individual immediately recognizes this individuality as a gift of the community. If this feels too simple or easy to be a serious revolutionary politics, I need only remind you that this is harder than you think, so accustomed we are to constantly calculate consequences. Yet it is only in this unique situation of purposelessness that one can exit the state of objecthood under capitalism, in order to experience, if only for a minute, what it feels like to be free. It is horrifying but I genuinely believe there are many people today who have never felt what I am talking about, because the constant mental chatter that is constantly calculating consequences has hijacked our experience of each other to such an extraordinary degree that we don’t even realize it.

Nobody wants to admit their mind and body are so fully hijacked (in part because people won’t like you, etc., i.e. the consequences), so we all continue this horrible state of things in which we actively push away from ourselves and others the only really desirable thing. The other reason I believe there exist many people who have never really grasped or cannot remember this experience is that, feeling or even remembering such an experience *forces one to be a revolutionary*. If you really know or remember this feeling, you cannot not find yourself foaming at the mouth in opposition to the absurdity, stupidity, and brutality of almost everything currently existing under the label of “reality.” That the average person appears to at least publicly speak and behave as if the official reality is real—

that is data supporting the inference that the very experience of true autonomous existing is itself going extinct. Or maybe everyone knows it, but we're all too afraid to truly *speak and act* accordingly. Either way, the upshot is the same: revolutionary politics, in the first and perhaps even final analysis, means nothing other than the immanent production of autonomous communal social power through the basic principle of radical honesty, which implies immediate de-objectification followed by all parties becoming *whatever* they are (i.e. flourishing). By gaining a collective mastery over this production, how it works and how it breaks, we expand the commune indefinitely.

It is worth remembering that the world-historical revolution of capitalism itself, which overthrew feudalism, operated on precisely these terms. Whatever we might say about the inhumane consequences of capitalism, the pioneering individuals whose attitudes and behaviors would lead to generalized capitalist society were: highly creative, courageous individuals (in the sense of defying social expectations) who met in new and uncharted zones (the cities), who acted to manipulate the nature of reality by leveraging new forms of knowledge and new forms of technology that the traditional status quo repressed. They started in small groups, sometimes as individuals and sometimes in small networks of oath-bound individuals. Fearlessness, creativity, trust, and the purposeful alteration of social reality in a way that no one's ever done before, produced a world-historical revolution. There's no reason capitalism can't be overthrown by the same type of operations, this time geared toward the truth of our being rather than dishonest material interests in commanding nature and each other.

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Most of what most people do generates nothing but their own misery, and bad faith converts this misery into only a minimally tolerable survival (and even this minimum appears increasingly hard to maintain). Almost everything that passes for education today is essentially false. Most human relationships, at least in the overdeveloped world, range from empty to shit, as the number of our weak relationships has increased and the number of our deep relationships has decreased. And even the best benefits you can

get from the status quo—if you’re really lucky, privileged, and/or do everything by the rules—don’t even give you that much security nowadays. These are some reasons why today, it is in some of our own lived relationships that we see not merely potential, but rather the site of currently unfolding revolutionary dynamics we are only beginning to decipher.

I am writing this on the day that Donald Trump is being inaugurated as the President of the United States. There is something significant in the fact that I’m thinking far more about Mark Fisher and my revolutionary friends than I am about Donald Trump and the government of the United States.

There’s this long-standing assumption that educated, progressive individuals should pay close attention to national and international news, but if high-level politics and what is called the news are both institutionally and ideologically locked down to an unprecedented degree—as I would argue they are—then I believe that today, educated and progressive individuals will increasingly learn the courage to unhinge their attunement from what is effectively at this point mere noise in the social system. I think one of the discoveries some of us have been making recently is that, when you do this, in conjunction with doubling down on your attunement to dearest friends and comrades, so long as they are also honestly attuned to you, then fundamentally new energies emerge into this new collective entity-machine-project that feels quite literally out of this world. I don’t mean this in a woo-woo, spiritual way, I mean fundamental physiological, biochemical effects are triggered that then ripple out into speech and behaviors in organic ways tending to the overthrow of institutions.

For people who see short and easy proclamations on social media as the key gauge of someone’s political life, I am happy to give you 30 seconds to type that I think Donald Trump is very bad and, whatever it is, I’m against it. But I’m conserving my energy for larger projects; for my living, intimate accomplices and my revolutionary friends dead and alive. The big center is a massive, empty zone filled with little more than the fears of those who incorrectly believe there is still something there. Mark’s death is teaching me that, more and more I want to wager everything on my friends, and

that means moving investments away from the big empty center of this dead society into the spaces, times, and experiences that you have the concrete ability to fill with power. None of this is an attack on other styles, it's just to remind everyone that silence is not always complicity and indeed it is sometimes the mark of a groundswell you may just not know how to interpret.

That Mark and many of us have been onto something different, ever so slightly different but crucially, categorically different, is nicely measured by the reception of Mark's infamous essay on the Vampire's Castle. First, I think time has shown that essay to be way more correct than incorrect. I'm very sorry but anyone I know who has half-honestly watched the sociology of left internet discourse evolve over the past few years will agree on this point in private. Many remain afraid to say it, but with Mark's passing this feels more important than ever to just put on the record. I remember following the whole fiasco when it happened, before I even knew Mark, and I thought it was absurd but I didn't dare to say so. That's shameful and embarrassing. Any self-respecting adult has to call bullshit wherever they honestly see bullshit, in public, without apologies. I know way too many people, myself included (although I'm trying to end this), who won't say in public really important thoughts and feelings they have about various habits and tendencies prevalent in what passes for radical or progressive politics today. I won't argue it here, because anyone who would be offended by what I'm suggesting almost certainly won't be convinced and most people whose opinions and judgments I know and respect know what I'm talking about or at least accept and respect my comradely right to say what I think without apology. And here's where this gets real: the truth is I wouldn't even be writing this if I wasn't at this very moment embedded in real liberatory dynamics with others who I know have my back because they are themselves flying on the same winds.

A little story I haven't told many people. I have this draft book manuscript and Mark once invited me to share it with him. He was one of the first people I had ever shared it with, and honestly it is a pretty scrappy and highly idiosyncratic project that I could not have imagined appealing to anyone.



But of course he loved it, or at least pretended to love it. His encouragement could not have come at a better time, it was a really long and dark period of nothing but rejections and failures on all other fronts, intellectual and personal. His interest in the book was maybe my most positive achievement I had in the entire year of 2014 – 2015. And again, where many people might only see a minor act of kindness, I think there is something much more substantial, if we can learn to see it.

Dispensing encouragement to younger people can be a world-transforming political action. And if there's one thing that emerges from all of the beautiful tributes that have been written recently, Mark appears to have done this on an almost industrial scale. I was somewhat humbled to learn I am not so special, but impressed to learn that Mark appears to have been on some kind of mission to push forward everyone he possibly could. And you know what, lots of notable radicals or intellectuals or academics are nice people and they try their best to be "supportive" of others, but there are levels to this. This is where, if you look closely enough, you'll see that people like Mark are not just kind or supportive; he was practicing a revolutionary politics much harder and far more interesting than just being kind.

If you meet someone you admire and they give you some general positive feedback or words of encouragement, the actual transforming effect is going to be conditional on a series of other factors. Typically, you might find it vaguely uplifting and inspiring for a little while. But when someone you admire goes to the same political meetings as you, and sits around before and after just like you, somewhat awkward, somewhat terrified of recent news, and personally, vulnerably desperate to change everything that currently exists, with you, well you know what? It changes everything. The effect is totally different, far more powerful, far more lasting. And it matters when radicals are also respected in more status quo hierarchies—while of course there is so much to criticize about those hierarchies. When people such as Mark, who could be off writing cool books or seeking an academic promotion, are going to the same meetings as you because they genuinely want to make revolution now, it produces a unique effect. And

I think that's because no matter how radical we are, we cannot help but be affected differently depending on where a signal is coming from within the social status hierarchy. Placement in the social status hierarchy should mean nothing whatsoever for how we value or treat each other, my point is just that when people possess status quo cultural capital and they are choosing to invest themselves in the hard work of organized revolutionary politics, this is something relatively rare and it produces unique effects that deserve to be appreciated.

It is these types of interpersonal activities that generate irrevocable anthropological transformations. Mark's interest in my book was not just "encouraging"—it effectively supported my entire will for almost a year at a time when so many rejections were really making me wonder whether I was maybe just dumb or crazy. But also it altered the course of my life, to make me more invested in the real, immediate actualization of revolutionary political change, because our relationship was one defined by a revolutionary organization and if I felt indebted to Mark's support what that really meant was I was indebted to keep figuring out how to make revolution. I'm fully aware how absurd this might sound to others, but think about it. Since that time, I've had some modest academic success in my bullshit bourgeois career, which means my precious ego and income are pretty secure at the moment, so this is exactly when most people start to drift from their youthful radical politics toward a comfortable integration with the status quo. I have every social, financial, and cultural reason to now just kick back and enjoy my permanent academic post. But now *I can't do that*, and I'm happy I can't do that, but the reason is because through my revolutionary friends I am increasingly and irrevocably indebted to figuring out how to make revolution—to pursue my own liberation means pursuing the liberation of those others who are the concrete, direct generators of the power that has animated me over the past two years.

This is what we are onto. True attention and care, radical honesty and making shared/public that which is hidden, not to make a watered-down life possible within unlivable conditions but as a necessary path to making true life occur now. The politics of "consciousness-raising" is the material

process of overthrowing oppressive political institutions at the only point they really exist (where they enter our bodies), by treating each other honestly and never as instruments, thereby generating irrevocably bonded yet autonomous agents and collectives incapable of being consistent with status quo institutions. In my tiny little corner of contemporary Western radical politics, this is exactly what I've been doing with Mark and a number of others.

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Something about all of the lovely tributes that has given me pause is the tendency to see Mark with somewhat rose-tinted glasses. Don't get me wrong, Mark was a first-class intellect, an excellent writer, and he made quite an impact on a sizable audience. Many people knew Mark and his work much better than I do, but from where I'm sitting I don't even see Mark as primarily a writer. To me, Mark was an active revolutionary first and foremost, he just happened to write a lot of things down. I think this is really important because, how do you think anyone becomes an important writer? It's certainly not by choosing to become an important writer; it is by having some above-average source of interest or energy toward certain questions and writing things down along the way because you need to make sense of things as you go. Personally, I think Mark was interested in how such a rotten set of institutions can perpetuate themselves, and of course the question of how to overthrow them. I see his writings as by-products of the much larger qualities, attitudes and behaviors that made Mark the uniquely important figure he was.

In a comradely way, I would even wonder if there is not something possibly ideological in some of the glowing obituaries of Mark as a writer. As if his obscure, independent k-punk blog became so valuable and influential because of his way with words? I doubt that. And if you want to grow up to be cool and valuable and influential then just start an obscure, independent blog with good words? Maybe, but I think the real reason Mark made a lasting contribution to late 20th century British culture is because he fucking hated capitalism and it was killing him and he actually dared to say so, and to explain how and why, and to actively find others with whom

he might take an honest shot at changing everything. If that's the type of person you are, if that's how you live, then anything you scribble on the back of a napkin is going to be fascinating, inspiring, useful, and impressive. Not because you're a good "writer" but almost the opposite, because you care so much more about seeking liberation than being a successful "writer" that you have the freedom and energy to do something real with words. This is a crucial lesson for those interested in pursuing their own path of radical cultural production, but it's one that tends to be erased in the tropes our cultural industry uses to describe important writers.

No doubt I liked and admired Mark's writings, but I think Mark would understand my wish to make clear that he was not some sort of super rare genius talent. He wasn't: he was you. Of course he was smart, and a good writer, but he was also weird and awkward and nervous, like you, like me. I have met certain towering intellects whose mental function is in fact probably something incomparable to what you and I have. Mark was not that type, he was something far more dangerous. He would often say interesting and brilliant things and also things I hardly understood or did not agree with or did not find interesting. I've heard people call him a great speaker, and he was certainly quite a speaker, but "great speaker" risks a crucial misunderstanding. He was great fun to listen to and talk with, but he was not a great speaker in the classic sense most people associate with that phrase. He was often quite disorganized, mentally cluttered, elliptical, stuttering, longwinded, and—if we are being honest, and of course we are—sometimes downright incomprehensible.

I remember at a Plan C Congress he gave a talk on some ideas from Operaismo and I left the room with almost no idea what he was trying to say. But the radical insight here is that *that* can be more politically powerful and sometimes even more fun and cool than "great speakers." This is exactly the political-psychological mechanics of punk, where it is a lack of certain skills combined with a kind of passionate carelessness that triggers real excitement and empowerment in others, more so than mastery. So to call Mark a "great speaker" risks the very same media-spectacle recuperation that pacified Punk. I'm overjoyed to see Mark becoming a legend

even sooner than I would've predicted, given the remarkable outpouring of acclaim in the aftermath of his death. But if the effect is to increase the perceived cognitive or performative distance between the average reader and Mark, then that would be unfortunate. What made Mark so interesting and powerful was that he thought what he thought, and he said what he said, because he wanted to, because he was irrepressibly moved to overthrow an intolerable state of things. And he said what he said *despite* that he had all of the shortcomings and deficiencies of the average person. To hear someone like Mark think all this radical shit, and make all these crazy statements, was so politically electrifying exactly because he was not super gifted and had to struggle against obvious normal difficulties. But he didn't give a fuck, because he was a revolutionary, and that could be you tomorrow, today.

Or consider what is probably his most famous work, *Capitalist Realism*. It's a totally cool little book that's fun to read and I think it was really useful to a lot of people. But it's crucial to celebrate it for the right reasons, and avoid those that distort Mark's unique powers. It was not super original, certainly not systematic or comprehensive, and it gave very little direction on what any of us should do next. Mark wasn't a genius, he was an interested, passionate, creative person on a search for something real, and that's so much more revolutionary than mere genius. Again, his work was something you could do, if only you could find the courage and energy to pay attention to what really interests you, and write down what you think, for your friends, precisely without really giving a fuck if its original or systematic or impressive. This is the secret recipe of radical culture that actually produces effects on people, and I'm pretty sure Mark would not mind me reminding people of this.

From my view, I think Mark had a few key insights and I would summarize them as follows. All of this is temporary and it's not supposed to be like this, but if you look closely you can always find glimmers of life. And it's necessary to find those glimmers of life and invest in them, and if we all do this honestly and openly than we can and will find a way to change everything. These insights are insights that many of us have deep down in-

side, he just went after them as if it were a matter of life and death, because it was a matter of life and death, just as it is for us today, whether we feel like facing it now or later.

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Mark's death is teaching me that our revolutionary moment today is so much more real than I thought. Not an abstract potential, but something that is already operating wherever radically true relationships are being formed, if you only know how to pay attention, be honest with yourself and others, and invest your energies wisely. The more you take your attention and energies away from status quo fixations, and divert them into those people genuinely attuned to liberation, then as the dynamics of genuine bonding and belonging take hold, larger collectives can be spun from the two, to the three, and so on. If Mark's readers trust him as an authority on the political nature of depression, then we should also trust him as an authority on the real and immediately available road to revolutionary transformation that he and I and others have been stumbling down together for the past few years.

There's nothing magical or sacred about Plan C, which is only one particular group trying to figure these things out; it's about the discoveries many people are making and are continuing to make, discoveries which anyone can pursue in their own way and on their own terms with anyone around them. This is not a vague appeal for everyone to "come together in love" with everyone around them, not that at all: it is an appeal to break away from all that is wrong and false with only those you can trust to make of yourselves whatever it is you need to make of yourselves in order that life may occur together now. Not a universal love, but a highly careful and discriminating love—which might very well produce some enemies in the short term—based rigorously only on those principles you honestly believe to produce real dynamics of liberation, and an unflinching refusal of anything else. Not a circle of people singing kumbaya, but a real uprising that honestly feels like an uprising and which creates, almost out of thin air, the very thing you have been seeking all along.

At least for me, this is how it's working. It's sad to say, but it might've

been Mark's death that has really driven this home to me once and for all. During my last visit to the Plan C group in London, I had the good fortune of spending some quality time with several of my closest friends in that group. In a few moments, spread throughout my visit, I had the distinct feeling that, with those people, I'm truly embedded in a life or death struggle, but at the same time, in those very moments, I felt fully 100% alive and doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing. You can't call it liberation or revolution exactly, because no one is liberated until everyone is liberated, but it was a really unique and overpowering quality or experience of life that I used to think was something that would only come after the revolution, as it were. In these moments I sincerely felt like it was already here, or presently swelling like a wave, like it was actually happening in my body, like we are really doing the only thing that revolution could possibly be: our radically honest best, together. Interestingly, the only time I can remember having this feeling was in the headiest days of Occupy. The reason this is remarkable, and more evidence that indeed we are onto something, is that feelings of revolutionary power are supposedly short-term, fleeting, unsustainable rushes that only come about in rare insurrectionary upsurges such as Occupy—but here I am feeling them in a random pub with E, in another pub with N and A and J and W, on the overground to Tottenham with S, with C and T and A and J and A and S and everyone else at the same Misty Moon where I first met Mark Fisher before a Plan C meeting in 2014. And I still feel them right now, weeks later, even though to the naked eye “nothing is happening.”

In a way that I wouldn't have said even two weeks ago, it really now does seem to me that we are already doing it. I've never seen it so clearly. I do not feel any hope for the future, which I firmly believe is a conservative affect. What I have is an interpretation of where I am and what is going on around me and who exactly are these different people. And I have increasing reasons to believe that my interpretation is true, while the socially dominant interpretation is false. What I also have are concrete tools, reproducible tactics and techniques to make energies flow inside our bodies, tactics I have discovered with my revolutionary friends, whether we have

fully realized it or not, tactics that I can now creatively employ to remake every part of the world that I touch. What's even more remarkable is a peculiar strategic asymmetry about these tactics: these are tools that only real revolutionaries can learn, for the simple reason that today one must enter a revolutionary attitude to even access certain basic human experiences prohibited by what is currently called normalcy. Not least of these basic experiences is the one I mentioned above regarding "consciousness-raising," that most primordial experience of being present with others for no ulterior purpose whatsoever.

That simple and immediately available place of radical honesty and being-onto-ourselves, easy as it sounds, is available only to individuals and groups able to see that it is effectively barred to normal humans adapted to the status quo. Also it is only through radical relationships, attuned and bonded around the honest search for liberation, that currently atomized individuals can gain the courage to take the risks necessary for shooting down this path. When I speak of risks I don't mean anything grand, I mean even just that blog post you've been meaning to write but for some reason you're just vaguely afraid to post. With honestly revolutionary friends, you stop caring what the Big Other will think, and you say a little more, do a little more, than you normally would—because you actually believe you're onto something, as your friends are onto it also, and you might be crazy or stupid but you can't all be crazy and stupid.

Last but not least, you begin to realize that even if everything fails and everything goes wrong, nobody can really touch you, because the truth is most people won't even know what you're talking about. At first one's fear is always that people will respond negatively and punish you for sticking your neck out, but as you learn to do so, buoyed by revolutionary friends, you realize something at once more horrifying and liberating: you are much more likely to be ignored or misunderstood, possibly forever, than maligned and punished. If you're honest path brings malice against you then you should count yourself lucky, for it means you are certainly onto something. See the Vampire's Castle. Of course you could also be veering toward evil, always a risk, but again that's why you've invested so much into your



revolutionary friends. They will keep you honest without oppressing you.

And let me tell you one of the most beautiful things. If I haven't made myself clear or you just don't understand what I'm talking about, I am sorry about that but I also don't need to care or worry because I know with certainty that at least a few of my comrades will. I'm able to know this with certainty because the only reason I'm able to write this is because of them, so almost by definition they will find themselves in it. Radical political groups are often mocked for being self-referential little spheres, but the only reason this is mock-worthy is because we feel like we have to be accountable to something or someone else outside of those circles. So the inside of those circles can feel sad and guilty and lacking something. What exactly are they lacking, though? Nobody can ever say. We feel like we need to do something more, or do something bigger or better outside of ourselves, and we mock ourselves for being tiny and self-referential only because we judge ourselves from the perspective of some stranger in the big dead center who in fact is not looking at us, and never looks at us. Ironically, the really perverse thing about our little circles is that they are not radically circular enough.

There's nothing wrong with a small group that makes time and space to see nothing but itself. But the crucial condition for this to become revolutionary, the condition which is so hard to meet, is that such a circle must dare to make its own judgments about what is true and not true, real and not real (not in the sense of one objective truth but in the sense of diverse honesties or consciences), without apology and without paranoia and with absolutely zero respect for the millions of idiotic responses that might come from the massive dead center of society. And then it must dare to really believe and live by those judgments. The capacity to generate charmed circles is an extraordinary political power. All that is necessary from there is to make that circle expandable with a scalable membrane, not to self-loathe the inherently circular nature of a shared world, constantly fearing that we are not already enough for each other.

## **Consciousness-raising and the bio-chemistry of revolutionary politics**

Everyone asks: what is this odd dream we keep referring to as the social strike? How can we speak of striking given that the strike is, as they say, no longer a thing? I can already hear my activist and organizer friends snickering, that I speak so dismissively of the beloved strike, the proof they once had some power and will again. But indeed, activism and organizing in general is really no longer a thing. I, and presumably most other people, are bored by activists and organizers. Even those I am closest to, even those I have the most relative faith in, I am typically bored by them to the degree their perspective still basically revolves around how to make activism and organizing “work.” For my part, I am writing here not as an activist or an organizer, just one person who opposes the current form of human existence and is dedicated to collectively overhauling it before death takes me, as it did yesterday and as it will later today. I begin this essay on personal terms not because my own experience is especially important, but to offer my own case as a kind of introspective ethnography. I could write this as a sharp impersonal theoretical piece hoping to establish myself as a cool and useful theorist—of course as a typically insecure and alienated person I crave such recognitions—but that is precisely the type of elementary dissembling that constitutes a Valuable Activist Contribution at the cost of preventing honest and therefore real revolutionary connections from emerging. In a society as dishonestly sophisticated as ours, hopelessly useless honesty becomes revolutionary method, as I will try to demonstrate here.

The problem is that whenever I start talking in terms such as life, existence, and death—general terms, loose terms, honest terms, that is, everyday speech about my life, my feelings, my deeper fears and goals and what has always brought me to back to the revolutionary position—it is always the most active of the activists and the most organized of the organizers who are least able to understand. In many cases, with sometimes laughable rapidity, it is assumed that I am simply not educated in the rad-

ical activist catechism. If I give some historical or theoretical references to convince them I know a thing or two, I am typically pigeonholed into whatever niche of radical theory my vocabulary or appearance seem to suggest. At the very best, the kind ones will try to help me turn my positions into a proposal or some such product that makes activists and organizers happy.

For a while, I took these exchanges seriously. I stepped back, I listened to my elders, I learned, and I blamed myself: maybe I am just being negative, maybe I am just obsessed with my own feelings, maybe I am lazy or inarticulate or mumbling, maybe I just do not have anything to contribute to revolutionary politics. Ever since the end of Occupy back in the US, I have done my respectful best to contribute meaningfully to currently existing struggles and projects. But each day I fail to experience genuine revolutionary social transformation, I find it harder and harder to justify investing myself in activist projects. All the typical bourgeois excuses for resignation become increasingly tempting, compared to the blind alley that almost all currently available activism and organizing just honestly feels like.

From this experience, an insight emerges. If activist engagements sometimes make me think about quitting altogether—if radical activist circles cannot at a bare minimum retain the political energies of a relatively privileged and educated person who is actively and purposely trying to defect from status quo politics into dedicated, organized revolutionary politics—then really the activist incapacity to co-mingle and multiply with non-activist revolutionary energy must itself be a primary problem. If there is an “energy crisis” today, it operates much more at the level of interpersonal biochemistries than fossil fuels, for only the former can explain the absurdity of the latter: only a world-historical pacification of basic energies could explain how many humans cannot even find it in themselves to resist their own extinction.

I should be clear that I am not trying to contribute to currently existing activism, in which case I would be easily pigeonholed into the anti-activist activism tradition. I love my activist and organizer comrades and friends, but whenever I frame my perspective as a simple friendly offering,

I am beginning to realize it is they who sometimes honestly cannot decipher that I am actually raising a serious challenge and intimating a fundamentally alternative model. So I am not trying to constructively engage activism from within it, which has never achieved anything; the critique of “activism” from within radical circles is long-standing, but activism is too good at protecting itself. If it seems like I am coming out swinging, it is only because I am increasingly dumbstruck by how good activists are at not hearing anything but their own language. I am not trying to distinguish myself against anyone, itself a typical pathology of activist behavior which I would rather deflate at its roots.

Almost all currently existing revolutionary politics is essentially doomed to prevent revolutionary energy from appearing within its orbit. The entire history of radical politics under capitalism is a tradition in which activists primarily sell the commodity of optimism, in order to earn social capital for their activist firm (in the form of members or cachet). The traditional vessel for delivering customers the optimism they now shop for is some practical strategy for obtaining collective benefits. Long ago this was naturalised as just, on the grounds that one honestly believed one’s activist firm would deliver the collective benefits to make it all worthwhile. The problem is that this treats humans as objects to be organized, so that even if the collective benefits are obtained, the humans who joined the activist firm are farther from liberation than when they started. Activists duped them into relinquishing their humanity for material benefits, and indeed they helped dupe the activists into believing that such a basically dehumanizing organization of relations and priorities could ever advance liberation.<sup>8</sup>

Today, very few of us would ever actively lie or manipulate or mislead for radical ends which we believe would justify such sinister means. But yet, very few of us want to be radically, unlimitedly honest as an indepen-

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<sup>8</sup>Here I feel like I should cite a long list of readings to establish my intellectual bona-fides and urge you to read them, but there is no reason to assume that more reading would make you more revolutionary. I don’t even know you. If you want to, just Google shit or I would be very happy to email with you; if you don’t want to learn more, then me telling you to read certain things will just make me seem more powerful than you and make revolutionary politics feel to you like work. Why radicals think it is revolutionary to recommend readings to people, I cannot understand for the life of me.

dently worthwhile aspect of revolutionary transformation in its own right. Who would want to proclaim that we are hopelessly alienated, overworked, unhealthy, atomized, insecure, and simply have no idea how collective liberation can be produced from where we currently find ourselves? But yet, on the whole this is the case, and whenever these facts appear they are neurotically repressed in truly symptomatic fashion. Even in the most open organizing spaces, too much theoretical interest in these facts is seen as immature, ill, digressive, narcissistic, undeveloped, or at best tolerated as a therapeutic need of the speaker (which we later need to figure out a way to strategically translate into something practical). Revolutionaries remain unable to see that such naked facts of our predicament are themselves of primary interest, and that they are produced by orienting ourselves to each other as objects to be strategized, not solved by such an orientation. This is likely because it would not sell to simply say we are united by our radical honesty in having no answers, and so beholden are we to this logic that if we cannot imagine it selling then even we have a hard time believing in it. And it would not satisfy the need of current activists for whom activism is its own satisfaction as a platform for feeling ethical and efficacious and optimistic.

This need of activists to feel that one is already a valuable member of an adequately effective political project is one of the greatest enemies to initiating liberating social contagions simply because it is false: we are not really valuable members of any nearly adequate political project, so long as we remain this incredibly far from true freedom and equality, or anything that is even approaching its achievement. Most people are “apolitical” because they know better than us not to be duped by us. And within our own circles it is markedly counter-revolutionary to try and translate honest despair into something practical, almost by definition something falsely practical. Indeed it is the activist addiction to optimistic practicality that enshrines us in the despair of being nothing more than objects, because whenever honesty breaks through the charade of false strategic shrewdness, the obsessive desire to make something valuable out of it returns the subject to an object, precisely when the subject is trying to break out of

value production, and precisely when and where it should be able to.<sup>9</sup>

Lo and behold, there is a formidable tradition of radical politics which seizes directly on the massive, latent repository of honest relationality repressed by institutionalized domination (and traditional activism no less).<sup>10</sup> Its chief modern political signpost is known as consciousness-raising. Most popularly associated with 1970s socialist feminism, I would define consciousness-raising as the dedicated practice of honest relationality which is not reduced to some larger strategic necessity to which it would need to justify itself.<sup>11</sup> Consciousness-raising is also one significant focus within Plan C.

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<sup>9</sup>Of course, I am not saying that rational strategic logic should be exorcized from all aspects of human life, or that it plays no part in the thought-processes which feed into revolutionary politics. I am only pointing to a deeper, longer-term rational utility to the sincere and complete qualitative unhinging from strategic calculation. In other words, if you insist on the strategic attitude, then think of my position as a meta-strategy for overcoming why current strategies aren't producing revolutions; mine is a meta-strategy of radically defusing the strategic fetish in order to make possible the actual interpersonal dynamism which "strategic thinking" suffocates before it can even leave the gate. In other words, I am not pushing for a cult of purely irrational, non-sensical attitudes or behaviors; I am pushing for a highly rational disarming of certain deeply automatic defense mechanisms, rooted in instrumental reason, which prevent the group processes that make resistant sub-populations dangerous enough to force change. These self-pacifying automatisms enter activism before we even think about what to contribute to radical political discussions because they are rooted in the deeply habitual presumption of seeing each other, including our own selves, as means to ends rather than ends in ourselves.

<sup>10</sup>Some will say that honesty is not the issue, that it is not a matter of looking deeper into our own souls to see the world as it really is. On this point I find it interesting that as radical critics we agree that modern society is capable of the most incredible mystifications, and yet the possibility that there exist pervasive mystifications at the level of our own self-understandings is seen as implausible. I find this more odd than the idea that radical introspective inquiry may be a natural dimension of any real revolutionary politics. Based on everything we know about modern human beings (here one could cite figures from Heidegger to Arendt to Goffman), I would think looking deeper into our own interior lives and our deeply habituated ways of living and presenting ourselves to others would at least be acknowledged as a worthwhile area of inquiry.

<sup>11</sup>When I refer to honesty, one should not imagine merely the conventional image of a noble introspector who confesses their lies. True honesty implies the entire thread that links the emotions and judgments of individual to their everyday perception of themselves and their surroundings, and ultimately to the choices on which they will choose (or not choose, in bad faith) to stake their lives. In other words, far from reducing the political tradition of consciousness-raising to mere introspection, defining consciousness-raising around a generalized political honesty is indeed to view it quite epically. Of course, this larger perspective on the radical politics of the personal is what 1970s socialist feminism knew perfectly well. While 1970s feminist consciousness-raising was interlaced with a strategism which played its own important roles, what I am arguing here is that, empir-

And yet, even within Plan C, consciousness-raising seems to function as a side project. At the recent Fast Forward Festival, where one of the big questions revolved around advancing the concept of the social strike, it is remarkable to me that consciousness-raising as political practice did not seem to come up (at least not in the sessions I attended), as a significant pointer toward what exactly a social strike might entail. Given that the concept of social strike remains to many unclear, it stands to reason that our inability to integrate consciousness-raising as central to the idea of the social strike is not just an overlooked connection but a deeply conservative blockage symptomatic of the dubious, actionist optimism described above. It is hard to resist the inference that consciousness-raising may be seen as a kind of feminised supplement to real revolutionary politics, even within Plan C, useful as therapy and solidarity but only to the degree that it feeds into practical strategic value. This is comparable to how personal honesty shared in activist meetings finds no home unless it can be translated into something practical for the optimism market.

Thus a second insight dawns upon me: In fact, consciousness-raising is social strike in situ. Any instance of consciousness-raising, in the general sense I defined above, is literally a social strike against the value production and extraction which take place interpersonally in almost all human interactions under contemporary capitalism. At the same time that it halts the production of status quo value, it produces fundamentally new sociality which is not merely “feeling.” If you have ever had the experience of transformative interpersonal honesty, you know that its products are veritable material resources. Clarity, trust, empathy, acceptance, confidence in oneself, and ultimately joy, which from Spinoza to Deleuze has long been recognized as essentially the most elemental capacity to move and be moved: these are not feelings, they are weapons. Learning how to collectively produce joy is the only thing that “social movement” can really mean, in the first instance, especially given our world-historically severe alienation and

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ically, I believe it is the radical will to honesty that drives, and can even constitute its own, strategic actions—for it is only the will to honesty which can energize and bond a reality realer than bourgeois society, which is then concretely dangerous, powerful, and genuinely actionable.

anxiety. Consciousness-raising is not a feminine respite from strategic revolutionary action; it is the science of revolutionary action itself, for only this tradition takes seriously the crucial question of how to produce collective energies from separated alienations in a fashion which is not immediately stolen through some “larger” but alien sieve which is somehow always labeled “productive.”

This is what the Institute for Precarious Consciousness has in mind when they speak of constructing machines for fighting anxiety. Although even they see consciousness-raising as ultimately subordinate to “action.” My argument is that this instrumental subordination of consciousness-raising to some kind of “action” is precisely where and how capitalism short-circuits our subjective desires and atomized powers, re-wiring them back into the status quo despite our sincerest commitments to making revolution. In *Inventing the Future*, Srnicek and Williams provide some striking etymological evidence that their own will to subordinate consciousness-raising to “action” may perhaps be more anchored in an exploitative logic of market value than they care to explore: they ask, critically, when consciousness-raising sequences are supposed to “pay off,” lest the affective bonds produced by consciousness-raising “go to waste” (pp. 7). What if the problem in activist circles is not so much “folk political” tendencies with inadequate strategic perspective but rather the neurotic-repressive will to hyper-strategically translate every possible human energy within our orbits to some kind of radical version of “cash value,” which precludes the very possibility of our alienated subjective energies from fusing into larger collective dynamics? The problem would not be that “folk political” tendencies lead to failed social movements, but that instrumental reason as the psychological bedrock of a capitalist order makes us squelch each others’ diverse micro-movements before macro-movements could even be imaginable (as we try to make something valuable out of each other, to appear and feel valuable ourselves, to write books and articles, including this one, etc.).

In this perspective, it is not that consciousness-raising is a kind of emotional therapeutic support to primary strategic collective action such as



the strike. Rather, most of what pretends to be strategic collective action, such as the strike, is a kind of consumption or expenditure (usually wasted) of the militant psycho-physical energies produced by the everyday strategies of radical consciousness maintenance. Consciousness-raising is the psycho-physical (emotional, cognitive, and even bio-chemical) social reproduction of resistant collective action itself. Therefore, in my perspective, to join the social strike simply means to orient one's life toward maximising the free, militantly non-exploitable joy circulating among those beings who constitute one's lifeworld, including especially oneself. And to do this in explicit opposition to all of the currently existing social and political institutions whose very existence is literally owed to the fact that they long ago agreed to turn these energies over to the status quo order. Of course, it is immediately obvious that such processes of energy maintenance already happen everywhere, every day. The problem is that such energy maintenance is rarely if ever lived as a larger project of evacuating status quo value and increasing the commons, in such a fashion that can accumulate as an overthrow of contemporary institutions. Even in most radical circles, we might brag in private about our daily refusals and subversions, but only before or after the "meetings."

In my perspective, "organizing" a social strike means figuring out how to cultivate a contagion whereby already common tactics of micro-liberation become explicitly anti-institutional, increasingly bonded in alliance (if only in implicit reference), and simply more frequent, more widespread, and increasingly ungovernable. We have to reckon with the possibility that the subjects we wish to become, and the types of human energies we are seeking to proliferate, would actually be too joyous to even submit to the ways of thinking and types of interaction currently associated with radical politics. This does not mean folks should not have meetings, but in this perspective one becomes aware of how the object of meetings might be radically different than what is baked into the current psycho-physical dynamics which bring folks to activist meetings in the first place. This is not a rejection of strategic thinking as such and is more than the basic "prefigurative" position that we should model the world we want to see. Rather I am presenting

here a specific causal pathway to strategic leverage of a revolutionary magnitude, but the pathway is through a radical unhinging from instrumental rationality (i.e. the strategic, essentially exploitative mindset which pacifies our mutual encounters before they even begin).

When asked what is the meaning of this idea we call the social strike, I therefore would say that it is simply the qualitative and quantitative expansion and intensification of consciousness-raising to the threshold at which the collective store of energy we withdraw from status quo value (reserved for our own non-instrumental enjoyment and flourishing) outweighs the store of value held in reserve by the status quo. When I speak of energy I am not referring to any kind of mystical or New Age notions: all I have in mind is the process of literally making ourselves and each other's immediate lives actually more valuable and desirable than anything the institutional status quo can offer, until this becomes publicly and zealously true for a non-trivial percentage of the population.

It is not that "we" have to radicalize the ignorant and complacent others, quite the contrary; activists have to educate and practice ourselves out of our current, generally dishonest selves to simply become ourselves honestly, as much as possible, not just in special private spaces but increasingly in all spaces at all times, so that we increase our life with others (the commons itself) in actual movements of irresistible and uncontainable defiance. Because this would represent the real acting out of new collective energies rather than the performing of old energies we merely assume we are supposed to perform, we would be producing a source of actual, lived power from which strategic collective action might once again become possible. The spread of this type of behavior and attitude in deeply held and publicly political, interpersonal solidarity, beyond as small a threshold as 10% of the global population, would represent a fundamental threat to global capitalism. I am not saying this would be easy, but it is at least a concrete macro-vision with what social scientists would call "micro-foundations," i.e. a plausible account of how individual-level dynamics could feasibly aggregate into the desired macro-level phenomena. This is more than one can say about many implicit mental models of revolutionary change dominant

in activist circles, as evidenced by the simple fact that people are not exactly flocking to the revolutionary cause. Not yet. If educated progressives are so smart, why is right-wing populism winning?

### **Is it dangerous to engage seriously with radical right-wing thinkers?**

First, I am generally skeptical that any intellectually radical thought or speech that takes place within the wealthy liberal democracies today has much effect on anyone, for better or worse. So it is hard to see how intellectual or even social engagement with polar ideological opposites (even if one thinks their positions are plainly wrong or violent) would itself cause unique negative consequences of any kind. The genuinely thinking members of the ultraleft and ultraright are so few and marginal that it strikes me that this fear of “dangerous associations” is a narcissistic delusion; it’s a way of pretending that anyone gives a shit about what we think or say. Nobody cares, and that’s an essential part of our predicament, that human beings today are quite fully pacified and neutralized in their capacity to be moved.

It stands to reason that, if there is any way out of our collective virtual jail cells of separation and alienation, it might have to involve finding those who are most alien and frightening, to see if perhaps they know something we don’t. To see if, possibly, one reason the revolution never comes is that it’s always been posited on this obsessive insistence that our evil enemies could not possibly know something we do not know. Even if you believe someone is evil, you can still wonder if they know something you don’t. Clearly, collective revolutionary liberation has not occurred yet, so almost by definition there must be a large number of things ultraleftists remain fundamentally incorrect about, right? I don’t think it’s such a crazy idea to suppose that the most intelligent people on the right could be a source of great insight, especially into the dumbest and most ineffectual aspects of ourselves, aspects which we are possibly unable to see as clearly as we need to. I understand this is a moral heresy on the left, but what if this

very structure of paranoid-neurotic moral prohibitions is itself one of the most dangerous problems, and one we are uniquely ill-equipped to see in ourselves, by ourselves? This seems not only plausible but, in my view, increasingly likely to be true.

There is this fear that engaging with what one takes to be bad ideas will function as legitimization of those ideas, and that this will then spread them. There are two really hard problems with this view. First, I think we have to wake up to the empirical reality that left-wing culture has been collectively practicing this strategy of disengagement and disavowal for the past several years and the effect has been a *flourishing* of radical right-wing perspectives today. So the “distance and delegitimate” strategy of dealing with one’s ideological opposites is arguably the most dangerous way to relate to those one disagrees with (this is assuming one is correct and one’s opponents are wrong, that the others are in fact dangerous, which could itself be a pathological arrogance also symptomatic of what’s wrong with us). Hence the second problem with this attitude is that it assumes one knows for sure one is fully correct and one’s extreme ideological opposites are fully incorrect. I think this is a patently stupid presumption; most people use political ideas as blankets to keep them warm, and that’s fine, but the reality is that no matter how much one believes what one believes there is always the possibility that perhaps one has been wrong all along and one’s ideological opposites have been correct all along. This may be very unsettling, but it appears to be an unavoidable difficulty baked into reality itself, and no amount of militance can overwrite such difficulties by force.

Finally, even if it is “dangerous” to liaison with thinkers of seemingly evil thoughts, I would say the whole point of a radical or revolutionary political position is to actively cultivate a higher-than-average tolerance for danger. Is it not odd that people who claim to believe in radical critique and revolutionary social change speak of “dangerousness” as something to be avoided? Again, I see here a symptom of the mystified mechanisms of our own pacification. The truth is, I desire some danger. If only my thinking and communication behaviors were dangerous! If there is any danger to dialogue with the radical right, I think I would simply say that I am not

afraid of it. I trust in the capacities of human beings to distinguish true from false in the long run, I trust that we will converge on the truth ultimately but only if we, perhaps somewhat dangerously, are willing to consider everything, especially that which we are most emotionally invested in (for that is almost certainly where our errors will be found). And I believe strongly that whatever the truth about human beings is, finding it out cannot hurt us any more than all of the prevailing falsities. The catch is that one has to at least entertain the possibility that what one fears and loathes the most could potentially turn out to contain some truth. If that's dangerous, then I would think it is precisely the type of danger revolutionaries should be faulted for not seeking out more eagerly.

## **On turning left into darkness**

A response to critics and a more positive elaboration of my current thinking.

In the past week, many associates of mine on the radical left have expressed grave concern about my recent cultural politics. If you haven't been following, here's my best shot at a succinct, impartial recap. I have been blogging about what it means to engage intellectually with what I call the "smart right." By that I mean people with personal intellectual projects defending right-wing perspectives, potentially even including some that appear horrifying and/or evil. I use the word "smart" only to exclude from the mind two images that have come to define "conservatism" in the left-wing imagination: infantile and fundamentally disingenuous politicians, and then mindless, racist armies of trolls. Specifically, for instance, I have expressed interest in the writings of Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin (Moldbug); I recently hosted a podcast with psychologist Diana Fleischman that included discussion of controversial topics such as "human biodiversity" (some say this is a euphemism for racism and some say it's an empirical reality). Obviously not the usual talking points for a left-wing intellectual, but to be clear nobody is accusing me of writing or saying anything particularly impeachable. I did receive some very thoughtful concerns, however,

so one goal of this post is to clarify at least one or two of the most fair and important criticisms I have received. This is a caring thing to do, and I still believe deeply in caring.

On the other hand, any culture of absolute kindness becomes a conservative system of unspoken violence insofar as painful truths get repressed and all participants become deformed over time. It is because I genuinely love my friends on the left that I am stepping up to publicly state, and seriously pursue the implications of, dozens of difficult questions we have basically had an unspoken pact to not speak about for perhaps decades now.

If you are one of my comrades on the left who is generally overexposed to human docility or illness, I must also warn you, caringly, that you might be alarmed or confused by what follows. Many of you are now accustomed to a particular script: comrade is “problematic,” group pulls moral alarm, comrade begs forgiveness and (even in the best of cases, not to mention the horror shows), comrade dies a little on the inside, group feels reassured comrade will do no harm, groups grows old and gray wondering why they never changed the world. Well, I have seen this script performed too many times to play along any longer; over the past several years I think I have learned a thing or two about why our groups don’t change the world. One reason is that we punish our own for grappling with questions we pretend to understand but are in fact too fearful to seriously consider.

So at the same time this post will charitably respond to some left-wing critiques of my project, in the same breath I am going to unapologetically push further outward on my perspective that so horrifies many of you. I will no longer fight rearguard battles against fearful and disingenuous people on the left who would rather condemn something than admit they don’t have the time to read and process it; but neither am I here to cozy up with right-wing currents, as so many on the left assume of anyone who starts really speaking up and speaking out. I should like to become a *worthy opponent* of the smart wings of the new reaction, rather than merely pretend they are stupid; for I consider it a great embarrassment that the revolutionary left has yet to generate anything as genuinely interesting and creative as *The Dark Enlightenment* or *Unqualified Reservations*. If so-called left-

accelerationism is our best response, then we're in deep trouble (see below). Fortunately, I think we can do much, much better, but we won't know until we try.

One of the key objections put forward by my more thoughtful critics from the left is the following. They argue that it is ethically and/or politically wrong to entertain a *frame of debate* in which racist implications appear likely. For example, my podcast with Diana is ethically or politically bad because by even discussing biological differences across groups, I am effectively increasing the perceived legitimacy of notions that can and will be used to support racist ideas or policies. I think this is a reasonable concern based on a plausible model of culture. Yet after reflecting on this for several years, I believe this idea is fatally mistaken in ways that have not yet been fully grasped or written down anywhere (that I know of, anyway). Here is a first, short attempt.

This idea that it is ethically or politically wrong to *entertain a certain frame of debate* is a fatal error in both the normative and empirical sense of that term. First, on the normative level, the idea of refusing to engage people with certain frames of reference dehumanizes people who have no access to anything other than those frames of reference. In short, this objection writes off large swaths of humanity as inhuman. I believe that this monopoly on humanity claimed by educated leftists is now, on net, a more violent and reactionary phenomenon than any legitimacy that would be given to racism by even talking with a proper racist (let alone decent people who merely have dicey or controversial positions). What many on the left ignore is that today large swaths of human beings are, through no fault of their own, socialized into right-wing and often racist frames. There exists a large number of people who are racist because they were sociologically doomed from birth to be racist (e.g. poor undeducated white kids in racist families and geographies are statistically doomed to be racist). Their humanity has been robbed from them (as it's increasingly robbed from everyone).

It is my view that the revolutionary left is absolutely obligated to treat such people *as the humans they truly are* despite the dehumanization they

have been subjected to. When the “humane” leftist says thou shall not engage with any racist “framing” of a conversation, they are saying that large swaths of essentially innocent people *do not have the right to think, speak, or participate in public life*, i.e. this position coldly writes off the past and continued dehumanization of literally millions of people. Leftists think they are being radically humane, guarding the last line of defense against the collapse of human equality, but the horrifying mistake nobody is willing to reflect on is that this is actually saying “keep those filthy animals out of the little circle of humanity *I* still get to enjoy with my educated friends.”

The genuinely humane, revolutionary-emancipatory position in contemporary culture is that we must dare to do the cognitively and emotionally terrifying, and dangerous, work of extending whatever last shreds of humanity we have, to everyone we possibly can. Therefore, the truly humane, caring, revolutionary gambit today ethically requires us to “engage with racist frames.” As a militant antifascist, I also believe in drawing lines across which absolute refusal or physical resistance becomes the correct move: to me, the clear line is if someone is actively engaged in violence or directly inciting it. I would not have a conversation with a neo-Nazi marching in my town throwing bottles at immigrants; I would, with my community, physically remove them from my town. All I am saying is that to draw this line of militant non-engagement at the level of “thinking and speaking with a racist frame” would require us to tell millions of people to go die in the cesspool they were born into. We have been effectively doing that for decades now, and not only does it fail, but it appears to *engender* or intensify novel mutations of racist politics (e.g., carefully non-explicit white “identitarian” movements, etc).

Continuing from the previous part, the second problem is as follows. This notion that it can be wrong, *a priori*, to consider certain frames of reference is a grave error in the practical or strategic sense as well, because to cast off so many people as inhuman casts off all of the humans we would need to change anything. It empirically dooms the left to never achieve the fundamental transformations we claim to be fighting for. If you listen to smart people on the right, they are currently laughing their way to



the end of humanity as the left continues to push deeper and deeper into the mistakes we are actively refusing to learn from. It is very difficult for the few revolutionary leftists still alive to confront this, because it's genuinely so vertiginous and horrifying that it really approaches what is cognitively and emotionally unsurvivable for genuinely caring people: there are at least some objective reasons to believe the human species may be genuinely crossing the threshold at which exponentially increasing technological efficiency makes the absolute end of humanity an objective and irreversible empirical reality. I think it's debatable where we are at in that process, but it seems undeniable this question is now genuinely at stake and I simply don't see a single person on the revolutionary left seriously considering this with the radical honesty it requires.

If folks like Srnicek and Williams and the "post-capitalism" types are the best the radical left has to offer on this front, I'm very sorry but we're in serious trouble. No disrespect to those folks, they are all very good and smart people. But that is exactly the problem. A really profound problem nobody on the left wants to consider is that being "good person" imposes psychological constraints on your most basic capacities to think and express yourself honestly. To understand this, we need to take a little historical detour.

Recall that capitalist society only emerged and grew on *hypocrisy* as the standard mode for cognitively and emotionally managing the necessity of having to brutally exploit each other to survive. This hypocrisy is what the word "bourgeois" means, and it is nothing less than the naturalized lifestyle of everyone who qualifies as a "good person" in modernity. Because living as a human being under capitalism requires hypocrisy, being empirically correct about what is happening and how the world functions (science) as well as interpersonally adequate to each other (what is called "caring," or saying/doing what helps specific other people in specific moments) are mutually exclusive to a substantial degree. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt has shown with several years of research that people who identify with the political left are disproportionately interested in "care" as a value; conservatives have a more multi-dimensional "palette" of moral

foundations). To be clear, I am in fact deeply interested in the value of care, which is one reason I find myself sociologically on the left-wing of political culture. The unique challenge I don't see anybody on the radical left seriously confronting is how our commitment to care comes with the cost of certain systematic errors we happily ignore by dishonestly repeating over and over that we ignore them because we "care." The issue here is that, it is programmed into the nature of a capitalist bourgeois society that to pursue unlimited "care" means that you objectively do not care about changing reality, insofar as changing something as complex as "society" requires extremely sophisticated empirical rigor, deeply at odds with the care we also need to exercise in order to cooperatively change things together as diverse human beings.

(An aside. The first and most stupendous person to see all of this in the early stages of capitalist modernity, who so clearly saw the doomed destiny of any society organized on hypocrisy, that he preferred to sacrifice his public "goodness" to produce monuments of honesty so outrageous he hoped they would raze the hypocritical order altogether, was, of course, Rousseau. Now, Rousseau did not squash the rise of bourgeois hypocrisy, but he had demonstrable effects in generating the modern revolutionary left tradition as we know it, from the French Revolution to Fanon and beyond. There are many good critiques of Rousseau, but if there is one example of how a sincere *individual* can craft a life that contributes to genuinely collective, world-historical waves of revolutionary political change, it is surely Rousseau.)

In my view, this tradeoff between being correct about how the world works and caring for each other enough that we can cooperatively change it in the direction of peace and abundance for all—this is perhaps *the* most vexing and urgent puzzle for a genuine revolutionary left today. Yet remarkably I am not aware of a single person genuinely risking themselves on solving it, so I'm going to try. At present I am working on understanding the mechanisms whereby such an important problem has somehow been so stubbornly invisible to so many of us for so long. My wager is that we if we can truly understand the mechanisms of our own blindness, we will

find pathways to the holy grail of the revolutionary left tradition: the flourishing of all human beings in peace and abundance, immediately, without recourse to all of the right-wing solutions that get raised in direct response to the left's willful neglect of exactly this impasse.

It is because of this tradeoff between being correct and caring that I have recently become interested in what I have been referring to as the "smart" right-wing. Many people are concerned that my recent interest in intelligence means that I've become an IQ elitist or something. On the contrary, I am keenly suspicious of the politics of high-IQ subcultures, precisely because I know there is a trade-off between being correct and caring. Because we care about each other, there are certain things we refuse to see or else refuse to tell each other about what is really true. That's fine, and perhaps a hard constraint of the types of beings we are on the radical left. But "smart" far-right people, who do not give a fuck about how people feel, *they* might just be the only ones *capable* of telling us those truths we need to process if we are ever going to have a sufficient command on reality to generate the systemic transformations we believe in. But at the same time, I am highly skeptical that the evacuation of care is a viable political project, because warmth is a condition of life for we creatures who require the sun to live, we creatures who are literally composed of a once-exploded star. I think right-accelerationists are wagering on the possibility that, if technologically super-charged hypercapitalism is *understood correctly* (hence the call to minimize care), that is objectively the most likely path for the possibility of surviving, perhaps into the becoming of something post-human.

For instance, a remarkable feature of Nick Land's current writing is his obsession with coldness; I have never read anyone who so conscientiously endorses the absolute evacuation of care as a political project. Many on the left find this so evil they are resolutely insisting that if one so much as speaks his name without any positive adjective in the same sentence, *that* very act is enough to force the speaker out of the publicly defined circle of "good humans" into that outside zone of cast-off inhumanity (consider that Land's handle is *Outsideness*), via the same intellectual-social process I described above. If we self-servingly cast off human beings as if they are

sub-human, we cannot then feign surprise and indignation if they say, “OK then! I’ll go off to become one with the superintelligent eugenically produced cyborg overloads you’ll be enslaved by in a couple of generations and I will laugh my ass off all the way to the singularity!” That’s the vibe I get when I browse Nick Land’s ongoing work, and when I look at the objective reality of runaway global finance and the tech sector, it does not seem implausible that something like this could potentially be underway. Of course I find that horrifying, which is why I am calling absolute bullshit on the people who say that it’s “too evil to engage.” I think it’s too alarming not to engage.

The more evil you think someone is, the greater should be your concern to ensure there is not the slightest chance they understand something better than you. If they are so evil, and they understand even one tiny thing you don’t, perhaps they are off using that edge in knowledge to engineer you out of existence. This suggests to me that when people say, “intellectual engagement with person X is prohibited,” what they are actually saying is “we are so afraid they might be part of the superintelligent cyborg army coming to enslave us that, even if they are literally preparing to, we do not want to know about it, *even if there is a chance that we can still stop them!*” And this is where I get off the train to nowhere, for this is where moderate respectable leftism (including most currently existing “radical” variants) converges with the most insidious and cowardly conservatism. If there is some chance that hyperintelligent cyborgs are preparing to overtake humanity once and for all, because there is some chance that for generations now they have been operating on a model of the world we made it our pact to never consider, then I’m going to take a real look. Not everyone has to be comfortable doing so themselves, but at this point I think that any honest, decent, thinking being on the radical left will *at least allow me to try*.

I believe that currently, a dirty little secret on the the left is that for some people, the “left” is an agreement to protect each other’s right to look away from the most horrifying and potentially tragic realities of planetary life today, to (implicitly) secure amongst ourselves the last bits of interpersonal warmth available on the planet, agreeing to *allow* the rest of hu-

manity's descent into irreversible coldness. It helps to explain why, if you even approach these issues with the slightest indication of analytical coldness, you have to be ejected from the warmth cartel, for ejecting such existential threats is a condition of its survival. But I believe it has always been the vocation of the revolutionary left, properly understood, to risk its own survival on deploying just enough analytical coldness to engineer the unique machine that would take as an input the left's unique material resource (warmth or energy via care) and produce as an output non-linear, systemic dynamics the ultimate equilibrium state of which would be peace and abundance for all. What that machine looks like is the question, and this is only a formal statement to illustrate the revolutionary left position today as an engineering problem. There are many reasons that have been adduced as to why such a machine cannot exist, and I do not pretend to offer responses to them here. I am only suggesting that any revolutionary left today, worthy of the name, would need to "solve for X," as it were. The point of the engineering metaphor is not that everybody in the revolutionary movement will need to be an engineer, not at all; the point is only to show that any left-revolutionary project, to succeed, will have to solve this engineering problem.

What does this mean for revolutionary politics, in plain conversational terms? By putting all of our eggs in the basket of care and kindness, the radical left is now suffering from an engineering crisis it does not have enough engineers to *even notice*. In short, making revolution is a complex practical problem we are not solving because we are now generations deep in a long-term strategy of prohibiting people who are good at high-level problem solving but bad at being polite. Not to mention people who are good at creative and social openness, but bad at obeying rules. Thinkers of the respectable-radical left, people such as Paul Mason or Srnicek and Williams are selling a hope of technological super-abundance, but they are too sweet to tell any of their left comrades that all of the people you would need to *actually produce* that super-abundance are off building hyper-exploitative super-capitalism in part because they once went to an activist meeting *and everyone treated them like fascists*. To bring this back to anti-

capitalist basics, the reason left post-capitalist thinkers don't reflect much on such little problems as this one is because selling books is as mutually exclusive with truth-telling, in the short run, as is being a "nice person." Hence the need for a fundamentally anti-bourgeois revolutionary intellectual culture cold enough to seek all of the darkest truths, but still warm enough not to betray the calling of solidarity. I'm not saying the left should start worshipping cold analytical power; all I'm saying is that if we genuinely believe in the necessity of changing the world, a revolutionary culture would have to be at least minimally hospitable to a minimal number of people who have knowledge of how complex things work and how they break, and people with the traits and inclinations to maneuver among diverse others. Both types of people are effectively prohibited from those who currently define radical progressive politics. Contemporary radical left culture is now so fully doubled-down on the wager of kindness over intelligence and creativity, that I am afraid it is almost vacuum-sealed against learning why it might be on the verge of extinction. I am writing this, and will continue writing to this effect, on the last-ditch possibility there exist other people out there, somewhere, who can see in this something more important than a moral offense.

## **Two cultures of radical politics**

Why morality preserves the status quo and science is the key to overthrowing it.

While many people on the left still pretend that "free speech" and "political correctness" are fake right-wing concepts, a number of us are beginning to realize the profound mistake of dismissive moral posturing. Get your popcorn ready now, because it's going to be a fascinating mess as more and more people on the left begin to realize that the cultural politics of policing moral symbols has been fully exhausted and defeated.

The collective-emancipatory gains of genuine truth-seeking are now so massive compared to the rapidly diminishing marginal returns to the moral model, that there is no reason to spend much effort trying to convince the

remaining moralists. First, If I am right that the truth-seeking model is better, then it will win because it is better, whether I convince anyone in a blog post or not. Second, I am practicing it, so if I am right then by simply thinking and doing what I am thinking and doing, you'll see how it works in practice. If I'm wrong, my ideas will fizzle out and I'll go away. In any event, what I would like to do here is simply unpack some of the notions I have been referring to in not-fully-explained shorthand. To begin, what do I mean when I refer to the "moral model" and the "truth-seeking" model?

### **The moral model vs. the truth-seeking model of radical politics**

By "left moralism" or any of the other cognate phrases I sometimes use to this effect, I am referring to the model of political activism that seeks to change society by enforcing moral prohibitions. I think this is far and away the most widely held mental model of how progressive social change can and should be achieved, in moderate as well as radical circles. Make a list of words and ideas and types of behavior that are good, and try to get people to identify with them, talk about them, and go to meetings around them. Sometimes these words seem very concrete and action-oriented (such as "strike") but nonetheless, if you observe like an anthropologist would, you find that an overwhelming portion of the energy is organized around identification with certain words and ideas believed to be in some sense normatively good or desirable. Always curiously lacking is impartial assessment of effects. Also, make a list of words and ideas and types of behavior that are bad and politics means discouraging these by whatever means necessary. Radical politics means *really strongly discouraging* these things. An important feature of this model is that what, exactly, should be on the list of bad things is a question that is not in principle open to question or debate. It is a characteristic of the moralist model that questioning its basic premises is itself one of the bad things to be discouraged; "good politics" means granting the goodness of the list and its enforcement, simply because that's the moral thing to do. In practice, today, what's actually on the list of bad things is generally determined through reverse dominance hierarchy in which deference is given to the most institutionally

dominated individuals and groups you happen to be around. To be clear, I don't think this is a totally unreasonable model. It kind of makes sense: society oppresses people unequally so give some priority to oppressed people in defining what is bad and everyone try to stop the occurrence of those bad things from happening. Not necessarily perfect but fair enough.

I use the phrase "truth-seeking" as an informal and intuitive name for what I could just as well call "scientific method." The problem with "scientific method" is that for a lot of people this will sound too grandiose for thinking and acting around everyday cultural questions. Not to mention a lot of people think "scientific method" applied to social questions is impossible or harmful to begin with (it's not, it's just harder to apply to social questions than to something like physical objects). But most people agree that our ideas about the world around us can be more or less accurate, more or less consistent with how things actually work outside of us, and most people can admit they have an inner sense of when their ideas are proven true by reality (something works as you expect it to), and when their ideas are proven false by reality (something you are doing produces unexpected, undesirable outcomes).

So when I talk about "truth-seeking," all I mean is informally but seriously subjecting all of one's beliefs, opinions, and mental models of the world to the basic guidelines of scientific method in an everyday, intuitive fashion. Basically: everything you think is just a theory, and everything you observe at all times is data you compare to what your theory would have predicted; you need to actively consider all plausible alternative theories and you update your mental models of the world accordingly. You can, and should, have unique background experiences and feelings and creative quirks; scientific method in no way discourages or disqualifies any of that, as it is popular for naïve humanists to suggest. Indeed, truth-seeking is actually the only way to remain loyal to your unique experiences and quirks: the scientific method provides the key for translating your unique data into power over your unique environment, by subjecting your thoughts to objective rules that are guaranteed to give you the best possible command of your unique situation. So this isn't just an academic protocol; it's the only



way to live a basically honest and mature life, and I would argue it's a basic pre-requisite for anyone who would hope to contribute to the elimination of oppression by complex social structures.

So the "truth-seeking" model of radical politics is fundamentally opposed to the moral model. The moral model says to begin with what is currently defined as morally bad (typically through reverse dominance hierarchies), and devote yourself to discouraging and generally reducing the prevalence of those things. The moral model requires specifically that nobody question the fundamental goodness of that model, or the wisdom of certain items being placed on the list of prohibitions, because the whole strategy is based precisely on forcing conformity to Goodness. The truth-seeking model's only rule is that you must be honest about your data and how you're making inferences from that data, but otherwise everyone should just do their best trying to understand how oppressive structures function and how to think/speak/act with others in the precise ways that will predictably overthrow those structures in favor of equality and liberation. The moral model's final endgame is a world in which all badness goes away through mass conformity with moral criteria. The truth-seeking model's final endgame is, through diverse and totally free experimentation, we collectively unlock our true functional relationships to oppressive social machinery while immanently rewiring them into correctly-functioning liberation machines.

### **Why the moral model will not go down without a war**

The reason the opening of a free-speech cleavage on the left is going to be really messy is that a large number of people have so long schooled themselves in the cultural politics of moralism, and have for so long avoided the very different protocols of truth-seeking (i.e. scientific method), that such a paradigm shift will understandably be experienced as a mortal threat to their identity. And we know that human beings will sooner go to war than reasonably reflect on anything that threatens fundamental dimensions of their identity. People have staked years of effort and many of their social relationships on a model that is suddenly obsolete, so it's reasonable for such people to be confused and fearful about their place in the future of

radical politics, let alone society. Fortunately, scientific method has an extraordinary egalitarian feature that goes woefully under-celebrated in radical circles: it's equally demonstrable (ultimately) to anyone who is willing to work at understanding it.

The whole politics of left-moralism is actively anti-egalitarian because it's logic is not readily and equally available to all interested parties. There are many social and economic factors that make access to scientific method unequally distributed, of course, but it has the uniquely egalitarian-emancipatory feature of at least being intelligible and employable by all who can find their way to it. The protocols of the left-moral model are not only beset by the same basic problems of unequal access (this is why educational privilege is curiously the single non-demonized privilege in left-moral culture), but the protocols of how to think and act politically on the left-moral model are not available to all *in principle*. They are unequally accessible *by definition*, so even if they start out noble and true, there is no way for large groups of humans to hold each other accountable to them in a fashion equally consistent with their truth. The magical techniques of being an ideal ally in the moral war—in which, one day certain words are declared good and the next day they are designated impermissible, according to a logic that does not exist out of the declarations of those groups and individuals who happen to be at the top of constantly shifting reverse dominance hierarchies—is therefore inegalitarian in principle. This is not to cry woe for the exclusion of white men from power (as will be the immediate rejoinder to my point here), it is to cry woe for anyone anywhere who might like to enter revolutionary movements for liberation from diverse starting points. The left-moral model is inherently illegible for anyone who is not able to go through narrow, fickle, local person-driven power dynamics to receive the day's edicts on what is good and bad. Scientific method, while beset by problems of unequal access as with everything under capitalism, at least has the egalitarian virtue of being written down, basically unchanging, and citable to all.

### **Multiple equilibria**

I think a lot of smart and genuinely good people on the left operate on

this model simply because, as a really-existing cultural structure, it can always inflict very real punishments they are not personally able to risk at the moment (ostracism) and it really delivers rewards they are not personally able to forego at the moment (social stability, standing and status in the in-group, efficacy, purity, etc.)

But the whole point of being a *radical* or *revolutionary* is to actively cultivate a higher tolerance for social punishment than bourgeois normies, and less reliance on the everyday psychological payoffs that bourgeois normies require to make their sad lives livable.

The revolutionary life, the life that genuinely risks itself in the name of what it believes, operates on a totally different equilibrium. Through cultivated attitude and iterating behavioral practice, we push our social punishment tolerance to the human maximum (but no more), our reliance on disingenuous bourgeois psychological tricks to the human minimum (but no less), but we set our truth-seeking and truth-speaking/behaving high enough that it becomes a unique and inviolable source of two key resources. First, it provides motivation/energy replacing that which is lost by foregoing the conventional bourgeois channels, because any genuine process of truth-seeking is by definition interesting, inspiring, and endless. Second, it provides *actual power*, for oneself and for whoever you wish to share it with, insofar as increasing your understanding over the social average unlocks concrete pathways to change the world around you *despite* that most people are content to leave the world as it is. Read the biography of any well-known revolutionary in history (anyone whose life itself participated in world-historical effects), whether it be a political revolutionary or creative/cultural revolutionary, and you will find they are not just different or more extreme than their contemporaries. You will find they organized their life on this fundamentally different equilibrium, a qualitatively different organization of energy inputs and outputs, which provide the sustainable bio-chemical basis necessary for producing systemically transformative truths despite extreme social punishment and very little bourgeois subjectivity-maintenance.

The left-moralist model will protest the new school loudly and insis-

tently until one day you just don't hear from it anymore. This day is probably much sooner than most people think. Very soon the whole fashion of generalized moral condemnation will be so fully outed as an intellectually disingenuous and practically conservative tendency, that everyone will soon be pretending they never engaged in that embarrassing old fad. And the new cool kids on the block will be all those who are currently risking themselves on truth-seeking, those who were willing to take a little bit of heat from sad moralists in favor of seeking *what really works* for producing large-scale liberation dynamics. The reason I know this is not because I'm special; quite the contrary, it is because some version of this pattern characterizes all epochal transformations. A scientific outlook makes you larger by making you smaller, for it allows you to find a humble but real role in a set of infinitely larger objective processes.

## **Capitalism is an instance not an essence**

Reading Deleuze and Guattari, cosmic selection bias, and the room for revolutionary praxis within unconditional acceleration.

Nick Land sometimes reads Deleuze and Guattari as if all the mechanisms theorized by them are mechanisms unique to capitalism. I'm going to argue that this is one of the many specific points in which the accelerationist question remains far from settled, and in which the foreclosing of revolutionary praxis strikes me as over-hasty.

To Land, [D&G's concepts are not just theoretically applicable to features of capitalism but strictly synonymous with them](#):

The D&G model of capitalism is not dialectical, but cybernetic, defined by a positive coupling of commercialization ("decoding") and industrialization ("Deterritorialization"), intrinsically tending to an extreme (or "absolute limit"). Capitalism is the singular historical installation of a social machine based upon cybernetic escalation (positive feedback), reproducing itself only incidentally, as an accident of continuous socio-industrial revolution. Nothing brought to bear against capitalism can compare

to the intrinsic antagonism it directs towards its own actuality, as it speeds out of itself, hurtling to the end already operative ‘within’ it. (Of course, this is madness.)”

This is reasonable enough because capitalism certainly provides the most stunning and historically consequential examples of these mechanisms. But this is effectively a form of selection bias. This thing we call capitalism is only the contingent world-historical catastrophe that has made us conscious of these mechanisms through our feeling the violent long-run effects of them having over-taken us.

The whole point of D&G’s project, in my view, is to identify very general mechanisms; such that they can serviceably explain the perpetuation of systemic oppressions but also serve as actionable maps for spinning new, non-linear systemic dynamics (world-historical transitions) from the most micro-scopic mechanisms. If “decoding” meant “commercialization,” why are their texts otherwise quite clearly anti-capitalist? In other words, while I think these readings of D&G are often quite brilliant and productive, the current frontiers of accelerationism have something of a problem around “face validity.”

I think the biographical evidence makes it very hard to fathom that D or G intended any kind of passive capitulationism, and their works are a brilliant catalogue of calls to activity. Their writings are filled with injunctions such as, “Always follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight,” etc. Am I really to imagine that all of these lines are trying to tell me that I should start a business? I am not dismissing the provocative capitalist reading of D&G, I am only pointing out the obvious (which is surprisingly glossed over by the current frontiers of accelerationsim): D&G’s call to accelerate seemed pretty clearly to be part of a larger vision in which any interested party could learn how to accelerate into liberation from the inertia of systemic oppression; that the other side is more desirable, and that we might even find each other there together.

I am not saying that the passivism or “horrorism” of Landian or unconditional accelerationism (i.e., there’s basically nothing for us to do) is not

possibly the correct, final conclusion that D&G were simply incapable of drawing; it is only to say that, insofar as accelerationism is premised on D&G, passivist interpretations should explain why D&G spent so much effort delineating all of those general mechanisms in a general way, with so many inspiring exhortations, if not to use them for liberatory ends.

Many want to conclude that the call to accelerate forecloses revolutionary praxis, but one of the seminal projects underwriting the accelerationist turn, that of D&G, is filled with micro-models of how to produce macro-phenomena. Accelerating, in my view, means actively pursuing these threads, only faster. I do not see any strong reasons why, in D&G, the call to accelerate must necessarily imply a sharp exit from the project of fundamentally changing the world through revolutionary action—unless you define D&G’s concepts as essentially beginning and ending with capitalism. And I see no reason for doing that, other than a selection bias in which we are overweighting the reality of capitalism simply because it’s the phenomenon through which we first saw certain general mechanisms to work on planetary scale.

### **Activism is a capitalist virus from the future, honesty is stage-one cybernetic communism**

Capitalism is horrible because it disposes humans as garbage, but the motor of that garbage disposal is only the rabid human insistence that we are better than garbage.

As knowledge has become so specialized, many people would rather ignore or criticize highly evolved specialist discourses rather than admit they simply cannot understand them. This allows specialists to emerge as genuine masters who come to dominate others through this particular dimension of objective superiority, whereas honest admissions of ignorance and uncertainty would be an empirically and normatively sophisticated basis for unifying the large mass of normal people into a living project transcending capitalism (i.e. mass movement). The crucial political insight here is that self-aware stupidity is far more scientifically correct and powerful than

misleading performances of intelligence. The overwhelming majority of public performances of intelligence understate the significant uncertainty around even most true claims, as this brings material and psychological rewards, and little cost to the individual, especially as social media allow us to mute opposition. But when we all pretend we're equally up to speed on the objective dynamics characterizing contemporary society, this simulation enforces and obfuscates the unfair distribution of intellectual legitimacy based on cultural capital.

We either attune to the disinterested objective truths of being or else the vicissitudes of capital attune us to an infinite future of hell. Insist upon the ultimate human equality of our ultimately shared, cosmic worthlessness (you are welcome to call this dignity, but you'd have to believe in god). Otherwise, feigning equality where it does not exist will always be a servomechanism of capital. It is a tactic of cultural capital accumulation through brute force, which is not excused by its being also weak and unsuccessful. The reality we have to process is that the hierarchy of intellectual command today is not a gradually distributed pyramid (an image that incorrectly flatters most people by suggesting they are only a little below the top while also being above many others). It is better visualized as one small group in a hot-air balloon, with computers drilled into their skulls, drifting away from almost everybody existing, all of whom are equally lost, confused, and helpless. As I will try to show, this is not sad but rather an ecstatic realization.

An activist who sounds convincing in a meeting might be 90% wrong about how the world works, but they are convincing simply because within their milieu they have an above average stock of cultural capital (verbal fluency, education, seniority, etc.). The problem is not that this is "unfair" or "counterproductive" (common euphemisms), the problem is far more drastic: in a frighteningly literal way, that activist is a flesh-robot programmed and installed by capital, to serve the overall stability and growth of a system in which capital is the only possible adjudicator. By under-reporting our honest ignorance and uncertainty, we misleadingly command from others a kind of pathetic, sterile respect rooted in little more than their own com-

paratively worse illnesses, whereas an honest reporting of our own help-less stupidity is generative of energies for collective search (“most people are as stupid as I am, so my chance of figuring out what to do is as good as anyone else’s”); sincere irreverence and non-conformity leading to the breakdown of bourgeois repression (“all these people who want me to be a normal servomechanism of capital are dumb and powerless”); an increase in risk-tolerance through a decrease in false hope (“I used to be cautious because I thought I had a chance of surviving, but now that I see none of us will survive at present, I might as well try to do something I find interesting, which, ironically, makes me feel like maybe there is a chance...”). If we all admitted that, compared to specialists, most people are equal in their absolute incompetence, we might just be able to do something they can’t.

Remember those human-computers I asked you to imagine floating off into outer space, leaving us behind? If such cyborg intelligences designed the optimal virus to ensure the spread of capitalism, and then released it upon the earth, it would have to look eerily like the modern left-wing project: an exploitative drive to symbolically out-exploit the dominant exploiters, which convincingly presents itself as opposition to exploitation, not only spreading the culture of exploitation but super-charging it, as the competitive proliferation of obfuscation reaches a density that no human being could possibly penetrate in one lifetime. Not to mention that the already dominant exploiters also possess economies of scale in the production of obfuscation, dooming the left to lose even at the level of moral one-upmanship. It is the left that initiates an arms race of increasing stupidity, on top of the arms race of exploitation, without in any way decreasing the spread or intensity of exploitation, indeed pushing it deeper and deeper into instinctual intersubjective dynamics (the soul). If capitalism is a series of injuries inflicted on the weak, the history of anti-capitalism hitherto is a series of insults added to each injury, sold to the injured as preventative medicine.

To speak of left-wing activists as possessed by a capitalist virus sent here by a super-intelligence from the future might sound like science fiction, but hasn’t the average perspective always rejected radical political theory



as science fiction? That this diagnosis will sound to many like science fiction becomes objective data that it might just be correct, an authentic realization about how the world works and what is happening, beyond what is conceivable within the ideological boundaries of what is defined as reasonable. I believe the inevitable next move of any coherent revolutionary anti-capitalism will be to accept this as an objective characterization of our history on this planet, and to update our beliefs and activities accordingly. Ultimately, only time will tell.

At first, these realizations may be depressing, but depressingly true realizations are the price of entry to the ecstasy of moving from lost to found. When the lost find themselves in the radical equality of honest and absolute helplessness, my hypothesis is that we will be uniquely capable of moves that are psychologically and sociologically prohibited to those who currently command their specialized sectors of the global cybernetic apparatus. Ultimately, they are the most enslaved by this system, that's why the system selected and promoted them. We are those who were unfit to be slaves of this system (anyone silly enough to still be reading this blog post on the internet is, by definition, included in this "we"), that's why we are being left to rot at the bottom of its garbage disposal. But one of the primary reasons this is so oppressive is simply because we are obsessed with the excruciating and exhausting work of pretending the situation is otherwise. For those willing to acknowledge where they really are, new and unexpected winds begin to blow, the room to maneuver suddenly appears tremendous, and communication once again becomes possible, as if for the first time.

It is only the fearful and defensive will to decelerate that makes acceleration so brutal and insufferable; genuine submission to unconditional acceleration appears the only pathway to a sensible and durable calm, if only the white noise of unbiased chaos. Nothing about this prohibits creative, collective emancipatory projects to establish equal freedom and abundance for all, after the acceptance and integration of objective realities.

## The political psychology of prohibiting radical right-wing thinkers

*The real motivation of respectable progressivism is managing guilty conscience and conserving bourgeois privileges; how to theorize the Cathedral from the revolutionary left; understanding the suicide bombing of anti-intellectual intellectuals.*

Why do so many respectable, intellectually oriented people (academics, artists, and activists) wish to exclude independent right-wing intellectual work on moral grounds? I have in mind several recent campaigns to ensure some right-wing writer/artist, not be allowed to speak or perform in some venue. I am going to make a general theoretical point about a widespread social phenomenon, but I should also be honest about the specific individuals and institutions I see as motivating case studies. I have in mind the campaign to [shut down the LD50 gallery](#), and the decision of The New Centre for Research & Practice to [remove Nick Land from its roster of lecturers](#). These campaigns and institutional decisions, and so many public pronouncements by other “progressive” actors, present themselves as efforts to protect the public sphere from violent or harmful effects, but it’s increasingly impossible to believe that this is the real motivation. There is a widespread fallacy, what we might call the ad hominem fallacy fallacy, that it’s unreasonable to question someone’s motivations. It may be unreasonable to dismiss someone’s arguments by impugning their motivations, but it’s very reasonable to theorize someone’s motivations as an object of interest in its own right—*especially* when the stated motivations are increasingly belied by the effects they repeatedly produce.

I want to offer a concrete, informal theoretical account of what institutional intellectuals are really doing when they pull-up their draw-bridges to independent right-wing intellectuals such as Nick Land. Very simply, they are imposing a *cordon sanitaire* that is instrumentally necessary to the continuation of their unjustified intellectual privileges in the institutional order. I am increasingly convinced there is simply no other public function to this political repetition compulsion. The reason this is important, from

the left, is that this *cordon sanitaire* is straightforwardly a mechanism to conserve the status quo, everything progressives pretend to be interested in overthrowing. This is why neo-reactionary intellectuals speak of the status quo political order as dominated by a left-progressive “Cathedral,” and this post will provide one example of why I think they are correct to do so. In this way, genuine left revolutionaries will sooner than later learn to take heed from some of these right-wing diagnoses about what is rotten in left culture. If you believe in radical equality and collective liberation from unjust institutions, from the left, you have to be able to see how your compulsions might be a function of this Cathedral more than you care to admit. As someone who currently possesses bourgeois intellectual privileges, and as someone who believes in equality (i.e., I know I am not ultimately superior to many others who lack my platform), I wish to be perfectly clear about how these mechanisms function, as someone who bears witness to them introspectively. If it is still possible to be a genuinely radical intellectual committed to collective liberation, this is the least it will require.

First, it seems to be a fact that the genuinely intellectual wings of the alt-right or neo-reaction (NRx) or whatever you want to call it, are probably too intelligent and sophisticated for bourgeois intellectual workers to engage with, let alone compete with. The reason I know this is because I have only been able to really explore this world with the privilege of my sabbatical; bourgeois intellectual workers typically just don’t have the time to read a bunch of long essays on the internet. So if those essays are actually pretty smart and a legitimate challenge to your institutional authority as a credentialed intellectual—you are functionally required to close ranks, if only with a silent agreement to not engage. As an academic political scientist, I have at least average comfort with the history of political thought, yet when I really peruse all the independent NRx intellectuals, if I’m being honest I’d have to admit that I would need to go back to the books to really grok and engage what some of them are trying to say. I am on research leave and I don’t even have the time (or interest) in really doing that as deeply as would be required to engage all of it meaningfully. This is how I can very confidently call bullshit on any currently full-time bour-

geois symbol-manipulator who pretends to know with any confidence the alleged uselessness or harmfulness of the NRx intellectual ecology.

Now, as soon as anyone from this non-institutional world produces effects within the institutional orbit, it is actually a really serious survival reflex for all institutionally privileged intellectuals to play the morality card (“no platform!”). If all these strange, outside autodidacts are actually smart and independently producing high-level intellectual content you don’t have the time to even understand, let alone defeat or otherwise control, this is an existential threat to your entire livelihood. Because all of your personal identity, your status, and your salary, is based directly on your credentialed, legitimated membership card giving your writings and pontifications an officially sanctioned power and authority. If that door is opened even a crack by non-credentialed outsiders, the whole jig is up for the respectable bourgeois monopoly on the official intellectual organs of society.

An interesting question is, because respectable intellectuals are often pretty smart and capable, why are they so fearful of outside intellectual projects, even if they are as evil as some fear? They are smart and capable intellectuals, so you’d think they would embrace some interesting challenge as an opportunity for productive contestation. Why don’t they? Well, here’s where the reality gets ugly. The reason respectable intellectuals so instinctively close ranks around the moral exclusion of NRx intellectuals is that currently working, respectable intellectuals privately know that the intellectual compromises they have made to secure their respectability and careers has rendered most of their life’s work sadly and vulnerably low-quality.

To convince status-quo cultural money dispensers to give you a grant, for instance, any currently “successful” academic or artist has to so extensively pepper their proposal with patently stupid words and notions that knowingly make the final result a sad, contorted piece of work 80% of which is bent to the flattery of our overlords. But we falsely rationalize this contortion as “mature discipline” which we then rationalize to be the warrant for our privileged status as legitimate intellectuals. This is just good old fashioned conservatism, the standard psychology of bourgeois

hypocrisy that is the molecular basis for the stability of a capitalist society organized around unjust and unequal exploitation.

Because we know deep down inside that our life's work is only half of what it could have been had we the courage to not ask for permission, if there ever arise people who are doing high-level intellectual work on the outside, exactly as they wish to without anyone's permission or money, then not only are we naturally resentful, but we secretly know that at least some of these outsiders are likely doing more interesting, more valuable, more radically incisive work than we are, because we secretly know that we earn our salary by agreeing to only say half of what we could.

(Aside: The only reason I'm psychologically and sociologically capable of writing this is precisely because through the internet I am shifting a large share of my eggs into the basket of the outside, instead of writing grant bids that actively make me less interesting and less honest; and I am young enough in my academic career that my sunk costs and interpersonal investments in academic networks are sufficiently low that I can admit these realities without too much pain.)

Because the entire social value and self-esteem of respectable intellectuals is premised on this *guilty conscience*, moral opposition is the most immediately natural and useful symbolic flagpole around which a *cordon sanitaire* will rapidly and spontaneously be constructed and defended. In this natural and obvious urgency, bad faith will occasionally out itself in slips of the tongue whereby academics, such as a one David Golumbia, [proudly and explicitly reveal their commitment to anti-intellectual tactics](#). You might think that rallying around such a patently unintellectual position typically associated with bourgeois-conservative simpletons would itself be avoided as an existential threat just as well, for it loudly publicizes a scandalous dearth of the very intellectual firepower on which their status and salaries is supposed to depend. That respectable bourgeois intellectual culture would seek to stave off one existential threat through the symbolic equivalent of a kamikaze gambit reflects a secret awareness of its own doomed nature.

## **The affective politics of keeping it real**

*Why real nobodies become more powerful than repressed somebodies (the internet epoch has hardly begun).*

It once made sense for academics to bite their tongue in exchange for the influence they could gain by conforming to the dominant language. For a while, this was arguably rational and defensible—perhaps even a game-theoretic necessity for anyone sincerely interested in cultivating a genuinely public and political intellectual project. While it's obvious the internet has changed the game, old stereotypes die hard and continue to constrain human potential well after their objective basis has disappeared. In particular, the contemporary stereotype of the public intellectual as a self-possessed professional who regularly appears in “the media” to speak on public affairs in the royal language, is a contingent product of the post-war rise of mass broadcasting (one-to-many) media. In much of the post-war period, the classic “mass media”—newspapers, radio, television—had extremely large, mass audiences and were characterized by high costs of entry. This technical and economic environment offered huge rewards for speaking the dominant language within the parameters of respectable opinion. It was probably with cable television that a centrifugal tendency began the processes of fragmentation, polarization, and decentralization that would eventually bring us to where we are today.

Today, there is no longer any mass audience to speak to through dominant channels, overwhelming majorities do not trust mass media, and even the cognitively fragmented semi-mass audiences that remain will only listen to what they already think. Not to mention the masses probably have less power today than anytime in the twentieth century, so why bother even trying to speak to the masses? As a young academic, if I play by the rules for the next 10 years so that I might be respected by influential academics or gain access to regularly speaking on BBC or something like that, I would have sacrificed all of my creative energy for quite nearly nothing. As far as I can tell, today, the idea of biding your time as a young and respectable intellectual, to one day earn a platform of political significance, appears finally

and fully obsolete. In one sense, this is already obvious to the millions who long ago stopped following mainstream media and long ago lost all respect for academic credentials; but in another sense, an overwhelming number of human beings continue to think, speak, and behave as if we are still operating in this old world, as if there is some reason to not say everything one feels like saying, as if there is some social or political or economic reward that will come toward the end of a respectable career of professional self-restraint. It's easy for autodidacts and natural outsiders to say, "Duh, we told you so," but this in no way comprehends or solves the really striking and politically significant puzzle that an extraordinary degree of human power remains *voluntarily repressed* for rewards and punishments that no longer exist.

Just as the self-restrained professional intellectual is shaped by the rewards of a media environment long dead, so too are they shaped by punishments which are little more than paranoid fears. Many academics and professionals believe that for the sake of their careers they must exercise the utmost discretion in what they put online, and they confidently tell young people to exercise the same discretion for the sake of their own futures. But the reality is almost the exact opposite. First of all, with some important exceptions of course, nobody gives a shit about what you put on the internet. Nobody with any power over you has the time to follow, and the few that do won't care enough about you to follow or dig very much. In my now slightly above-average history of recklessly posting to the internet, before and after getting a competitive professional job, the worst that has ever happened is that nobody cares (and that's most of the time). But the best that has happened, here and there, is that a lot of people care and appreciate it and new friends are made and all kinds of new paths appear, individually and collectively.

The self-restraining, strategic professional intellectual is not only operating on incorrect beliefs but beliefs which are almost exactly inverse to the truth: today, playing by rules of respectability is perhaps the straightest path to unemployment and impotent resentment, while simply *cultivating the capacity to say or do something real* (by definition prohibited by re-

spectability), is a necessary (and sometimes even sufficient) condition for being genuinely valued by anyone, anywhere. Obviously if you have certain dimensions of poor character (i.e. you're a racist or something) then reckless posting to the internet will likely, and perhaps rightly, lead to many negative consequences. But if you're a basically decent person who just wants to push a little harder on what you really think, what you really feel, your experiences or your interests, or even just fuck around, the conventional wisdom still drastically overestimates the punishments and underestimates the rewards of doing so.

If these comments feel to you outdated because you think all of this already happened years ago with the initial rise of the internet, I would say you underestimate the quantity of human beings (and the qualitative intensities they could produce), who have yet to fully update their beliefs and behaviors around these matters. In some sense, the United States only just now, in 2016, elected its first President of the internet age. The fact that millions of people are genuinely perplexed and horrified by what is happening in this regard, is an index of how little the internet's rewiring of power circuits has actually been integrated in the perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors of most people.

If political theory will ever be a world-historical causal factor in the radically fragmented and decentralized age of information, I believe it will at least partially have to consist in living, interpersonal transmissions of *what works* to produce power within concrete, available situations. I suppose it is on that belief that I am reflecting on matters such as the micro-politics of self-expression, with some personal context as anecdotal data. I believe there exist objective, micro-political mechanisms whereby *being real* generates *real power*; that many people under-estimate or mistrust the objective reality of this mechanism; that many people live under compliant resentment because of incorrect beliefs about how the macro-social institutional environment will respond to their idiosyncratic deviations.

If I speak about myself at all, it's not because I'm special or great but precisely because I am nothing, nobody, yet it has always been in learning how to become nobody that I seem to unlock whatever few real powers now



possess me. I'm a young nobody academic or writer or whatever, I'm not famous or influential in academia or even on the internet, but I have been able to cultivate and maintain an energetic, autonomous, creative intellectual life that feels to me on the right track intellectually and politically, by what I think is a more accurate but still uncommon map of our immediate strategic environment, combined with periodically forcing myself to push outward on what feels to be in some way not allowed.

I have almost come to see this as a methodological principle—wherever you genuinely think or observe or desire to do something that you would be vaguely punished socially for saying/doing at a dinner party, then saying/doing that on the internet almost always produces immanent power and its by-product joy; it almost always clears debilitating noise and advances one of the threads that make-up the continuity of one's life. The entire life orientation that believes facing toward power is the image of intellectual and political sophistication—this, in my view, is the spitting image of mystified contemporary complicity. If I am trying to share how I think all of this works, and how I have experienced it, it is because I dream of what would happen if thousands of highly capable intellects currently toiling under institutional respectability suddenly realized they have no reason to self-censor and everything to gain from simply disarming their objectively miscalibrated expression calculators.

## **Feminism and the problem of supertoxic masculinity**

*A serious feminist challenge is what to do with hyper-dominant males who are not domesticated by any amount of moral or legal constraint; in fact, excessive social constraints on average males may help explain why, today, supertoxic masculinity is now a fast-track to the heights of political power.*

I just watched [a documentary film about John McAfee](#), creator of the famous McAfee Antivirus you will remember from every PC in the 1990s. I didn't know anything about this man before watching this film. I want to make a point that requires me to give you a brief summary of the story,

so here is a plot-spoiling recapitulation. Basically, after he gets rich off McAfee Antivirus, McAfee has a couple of failed business ventures before proceeding through a brazenly aggressive, daring, manipulative, controlling, arrogant, violent, and ultimately murderous course of affairs.<sup>12</sup> After a few years as a yoga guru preaching peace and wellness from a retreat center he funded, there's some indication that he becomes disillusioned with his efforts toward egalitarian community (he suggests something to the effect that others were taking advantage of him, but this is not examined deeply). So he buys a house in Belize, hires an idealistic biologist from the US to run an alternative medicine laboratory, recruits the toughest gangsters he can find to build an in-house private security force, donates to local police equipment worth millions of dollars, and effectively purchases several poor, local women as long-term girlfriends. When he had the time to also get two gnarly tribal tattoos was unclear to me.

Just to round out the psychological and behavioral profile here, note that he rarely, if ever, had sex with his girlfriends; he rather liked to defecate in their mouths while lying in a hammock. When the biologist expresses concern about their business relationship, he drugs and rapes her *that evening*, according to the biologist's testimony in the film. McAfee's vicious guard dogs roamed freely on the public beach around his house, so a neighbor poisoned the dogs. Then, the film suggests, McAfee promptly hired a man to kill the neighbor. This murder allegation becomes global news, and McAfee embarks on an international fugitive escape adventure. He gets into Guatemala, where he avoids extradition back to Belize by faking a heart attack, and thereby engineering his deportation back to the United States. He then promptly runs for President in the Libertarian Party, where he comes in second place.

Now, it is striking enough that the winner of the 2016 Presidential election is an icon of ignoring feminist ethical expectations—at a time when feminist expectations are more culturally ascendant than ever. But perhaps

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<sup>12</sup>Of course, I am assuming the film's narrative is to be trusted. I haven't fact-checked anything. Whether the film is perfectly accurate or fair is probably not crucial for the larger point I will make here.

that was a fluke. The McAfee story is profound because it shows in stunning, horrifying detail how the hyper-masculine drive to dominate really works in contemporary culture: when cranked sufficiently high, it rapidly and easily trounces any quantity of moral outrage and/or legal constraints, in a direct line toward the zenith of the global dominance hierarchy.

Moderate misogyny can get you exiled from contemporary public culture, often for good reason, but hyper-misogyny in an intelligent and driven male appears to give you sovereignty *over* public culture. It seems to me that, if feminism today has one genuinely catastrophic problem to be rightfully alarmist about, it might just be the small number of males who will not be domesticated through social-moral pressure.

First, a premise of my argument is that SJW culture is genuinely quite effective at minimizing the nastier masculine edges of large numbers of men, because most men are decent people who want to be liked and approved by most others. This is not an empirical article so I won't go into it, but if you doubt there's been a general cultural pacification of male aggression just watch a random film from the 1950s and then watch a random film at your local cinema. Anyway, people on the left and right disagree about what to call this trend, but its existence is attested by all. Feminists see this as men learning to be less violent and oppressive, and feminists celebrate women's long-term positive effect on the civilizing of violent patriarchies; others see this as a kind of female totalitarianism and evidence of civilizational decline. But the fact that feminist cultural politics have exerted notable and widespread effects of generally reducing the expression of masculine aggression in public culture seems hard to dispute.

The hypothesis I would like to advance is that this social domestication of masculine tendencies has made our society more vulnerable to the rare cases of men who escape the filter of social opprobrium. The life of John McAfee is a case study of this problem.

Why would the social pacification of once popular, moderate masculinity empower more virulent forms of violent masculinity? Many lefties think that pacifying the larger mass of men will shift the whole distribution of male behavior, lowering the ceiling of how bad the worst men may become.

I would say this is the dominant mental model of most SJWs, because it's the basic picture that comes out of liberal arts education today (that our images of the world shape what we do in the world, hence the emphasis on media and "representations").

The problem is that when the baseline of masculine dominance expression is held below its organic tendency, defined simply as what men would do in the absence of cultural campaigns to defang it, this increases the potential payoff to those who dare exercise it, as there are more resources to dominate precisely to the degree that other men are not contesting them. Not only does it increase the rewards available, it decreases the risk of competing for them, as the chance of being defeated by an equally aggressive male, or even just the chance of encountering costly competition at all, is lower than it would be in a world of much but minor, local masculine excess. We might also adduce a "rusty monitor" effect: Through the domestication of men over time, most people become blissfully forgetful about what genuinely dangerous men are capable of, decreasing the probability or the speed with which domesticated males might awake from their slumber.

Another reason the over-domestication of moderate masculinity is dangerous is that it makes it too easy for ethically lax "bad characters" to win all of the large number of local hierarchies that would typically have the function of imposing humility and modesty on cocky boys coming of age. If you're a highly intelligent, confident, and driven young man, the complex difficulty of having to navigate multiple distinct local hierarchies (among other highly driven males themselves sometimes prone to dangerous excess) from a young age, teaches you very quickly that you cannot ever be the best at everything. And that if you cut corners anti-socially you will be destroyed by other males invested in the maintenance of sociality. Examples of local hierarchies are sports competition, dating, ethical honor or "character" in the neighborhood or religious community, or even just fleeting micro-social competition such as battles of wits in social gatherings. All of these things will function as negative feedback mechanisms tempering genuinely dangerous anti-social ambitions in young boys coming of age,

but only if the other males are equally able and willing to play all of these games to the best of their abilities.

If you're overzealous or immodest or you cheat or you ignore your standing in one local hierarchy to dominate another—all of these things tend to get constrained by other males of equal will and ability, who are also sometimes dangerous and who have an interest in knocking all wiley characters down a few notches. What's happened in recent decades is that a non-trivial portion of the West's most intelligent and ambitious males pursue cultural careers predicated very specifically on the strategic under-display of their will to power. Take someone like the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—he's the leading politician of a whole country, so nobody can deny that this is a man with a substantial will to rise to the top through a whole series of competitive filters. But he is one of the best examples of how, today, the path to power for all "decent men" consists in a deeply deceptive competition to appear maximally unthreatening. One reason you get the John McAfee's of the world is because they went to high school with the Justin Trudeau's of the world. In all of the little, local hierarchies they encountered throughout life, people like John McAfee and Donald Trump learned that they could be as anti-socially ambitious as they pleased and no other intelligent and able men would check them (because those men were opting for the cultural capital that accrues to being feminist). A serious challenge for feminism is to see that someone like Justin Trudeau is seriously complicit in the production of the McAfees and Trumps of the world. And if you're a cheer-leader for the former, you're an objective supporter and producer of the latter.

I also think that people like McAfee and Trump learn early in life that if you are ostracized from social groups for exceeding moral expectations, then you can just channel your anti-social intelligence to making money all the more efficiently. That is, another key problem is that in secular, advanced capitalist countries such as the U.S., if you are smart and driven enough it is a feasible life path to accept absolute social exile by converting all of your energy into economic capital accumulation, and then build up a new social cosmos for yourself. The interesting thing is to see that this

is really only psychologically and materially feasible in a very late stage of advanced western capitalism where non-economic criteria of value have all but disappeared. Whereas above we saw one reason for the emergence of the McAfee's and Trump's of the world is that there wasn't enough local masculine aggression to check them throughout their life, here we note the specific problem that secular society lacks any effective adjudicator of human character other than economic prowess. In this particular dimension we see that the contemporary correlation of anti-capitalism and secularism/atheism is ultimately an untenable loop, because you never have an effective basis for anti-capitalist cultural change if you cannot submit to the possibility that values come from a place higher than practical reality. Of course people pretend they value other criteria, but those criteria don't *operate* in the selection of who ultimately wins attention, esteem, and power in society as a whole. There was no person, and no entity, in the entire life of these men who could credibly convey that there exist things in life more powerful than money, for the simple reason that hardly anyone believes this anymore. And so the most toxically ambitious males become the very first to realize that one can very well quit the entire game of socio-moral respectability and shoot to the top of everything via radically unreflective capital accumulation.

Another reason why the constraining of moderate masculine toxicity may increase the power of supertoxic masculinity is that males may become more pathologically power hungry from lacking opportunities for healthy satiation. Once upon a time (for better or worse), masculine prowess promised a fair number of immediate satisfactions. The best football players received the genuine interest of the most desired girls in high school, say. But even from my own observations growing up, it was easy to see that as my cohort aged from about 10 years old up toward about 17 years old, conventionally masculine prowess became less and less effective at winning immediate social rewards. By the end of high school, the most desired girls were more interested in—I kid you not—a nationally competitive business role-playing team. What this suggests to me is that, aside from perhaps an early bump at the very beginning of adolescence, dominance hierarchies rapidly

stop rewarding conventional masculine expressions of dominance behavior in favor of the capacity to elegantly dissimulate dominance behavior. Today all of the basic evolutionary machinery of mating and dominance competition remains in full operation, but it's mind-bogglingly confusing because increasingly females select for males who can most creatively and effectively hide their power. What this means is that precisely the most over-flowingly aggressive males may be less and less likely to receive the basic, small doses of love and esteem that every human being requires, in their early socialization experiences. Combined with the previous point about the ultimate power of money, it's easy to see how and why the feminist inversion of which males get selected by females (defining dominance as the dissimulation of dominance), has the direct consequence of leaving the most irrepressibly narcissistic and power-hungry males to seek unbri-dled social domination via capital, as a basic requirement for psychological self-maintenance.

John McAfee and Donald Trump are the types of whom it can be said, literally, that they are capable of making the entire world conform to their whims. They can do this repeatedly and sustainably, even when a large number of interested opponents see what they are doing, even when it publicized to the moral outrage of the entire respectable, cosmopolitan world. What is genuinely frightening and dangerous about powerful males is precisely that their power is real, i.e. absolutely impervious to the wishes, interests, and indignant words of less powerful people.

It seems to me that, broadly, there are two possible ways to dealing with this problem. The method popular activist culture has adopted is to work toward a state of zero dominance expression in all possible local and global hierarchies, with this leading to a substantially higher risk of psychopathic males going straight to the top of the megamachine, for all of the reasons I've laid out. Now, to be fair, I see one way you might still find this method preferable: if you believe that psychopathic male drives for dominance could possibly be socialized out of our biology altogether in some kind of long-term evolutionary engineering process. If that's your model, then I suppose you could defend the now popular approach as a risky but

radical plan to eliminate violence forever, or something like that. Personally, I find that hard to believe, but that would require a different essay. In the meantime, I suppose we all have to make our wagers as we see fit.

Of course, the second solution is simply to permit or even encourage small amounts of masculine dominance behavior in a large number of local hierarchies (with some margin greater than zero for dangerous excesses), leading to a low likelihood of psychopathic males rising to the top of the megamachine.

A final point about the role of higher education in all of this. In a contemporary liberal arts education, the primary educational experience is coming to feel the power of words. This is a real and important insight because in modern societies the symbolic order exerts extraordinary if diffuse effects, and I benefitted from gaining this kind of awareness in my own liberal arts education. This feeling is also exciting and empowering because we all have the capacity to produce words. But for this reason—combined with the fact that direct violence in wealthy Western societies is atypically low in long-run historical perspective—a very large number of well-meaning lefty folks today have genuinely forgotten that there exist forces more powerful than words. We have forgotten that the whole, horrifying, tragic, and very real problem of power is precisely that those who have enough of it may ultimately do exactly what they please. Many lefties today seem to be living on the genuine belief that enough people, saying enough words, is a viable method for constraining anything whatsoever. It's not.

The McAfee documentary is an extraordinary lesson of how no amount of moralizing can solve the fact that unequal distributions of raw human power exist across society; no amount of “awareness” or information-sharing or even law-making will ever be able to stop the will to power wherever it sneaks through the cracks of social inhibition. One of morality's dirtiest and most harmful little secrets is that it only constrains power where power is already weak for other reasons. Contemporary SJW-styled feminism will make the large mass of beta bro's marginally more polite. It may, for short-to medium-term intervals, suppress the brutality of alpha types who may



indeed be prone to some abusive behaviors. But it will also ensure that wherever the male will to dominance arises in its purest form, it will wreak more havoc, more rapidly, more unpredictably, more completely, and at a higher socio-political level than it ever could have without feminist “moral progress.”