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THE CIVIC HUMANITIES AND THE CRISIS OF NEOLIBERALISM

High Noon for Neoliberalism

The results of the Presidential election of 2016 struck the academic thought-world like a devastating hurricane that few expected to make landfall. In the run-up to the election, and in discussions that followed, one term kept coming up that had been used increasingly over the previous two decades, but more specifically in relationship to the global financial crisis of 2008. It was “neoliberalism.” The topic has become inescapable within our current discourse, but has been rarely discussed in any serious way. It has been constantly named, yet hardly ever diagnosed. Injected into public conversation originally as a very specific, qualifying term to make sense of what at the time were new and unprecedented trends in global politics and economics, it became a bald term of disparagement for everything that seems to be wrong, especially if one is speaking from some minimally “progressive” perspective, with the world in general.

At the same time the term during the same period has accumulated to itself a corpus of significant, as well as insightful, academic literature that provides both heft and precision for any kind of evolving analysis, even if the meaning of the expression itself remains rather opaque. Until recently, because of the work of the Marxist-leaning British economist and historian David Harvey, “neoliberalism” was intimately associated at its core with the post-Communist collapse of command economies and the unbounded flow of financial capitalism across borders.¹ Francis Fukuyama’s paen in 1992 to “free-markets” as a hypothesized driver of liberal democracies in his best-selling book *The End of History and the Last Man*² was for almost two decades regarded as the grand neoliberal manifesto of that era. With the financial crash of 2008, however, it was not only the ideological euphoria, but the very nuances of the term “neoliberalism” that began to morph in an unanticipated manner.

In recent years the expression has come to acquire strong social, cultural, and political overtones, especially in light of wage stagnation and galloping global income inequality. The recent surge of impassioned populist movements on both the right and the left, not just in the United States but throughout the Western

¹ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

world, has been ignited by a thorough disenchantment on the part of the Western middle classes with the promises of “free market capitalism”.

Yet these movements have at the same time been fomented, largely on the right, by a growing perception that the moral and religious, even more than the economic rhetoric of the neoliberal “dream machine” masks pernicious class interests and strategies of domination. Whereas in the traditional Marxist “class war” set piece the bourgeois spirituality of personal rectitude, ethical development, and fidelity to family values masks a deeper politics of private avarice that finds its consummate expression in the well-being of middle class at the expense of an exploited urban proletariat, in what might be described as an emerging, *post-Marxist* or *neo-neo-Marxist* “hermeneutics of suspicion” the middle class itself is increasingly duped, cozened, and prostituted through an appeal to what Nietzsche dubbed the “highest values”, which are exploited by the new “cosmopolitan” elites to solidify what is becoming a global empire founded on what might be characterized as financial feudalism. A “new critical theory” (in contrast to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School that reached its apogee a half a century ago), is beginning to take hold, while replacing the theoretical templates that dominated a generation ago.

The most prominent among these new critical theorists who have shed some light on the landscape of the newly identified political and cultural constellations of neoliberalism include American political theorist Wendy Brown, Italian-French social philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, the anonymous collection texts published originally under the name of the erstwhile French journal *Tiqqun*, and American political scientist Lester Spence, who focuses on how the neoliberal mentality has infected African-American thought. As Brown writes in her signature work *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, neoliberalism “is best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*.”. This version of *homo oeconomicus* is nonetheless strikingly different from the “*homo oeconomicus* of yore.” Instead, neoliberalism is all about the production of “subjects, including citizen subjects,” which “are configured by the market metrics of our time as self-investing human capital.”³

Unlike the subject of classical nineteenth century liberalism, which political philosophy in keeping with the Enlightenment tradition theorized as rational and “autonomous” and capable of making intelligent decisions according to the promptings of one’s own “self-interests” (which Marx of course sought to decipher exclusively as class interests), neoliberal subjects, according to Brown, are “valued and desired almost exclusively for their contribution to capital enhancement,” regardless of “whether than capital is human, corporate, or financial.”⁴ Such capital “is not sought for developing the capacities of citizens, sustaining culture, knowing the world, or envisioning and crafting different ways of life in

³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 176.

⁴ Ibid., 177.

common.⁵ Rather, it is designed to promote docile and obedient “knowledge workers”, along with the inexorable elimination of material labor itself in the worldwide advance of integrated, transnational corporate, government, and educational systems managed by a numerically shrinking, yet increasingly powerful, self-dealing, Machiavellian new ruling class.

Neoliberalism as a movement may have begun in the late 1970s and early 1980s, according to the analysis of such economic theorists as Harvey and Richard D. Wolff,⁶ as an effort of certain old industrialists and their policy minions to reverse the tide of postwar income equalization and restore the rule of profits. But in light of the global transformations we have witnessed since the mid-1990s, which have been spurred on through new digital technologies and their concomitant impact on the means of production, transport and delivery, the phenomenon itself must now be gauged in terms of what in one of my more recent books entitled *Force of God* I have described as “symbolic” as well as “semiotic” economies of control. The relatively disparate gaggle of academic authors who have plied this form of what might be considered a counterintuitive critique of neoliberalism as nascent cultural ideology, which under the banner of human improvement and well-being promotes an altogether unprecedented schema of domination and exploitation draw their inspiration in many respects from the themes developed by the late French philosopher Michel Foucault in his Lectures at the Collège de France from 1978 onwards to his death in 1984.

There is widespread agreement among scholars that Foucault in his the Collège de France delivered was the first to identify the underlying forces and factors that we now know as neoliberalism. During his slowly evolving historical study of the transition from what he called “the disciplinary society” to the advent of “biopower,” Foucault deftly made us aware that the forms of social control and political authority in the post-industrial period cannot be merely reified into some kind of axis of “power/knowledge” without examining their *semiotic* makeup, that is, the way they function in a garden variety context as *interoperable sign-processes*. Even “economic” processes can no longer be taken apart in the way they were in Marx’s day as mere “dialectical” or *material* phenomena. They must be seen as modalities of *linguistic rule-making* which both precede and provide the final shape for the “objects” of political criticism and cultural change-making.

Often the terms “neoliberalism” and “capitalism” are rhetorically conflated as one in popular progressive rhetoric with the latter seen as the true bogey. The problem with this conflation, as Foucault and Harvey have repeatedly showed us, is that “capitalism” historically from Adam Smith through Karl Marx onward has functioned largely, although not exclusively, as an economic construct, whereas “neoliberalism” is a term saturated with various unrecognized political significations and hidden intentionalities, thus betraying its hybrid nature. Neoliberalism is really not about economics, but about *values*, (as I have argued

⁵ Ibid., 177-8.

⁶ See Richard D. Wolff, *Capitalism’s Economic Crisis Deepens: 2010-14* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016),

extensively in my book *Force of God*)⁷ instantiating them in almost invisible routines of symbolic exchange that have profound economic effects. The “economic” form of neoliberalism, as we are beginning to realize, is a merely a contingent manifestation of what Foucault dubbed the biopolitical means of “governmentality”. Ever since Adam Smith we have derived the familiar types of political organization from economic means of production and distribution (as implied in the eighteenth century concept of “political economy.”

Thus a productive analysis of neoliberalism requires in many ways, as Lazzarato has made clear to us, an investigation into the value-sources of our social and economic condition — a good, old-fashioned, Nietzschean “genealogy of morals.” According to the various theorists we have mentioned, neoliberalism (taking into account their different degrees of emphasis) amounts to a configuration of power relations in an expressive articulation of embedded social valuations. These valuations, in turn, frequently employ the rhetoric of economicism — and economic “well-being” — both to mask the reality of elite domination and to exploit the humane instincts of those who are dominated. In short, *homo neoliberalismus* only wears the colorful costumes of classical *homo oeconomicus*. Like Frank Baum’s Wizard of Oz, *homo neoliberalismus* is a grand illusionist who manipulates our willingness to be enchanted by what Nietzsche called the “moral view of the world” to our ultimate servitude. Every historical form whereby this articulation is made manifest consists in what Foucault called a *dispositif*, an “apparatus” whereby power, knowledge, discourse, and personal inclination are mobilized and intercalated to produce such a magic theater of signs, what Michael has termed without irony the “politics of meaning.”

Neoliberalism is the munificent politics of personal meaning in the late era of consumer capitalism that masquerades as an old-style conservatorship of economic interest (consider the constant polemical sop of preserving the “middle class”), while relentlessly encumbering through an endless financialization of their private wherewithal and assets (credit cards, mortgages, student loans, taxes) that become the sole “property” of banks, hedge fund managers, and “crony capitalist” allies within government. Just as the double-sided *dispositif* (as Foucault called neoliberal “techniques” of administration), the Middle Ages was the castle on the hill (protecting town and manor against the armies of rival feudal lords) and the cathedral (building thick stone fortifications to insulate the unity of the holy catholic faith against the wiles of the devil). In the industrial era it was the factory with its concentration of productive power supposedly protecting the social order against want and idleness. In the twenty-first century it has become the corporate-government-university-financial-information complex, leveraging some of efficacious strategies of Foucauldian biopower to guarantee globally diverse populations not just the “democratic” delights of self-improvement and personal advancement, but a solid defense against all the terrors and predations that have gone before in human history.

⁷ See Carl Raschke, *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

These defenses are not merely virtual. They involve real weaponry, usually to protect whole populations as has been the case in large part of most Western military interventions since the 1950s. To quote Foucault: "Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone."⁸ The idea that wars can be fought simply for conquest, or to shield sovereignty from whatever threatens it for whatever reason, defers now to a conviction that blood and treasure must be expended only for higher, binding "humanitarian" moral purpose, to which the occasional United Nations interventions authorized by the Security Council consistently call our attention.

Kantian morality in its more diffuse and global-political guises becomes the subtle template for a new universalistic biopolitics rotating around the Foucauldian double axis of "power/knowledge". The same holds true for "domestic struggles" and the challenges of civil society where actual armaments are only deployed in the most extreme instances. The vast taxing, regulatory, and welfare apparatus of the state replaces classical *raison d'etat*, and the new "governmentality" of neoliberal biopower whose coercion is primarily "discursive" supplants the disciplinary systems of the moribund industrial order. In Brown's terms, neoliberalism becomes a "governing political rationality", one which ironically, however, effaces what has historically been called the "political" and, especially in the age of globalization, substitutes for it a faux "cosmo-polis" that "undoes the demos" and subtly weaves what she calls a pure "economization" of subjective life, which distributes, identifies (through new systems of signification and classifications), mobilizes, administrates, and (shall we say) "catechizes" not just the bodies, but the hearts and minds, of vast planetary populations. Such "governance", Brown says, "is not only or by nature neoliberal," but neoliberalism has "increasingly saturated its formulations and development."

The "security state" in all its subtle economic, military, and therapeutic manifestations is the avatar of neoliberalism. It seeks to create an apparatus whereby administrative reason is able to persuade us to "accept reality" and react "to reality in a non-random way".⁹ Neoliberal rationality is actually, as British philosopher Joshua Ramey notes in a brilliant new book, a form of "divinatory politics" that seeks, as did the emperors and kings of old with their haruspices and soothsayers when faced with imminent threats to state power, to advance the "exploitation of uncertainty" through the magic of computer algorithms and ever more esoteric explanatory models of human collective behavior. The magical theatre of such neoliberal rationality could not be found only in the "special investment vehicles" of Wall Street which were overwhelmingly one of the main causes of the financial crash of 2008. We find it in political polling, health care complexes, the transmogrification of the whole of personal biographies into actuarial and demographic forecasting. But it also works in the age of social media, by means of the instant mobilization for both partisan purposes and narcissistic self-righteousness, along the lines of what Lille Chouriaraki calls "ironic

⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 137.

⁹ Brown, op. cit., 122.

spectatorship”, i.e., reactive, immediate, and unreflective self-expression in the name of the good, the true, or the just.¹⁰

The power of moral outrage and collecting “shaming”, which in an earlier era was available only to political and social leadership with its privileged access to broadcast communications, now is extended to the masses through Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, or YikYak who, while believing themselves to be masters of their own opinions, dutifully carry out the “soft-coded” value imperatives of the neoliberal dominion.

The Knowledge Society, the Humanities, and the Birth of Biopolitics

As Foucault so brilliantly brought to light in his Collège de France lectures, the advent of biopolitics in the modern age is the result of a long, sequestered, yet inexorable evolution of the valorization of what he calls the “pastorate” in Western culture. For Foucault, the pastorate are the custodians of what the latter famously dubbed the “moral-Christian” metaphysics that has suffused Western epistemology from Plato forward. The pastorate encrypts the real in terms of a signifying praxis of ethical responsibility for the lowly, the mediocre, and the ordinary, all the while elevating the “priestly” function of guilt assignment and assuaging in such a manner that curial power is perpetually reinforced and multiplied.

This kind of “revaluation” of values, which according to Nietzsche can be traced back to the Christian church in its earliest instantiations, elevates confession over innocent vitality, self-abnegation over self-affirmation, systemic social distributions of Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness” with its irremediable guilt psychology that are endlessly absolved and administered by way of spiritual triage by the pastorate itself. Foucault writes that from the late Middle Ages all the “struggles that culminated in the Wars of Religion were fundamentally struggles over who would have the right to govern me, and to govern them in their daily life and in the details and materiality of their existence... This great battle of pastorship traversed the West from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, and ultimately without ever getting rid of the pastorate.”¹¹ Once the promise of heaven dissolves into the various secular heterotopias for the “pursuit of happiness” from the Enlightenment onward, the pastoral oversight of spiritual credits and debits is transformed into the benevolent biopolitics of the liberal state.

In short, the battle for democracy, beginning with the English Revolution in the 1640s was both an insurgency against the clerical “pastorate” - as the proto-structure of biopolitics in the West - and at the same time a campaign to install new mechanisms of biopower in the form of various “republics of virtue,” such as Cromwell’s Protectorate, Robespierre’s National Convention, and even Lincoln’s authoritarian redesign of the federal government around militant Christian

¹⁰ See Lilie Chouliarki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (New York: Polity Press, 2013).

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 149.

nationalism during the American Civil War. Bismarck's *Staatssozialismus*, though not an obvious example of democratic biopolitics, can be added to this list, inasmuch as it laid the groundwork for the full governmental *appareil* of the secular pastorate in the twentieth century.

Biopower and the Humanities

The exercise of biopower, as Foucault conceived it, began to be applied to the arts and humanities in the mid-1960s by President Lyndon Johnson with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The rhetoric of "biopoitics" suffuses the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, passed into law just about the time the administration launched the military build-up that eventually engulfed the nation in both the Vietnam War and the social strife and division it generated. According to the Declaration of Findings and Purposes framing the legislation, the rationale for the Act can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States.
- (2) The encouragement and support of national progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, are also appropriate matters of concern to the Federal Government.
- (3) An advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.
- (4) Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.
- (5) It is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to complement, assist, and add to programs for the advancement of the humanities and the arts by local, State, regional, and private agencies and their organizations. In doing so, the Government must be sensitive to the nature of public sponsorship. Public funding of the arts and humanities is subject to the conditions that traditionally govern the use of public money...
- (6) The arts and the humanities reflect the high place accorded by the American people to the nation's rich cultural heritage and to the fostering of mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups.
- (7) The practice of art and the study of the humanities require constant dedication and devotion. While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging

freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.

(8) The world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.

(9) Americans should receive in school, background and preparation in the arts and humanities to enable them to recognize and appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of our lives, the diversity of excellence that comprises our cultural heritage, and artistic and scholarly expression.

(10) It is vital to a democracy to honor and preserve its multicultural artistic heritage as well as support new ideas, and therefore it is essential to provide financial assistance to its artists and the organizations that support their work. (11) To fulfill its educational mission, achieve an orderly continuation of free society, and provide models of excellence to the American people, the Federal Government must transmit the achievement and values of civilization from the past via the present to the future, and make widely available the greatest achievements of art.¹²

Clauses (1), (2), and (7) are particularly telling. Statement (1) makes a clear political claim, implying in effect that all ideas have a political component to them and are therefore a "public" asset. It does not say that only those modes of "intellectual property" funded by a public trust of some sort comprise such assets. It makes a sweeping claim that the "arts and humanities" in general have a status similar to public lands in the nation. This "federalization" of intellectual property is further stressed in sentence (2). If (1) and (2) articulate the biopolitical rationale for a certain version of the "civic humanities," section (7) lays out what might be termed the "generative" argument for the intervention of biopower in the management of what were in the nineteenth century labelled by German scholarship the "spiritual sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaft*). A distinctively "Prussian" mobilization of intellectual resources for the "health", well-being, and ultimately material productivity of the population at large as a result of the deployment of certain state-claimed "immaterial" resources, henceforth, is proposed in this legislation.

As Foucault notes, it is the function of the biopolitical regime to foster a "climate" for human thriving, not simply preserve "bare life" (the Greek *zoe* as opposed to *bios*), as Giorgio Agamben has termed the minimalist aim of the state apparatus as first enunciated by Thomas Hobbes, the first architect of post-Christian political theory, in his *Leviathan*. The promotion of *bios* beyond the guarantee of *zoe* through the political apparatus is the hallmark of biopolitics in Foucault's reckoning. A "biopolitical" regime strives, in contradistinction with the way it is frequently misunderstood by its critics, not so much for the control as for the management of the essentials of what might be designated as the "good life", the teleology of a type of humanity that aspires to the status of what Aristotle

¹² National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965.National Endowment for the Arts Fiscal Year 2010. Appropriations and Related Agencies, 20 U.S.C. § 951 (2010).

described as the *zoon politikon* – in other words “bare life” that is not merely qualified, but alchemized, through a “political” means of organization that elevates it to a qualitatively new plane of distinction. That is essentially why in the classical age through Roman times and up until the Renaissance the concept of *humanitas* had less to do with what came to be dubbed simply *Existenz* in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (with a range of connotation that could not be applied to those “human beings” excluded from participation in some way in the life of the state, such as Jews, refugees, or all kinds of displaced persons) than it did with those “citizens” who were considered to be “proper” human beings who could be located somewhere within the *political* realm and credited with a certain recognizable “civil” status as well as a capacity for discursive reason that became by at least the eighteenth century the goal of educational institutions to cultivate and the business of the bureaucracy to bolster and regulate.

Historical memory is short, and the real motivations for Johnson’s initiative is not completely well-understood. Newspaper accounts at the time did not make that much of it, even though the notion of the government supporting the humanities as part of the nascent Great Society initiatives seemed somewhat novel and unprecedented. At the same time, it was nowhere near as controversial as the introduction of guaranteed medical care for retirees under the name of Medicare, which was perhaps the signature legislation next to the Civil Rights Act during those years. The moves to establish the NEA and the NEH came right after Johnson’s landslide re-election to the Presidency in 1964 and a little more than a year after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Legislation to establish the endowments was engineered by Congressman William Moorhead of Pennsylvania, who in turn was acting on recommendations of a report issued by the National Commission on the Humanities, a body which itself had only been founded the year before after lobbying by several major professional societies. The shocking death of Kennedy along with the national psychological trauma it caused, combined with the apocalyptic mood of the country immediately following the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 and the ongoing confrontation with the Soviet Union around the globe, precipitated a kind of spiritual crisis that most Americans at the time believed only the federal government and its elected representatives could appropriately address. Emboldened by a burgeoning national economy and an overweening collective conviction of American exceptionalism that hitherto had been channeled predominantly into economic and technological prowess, a consensus was ripening that what at the time was known as “industrial policy” should not be directed only at funding the sciences, but fortifying the American character itself throughout the population as a whole. As Glenn Seaborg, who was not a humanities scholar but a scientist told a Senate Committee in the run-up to passage of the legislation, “we cannot afford to drift physically, morally, or esthetically in a world in which the current moves so rapidly perhaps toward an abyss.”¹³

Seaborg was correct in one key respect. The humanities historically had never really belonged to the private as opposed to the public sphere, even if they also

¹³ National Endowment for the Humanities, “How the NEH got its start,” <https://www.neh.gov/about/history>.

served primarily to enhance what John Stuart Mill in his refinement of Bentham's principle of "utility" termed the "higher pleasures." The humanities were an elite preoccupation that were often pursued for their own sake, but they were indeed also a public good, which explains why the liberal arts curriculum could always be found at the core of the education of a "gentleman" throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Jens Hoyrup notes in his civilizational survey of the history of the humanities, "the division between manual and intellectual work, the precondition for the emergence of anything approaching, however vaguely, a stratum of 'humanists,' is...a consequence of the organization of society as a state."¹⁴ Thus the humanities from the outset were always a tacit version of the "civic humanities" in some wider sense of the word. As Hannah Arendt was fond of noting in various ways throughout her academic career, the very idea of the "political" depends decisively on a controlling concept of both the how and the why of "living together" (*Zusammenleben*), and such a notion is inevitably supplied through some transcendental construct of what it signifies to be "human." Since the Enlightenment at least the reality of the state has been indefeasibly legitimated through some intuition of a systemically iterable *raison d'état*, comprising the theoretical scaffolding of what Foucault has named the "biopolitical."

During the Cold War any basis for the authority of a "democratic" state at all required such a "deep" formulation of *raison d'état*. It was only natural that politicians, concerned about the erosion of the national will to fight communism, would turn to the often neglected twin of C.P. Snow's "two cultures.". In the famous 1959 lecture to the dons at Cambridge University in which he coined the phrase "two cultures," Snow had not faulted the outsize attention given to the natural sciences at the expense of the humanities simply because it had contributed to the benign neglect of the history of letters. Science and technology, he argued, fueled economic development, but without the moral and spiritual legacy sustained through humanistic learning the unequal global distribution of material advances, fomenting the postwar struggle between international Marxism and corporate capitalism, seriously jeopardized the long-term prospects for the latter.¹⁵

Once the Cold War ended this national strategic justification for the importance of the humanities this particular viewpoint, which had been largely out of favor anyway since the Vietnam debacle and had been undermined by the strong, left-tilting politicization of humanities faculties that began in the late Sixties, largely evaporated. The Reagan administration had sought half-heartedly to reinstate it by appointing the politically conservative scholar William Bennett as chair of the National Endowment for Humanities, who then passed it on to his protégé Lynn Cheney (wife of later Defense Secretary Dick Cheney). But the Reagan appointees were no match for the fierce and organized opposition of liberal arts faculty and

¹⁴ Jens Hoyrup, *Human Sciences: Reappraising the Humanities Through History and Philosophy* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 14.

¹⁵ See C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 52-53.

college administrators who sabotaged their efforts throughout the 1980s and early 1990s at virtually every turn. In the aftermath of the campus revolts of the late Sixties and early Seventies young faculty, whom their conservative critics disparaged as “tenured radicals” gradually became the dominant force in humanities departments and programs, rejecting the “canonical”, “great books”, or “dead white males” approach to the curriculum in favor of “alternative” or “excluded” voices that would constitute the gridlines of the emerging “identity politics” of the next several decades. Such a “dissenting” methodology, which rapidly crossed disciplinary boundaries in the humanities, purported to be an ideological antidote to the previous biopolitical regime of the Cold War era, but it was gradually and insidiously absorbed over the following generation into the neoliberal, “free market” agenda.

The agenda, initially inspired by the Marxist theory of submerged “class” interests, was designed to break the humanities down into a kind of socio-typological genealogy of repressed elocutions circulating in different guises around what Nietzsche in his unpublished *Nachlass* termed the question of *wer spricht?* (“who speaks”?) For Nietzsche, the question was one always of both valuation and authority. But in an age when “God is dead,” Nietzsche argued, the new source of valuation and authority is the resentful masses. “Suppose that the belief in God has vanished,” Nietzsche wrote. “The question presents itself anew... My answer, taken not from metaphysics but from animal physiology: *the herd instinct speaks*. It wants to be master: hence its ‘thou shalt!’.”¹⁶ In effect, the capture of the humanities through the template of identity politics converted it into an effective “sign machinery” (as Lazzarato calls it) for neoliberalism. The neoliberal concentration of power has coincided with the advent of the information age and the emergence of what Peter Drucker around the turn of the millennium designated the new “knowledge society.” In keeping to a certain degree with Brown’s analysis, this concentration has relied on a process of relentless typification and classification of *self and otherness* according to a surgical, yet unassailable politico-cultural logic of identity and difference. In an age where key commodities are no longer material, but virtual, such a logic is indistinguishable from the *economic* logic of neoliberalism. The same “taxonomical” image of thought, which post-colonial theorist Walter Mignolo attributes to both the European Enlightenment¹⁷ and the genesis of Western racial stereotyping, is the gist not only of identity politics, but what the famous Harvard economist Theodore Levitt in the 1980s named the “marketing imagination”, i.e., the theory that the key to corporate profitability and an expanding consumer base amounts to the power to symbolically differentiate “generic” commodities without altering their substance.¹⁸ Significantly, Levitt is also credited with giving currency in the same book to the term “globalization.” The symbolic fractalization of human identities through a constantly amplified rhetoric of the need to recognize their socio-historical marginalization and displacement turns the

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 275.

¹⁷ Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Theodore Levitt, *The Marketing Imagination* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).

"humanities" into a pliable instrument not only neutralizing their critical power of discernment, but for streamlining their "practical" use for the "multicultural" or "intercultural" exercise of corporate economic power. It is better, for instance, to "understand" and be sympathetic to Islam in its plain vanilla "religious traditions" format rather than its complex, ambivalent real legacy, for example, if one wants to make deals for an oil company with the emirs of the Gulf states. It is better to "racialize" the study of immigration and immigrant culture, effectively sealing it off from its perplexing politico-economic dimensions and any serious Marxian-style study of labor and class analysis, in order that wages can be increasingly depressed for workers in a neoliberal, globalized world order.

In *The Making of Indebted Man* Lazzarato shows how under neoliberalism the "subjectivity" of a caring society is alchemized through the confabulation of political rhetoric into a thoroughly instantiated and embedded system of personal liability and fieflike servitude. "It is debt and the creditor-debtor relationship that make up the subjective paradigm of modern-day capitalism, in which 'labor' is coupled with 'work on the self,' in which economic activity and the ethico-political activity of producing the subject go hand-in-hand. Such "work on the self," can be the entrepreneurial praxis of what in popular lingo is known as "self-help" and "motivational" training, which is usually geared to some kind of profitable economic enterprise.

In line with Harvey's assessment it becomes easy to see that the imperative to consume cloaks itself in the "evaluative" patois of personal freedom, the very generative grammar of neoliberalism with its honey-tongued celebration of "rational actors" making choices that ultimately confirm the wisdom of "markets." But, as Lazzarato points out, "the debt economy is characterized not only by antiproduction but also by what we might call antidemocracy."¹⁹ He cites the way in which the Greeks in the summer of 2015 were subjected to ferocious austerity measures by both the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. Harvey, a well-known historian as well as theoretician, stresses that neoliberalism was always a system of co-optation or, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call it, an "apparatus of capture." In a nutshell, neoliberalism has captured the moral passions and sentimentality of educated cultural progressives in the developed world to advance the causes of the new planetary "captains of industry."

According to Harvey, neoliberalism was launched in the 1970s as "an open project around the restoration of economic power to a small elite would probably not gain much popular support".²⁰ Neoliberalism picked up and preyed upon the street cries of political radicals for the loosening of restrictions by the state on moral behavior as well as more individual autonomy and "grass-roots" control of social and educational institutions. The ubiquitous New Left slogan of "freedom now", expropriated from the traditions of Western liberal political economy itself, became the basis for what Nietzsche would call the "revaluation" of all organizational value-standards and norms for evaluation.

¹⁹ Snow, op. cit., 158.

²⁰ Harvey, op. cit., 40.

At the same time, it hybridized this libertarian proclivities with the newfound interest in promoting “social justice,” building upon the realization among the swelling numbers of the college educated that the historic ideals of liberty and equality had been severely compromised by the concentration of state power since the early twentieth century. In Harvey’s words, “neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces ranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power.”²¹ The result, Harvey argues, was the creation of a new more “socially conscious”, meritocratic ruling class which, particularly after the collapse of Communism, employed various political “wedge issues” to gain political dominance and gradually economic hegemony, which became the adhesive for its new, expanding global empire.

The financial crisis of 2008 was indeed the climax of predatory lending practices. But it was also promoted by both the Clinton and Bush administrations as a strategy for increasing home ownership among previously marginalized groups – a classic tactic of neoliberalism. The fact that the banks which had sponsored this predatory lending were immediately bailed out by the very government that had backed them (unlike in previous crises where financial institutions take the hit) under the pretext of forestalling the social chaos which its very practices had engendered. Neoliberalism seduces with the promise of freedom, but ends up disenfranchising those who are caught up within it while slapping on the irons of debt servitude. In the end it can only “govern the economy through drastic limits to democracy and a no less drastic drop in the expectations of the governed.” (159)

The concept of economic exchange, mirroring the fiction of the social contract, assumes a voluntaristic set of primal social relationships, when in fact the universal, abject condition that Freud described as “hunger and love”, or basic need and extravagant desire, inevitably prevent the possibility of any original equilibrium as fantasized by the classical political economists. The neoliberal “social state”, which pretends to overcome all historical disequilibrium to the extent that it claims to regulate the means of production while distributing fairly and justly the fruits of collective labor, becomes a “total” system of “capture” – i.e., “expropriation” in the traditional, Marxian sense – of the lives and livelihoods of those who are inscribed within it. The cycle itself is self-reinforcing.

In *Governing By Debt* Lazzarato argues that the “democratic” promise of future consumption by the neoliberal state betokens a crisis that “does not reveal a mere economic failure but rather a breakdown in the political relationship between appropriation, distribution, and production. Growth cannot pull us out of the crisis, only new principles of appropriation, ownership, and production can.”²² The growth of the system is inseparable from the growth of the state and its *undemocratic* machinery of capture.

²¹ Op. cit., 41.

²² Maurizio Lazzarato, *Governing By Debt*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Semiotext(e), 2015), 56-7.

Interestingly, Lazzarato in the second chapter of *Governing By Debt* singles out the American university as the ganglion of the neoliberal debt-capture-expropriation machine. He characterizes the university itself as “the model of the debt society.” According to Lazzarato, “the American student perfectly embodies the condition of the indebted man by serving as a paradigm for the conditions of subjectivation of the debt economy one finds throughout society.” The fact that almost 70 percent of students graduating from American universities have financed their education through loans, and many with enormous sums, means that even the most highly sought-after forms of employment are but glorified versions of nineteenth century menial labor where every day workers, as the old song goes, got “another day older and deeper in debt”.

The federal government, or the private banks whose student lending operations are secured by the government with no possibility of default, literally becomes the “company store” to which the worker owes his or her “soul.” As Lazzarato stresses, “students are indebted before entering the job market and stay indebted for life.”²³ But this conjuration of a new “universal” class of chattel where the master-slave relationship is no longer one of personal ownership, but a lifelong fealty toward the state itself does not arise from the traditional workings of indenture. “Students contract their debts by their own volition: they then quite literally become accountable for their lives and...they become managers.”²⁴ They are not, as in the old paradigm of indenture, merely struggling to survive or feed their families. They are challenged all the way from grade school onward to become (in Foucault’s words) “entrepreneurs of the self”, who believe they are commissioned to add value not only to their own lives, but to others. Unlike the monks of yore who took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they are joyfully pledged instead to a life of indebtedness, profligacy, and self-seeking all the while under the powerful illusion that they are maximizing “human potential” while relying on the neoliberal state to establish justice.

Neoliberalism from the outset was, strictly speaking, a conscious effort to give capitalism a “human face” by mitigating the human exploitation and suffering Marx had so brilliantly diagnosed in the 1840s. At the same time, neoliberalism was from its inception a coup d’etat masquerading as “democratic” reform. Germany’s “iron chancellor” Bismarck was the one who first envisioned its basic “biopolitical” operating system, seeking to foil incipient proletarian rebellions with such innovations now taken for granted as rudimentary pensioning and the creation of the “common school.” The Great Depression forced the hand of *Sozialstaat* planners by requiring that similar kinds of anti-insurrectionary measures also be applied in the fiscal and monetary spheres.

John Maynard Keynes, who grand designs were focused not on transcending but “saving capitalism,” became therefore the shadow architect of neoliberalism with his revolutionary theories about regulating the business cycle in order to reduce economic risk and, especially, with his programs of artificially stimulating

²³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴ Ibid., 66.

consumption in times of downturn through deficit spending. Although present day pop political economists such as Paul Krugman have emphatically denied the historical ties between Keynesianism and neoliberalism, the historical record speaks for itself.

Foucault in his Collège de France lectures documents in great detail how the “theology” of neoliberalism constitutes a mirror of the Catholic theology of salvation with its emphasis on *epimeleia heautou*, or “care of the self”, “a notion which permeates all Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy, as well as Christian spirituality, up to the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.”.²⁵ Foucault asks why Western thought “neglected” this theme in its reconstruction of itself. “How did it come about that we accorded so much privilege, value, and intensity to the ‘know yourself’ and omitted, or at least, left in the shadow, this notion of care of the self that, in actual fact, historically, when we look at the documents and texts, seem to have framed the principle of ‘know yourself’ from the start and to have supported an extremely rich and dense set of notions, practices, ways of being, forms of existence, and so on?”²⁶

But the principle of the “care of the self, as it finds its ways from classical *paideia* to the Medieval penitential system, is not the linchpin of classical egoism or libertarian self-sufficiency, as is commonly assumed. *Curia ad se* constitutes an entrepreneurial ethic of obsessive self-formation under the guises a systematic corporate *ascesis* for the sake of the “greater good,” that is, for the sustenance of the biopolitical *appareil*, whether that be the “church universal” or modern secular social democracy.

What Is To Be Done?

We need thus to conclude then with Chernyshevsky’s question of “what is to be done”? How can the humanities effectively be emancipated from neoliberalism, and what are the zones of resistance? One of the challenges facing the instauration of the civic humanities is that their “neoliberalization” over the past several decades has undermined the very notion of the “civic” itself. Although the term “civic” ultimately derives from the Latin *civis* (or “city”), it came during late antiquity to imply a certain universalism, as in the implicit equation of *Romanitas* with *humanitas*, the ideal of a world-unifying drive toward empire enabling the creation of a new, higher notion of a cultivated human species. Christian universalism over time absorbed this particular form of Roman cosmopolitanism with the difference that it expressed a commitment to “equality” of all human beings in the eyes of God, even if it had to await more than a millennium for this “heavenly” vision to be brought down to earth in the modern enthusiasm for secular democracy. The *Aufklärung* of the eighteenth century represented the high water mark of such a “civilizational” universalism, which spawned a variety of

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981 – 1982* (New York: Picador, 2005), 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

revolutions from the American to the French and the various socialist transformations of the twentieth century.

The Identitarianism that spawned the politicization of the humanities in the latter quarter of the 1900s and the ethno-nationalist revolts currently underway in the Western world are ironically both the product of the neoliberal fracturing of all previous universalistic *métarécits*. Whereas identitarianism was borne in the 1960s as a unique form of *Realpolitik*, speaking the truth of the time that the emperor of democratic universalism had no clothes because of the entrenchment of structural discrimination against women and minorities which the latter seemed incapable of recognizing, it slowly morphed into a rhetoric of “class privilege” in its own right, embalming the hypocrisy of a presumed “panoptical” view of human belief and behavior as uniformly motivated by assorted bigotries (i.e., lack of appreciation for genuine “otherness”) emanating not from personal human failings but from one’s *Sitz im Leben*, the facticity of one’s identity itself. The idea that one always “spoke” from some standpoint of warped self-reference, whether it be racial, gender, or cultural positioning, has been central to this strange sort of “hermeneutics of the subject.” But, as Foucault himself underscored, such a hermeneutics was in telling measure the unavoidable *denouement* of the long “pastoral” tradition of self-curation, throwing in relief one’s own eternally contested subjectivity that must be both competitively elaborated and psychologically buttressed in a bloodless war of all against all that defines the “entrepreneurship” of the self.

Could the civic humanities turn out to be some kind of strategy for ameliorating such a personalized and “postmodern” version of the *bellum omnium contra bellum*? The question is apt. However, to provide a serious answer we cannot really draw on any standard or current models, past or present, most of which fit the long-evolving neoliberal paradigm in some sense. The justification for the “civic humanities” in a broad sense was always tied in with the assumption that a liberally educated person would be more engaged thoughtfully in the public sphere. In fact, for quite a while following the endowment act of 1965, the conception of what we now know as “civic humanities” was interchangeable with the supposition that everything from English literature to art history could be leveraged to make debates about public policy, if not its actual implementation, more efficacious. By the closing years of the century this demand for a purely pragmatic tie-in between humanities scholarship and the concrete political process, exploited on the main to keep the spigots of federal funding for the endowments themselves open and flowing, had worn thin. A shift toward a less specific connotation for what was meant by “public” in the case the humanities came into fashion. The more nebulous category of “civic engagement,” which better fit the original model of educating for “citizenship” in an overarching sense, gained currency. Nevertheless, the emphasis still fell on the humanities as a prosthesis for enforcing the present political climate through ideas. As James Veninga wrote in the Nineties in making his own passionate case for such a project, “education for citizenship” (which the consensual role for the humanities) should have a broader meaning simply Jefferson’s desire for an informed voting populace. “First,” he stresses, “we can no longer hide from the realities of American cultural pluralism.” It is incumbent that students be inculcated in an

"understanding of our multiple traditions, faiths, and values as is possible" with the aim of finding "new ways to combat racism and prejudice, to rectify our past mistakes, and to foster cross-cultural understanding and goodwill."²⁷ Furthermore, it is no longer viable for the humanities to "hide under the protective intellectual blanket of the Western tradition. Globalization necessitates a "commitment to civic conversation" at an international level that will engender "worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's highest qualities."²⁸

If "civic humanities" during the Cold War era tooled overwhelming to promulgate the virtues of a "free people" in the propaganda battle with international Communism, from 1991 onward it became a powerful instrument for advancing the emergent and somewhat nebulous catechism of "global citizenship," in other words the functional values of the neoliberal, transnational elites. The confluence of identity politics with the economic agendas of these elites, as a number of radical theorists (especially Slavoj Žižek²⁹) have started to play up. Given the feeling of second-class citizenship that the *academic* humanities has persistently experienced vis-à-vis the STEM disciplines and the social sciences, which have been habitually funded at a federal level, it is only natural that university-seated entrepreneurs themselves would seek to genuflect to the prevailing political consensus. After all, that has been the hallmark of the relationship between patron and protégé since the dawn of the modern era. If it is not the government, then it is the local economic development council with its blueprint for encouraging arts districts and cultural "third spaces" that will ultimately attract visitors to blighted downtown areas and attract business while boosting real estate values.

"Civic humanities", if it is not merely consigned to the permanent status of a "kept" discipline by the prevailing powers that be, must develop its site of resistance on its own, not by playing one public leadership constituency off another. In order to shatter the neoliberal "dream machine," it must go out into the streets and nurture the kind of "critical" perspective (as in the old and new prototype of discourse as "critical theory") that constantly calls the biopolitical touchstones and procedures of normative learning to an unprecedented account. It must have something akin to Antonin Artaud's imaginary of a "theater of cruelty" that shatters the framed staging of conventional plays and playwrights while dissolving the artificial boundary of performer and audience (or in this case student and professor, degree and credit-granting institution). If universities want genuinely to adopt "civic humanities" as brand markers, they must embrace the notion of community intellectual spaces not merely as public, but as *populist*, terrains. In an era when the neoliberal "apparatus" for manufacturing and maintaining knowledge hegemonies is dissolving globally before our eyes, it is time for the bold to mobilize for the genuine "knowledge revolution" that is coming and to speak with a genuine and resonating *parrhesia* of public discourse.

²⁷ James F. Veninga, *The Humanities and the Civic Imagination: Collected Addresses and Essays 1978-98* (Denton TX: University of North Texas Press, 1999), 132.

²⁸ Ibid., 134.

²⁹ Žižek has been making this argument for almost twenty years. His most famous salvo can be found in his article "Multiculturalism, or the Multicultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* (Sep 1, 1997): 0(225):28.

If there is truly a “philosophy of the future”, as Nietzsche envisioned, it will occur in the cafes and coffee houses of the *citoyen* on the street, as it did in France on the eve of its numerous insurrections and revived republics. In bringing Francis Bacon into the twenty-first century, we might rephrase his famous dictum that “knowledge is power” to offer a presentiment of what a true civic humanities might turn out to be – knowledge as *event*.

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