Organized Ideas, or Defeating the Culture Wars
(What We Need to Know, and How We Need to Know It)

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To Pete, who walks this road with me. And to Tom, who would have.

ABSTRACT

"What's the matter with Kansas?" Or, more generally: why, given an economic and political situation that benefits so few Americans (roughly…1 percent), do all the others (the roughly…99 percent) willingly accept it, and sometimes even fight for it, seemingly against their interests?

The most common answer: they're dumb. Or they've been duped. But this answer won't do. First of all, it's harmful: it perpetuates the Manichean, consumerist, and destructive way of doing politics called "culture war." Second, it's ineffective: to call someone a dupe is to alienate and exclude that person from the conversation. And finally, it's incorrect: "they," and "we," are just doing what makes us feel right. What makes us feel valued, and accepted, and worthwhile, in the communities we live in—the only yardsticks we've got.

The answer, rather, lies in the way those communities have been built, formed, expanded, condensed, altered, weakened, and/or destroyed. In a word, how they've been *organized*. All meaning-making happens in organized groups—"interpretive communities"—which can be as small as two siblings or as large as Christendom. Political meaning-making is no exception. To the extent that all of us act against our interests, which we all do, it's because of the way the communities we live in have been organized, to make certain gestures and actions more valued, accepted, and worthwhile than others.

This means that effective rhetoric—rhetoric that makes change—isn't just about finding the right words and saying or writing them. It's also, almost always, about being

part of the effort to organize, dis-organize, and/or reorganize interpretive communities. Ideas, no less than people and money, must be organized if they are to be powerful.

This is a hard truth for many to swallow, given that most of us have spent a lot of time in that large interpretive community called "academia and para-academia," where the truth is objective (not made by human organizations), and the goal is to find it and write it down, and it will set us free—and the result is a widespread, sometimes even active resistance to building and using our own agency.

But it's a truth that the powerful have long known. Many of the most influential "ideas" people in modern politics, from Karl Marx to Carl Schmitt, have been organizers themselves, or have taken very intentional part in organizing work. This is especially true for two of the most powerful political activities in recent U.S. history. One is neoliberalism, the organizing campaign that began in the 1930s and 40s as an alliance among a handful of economists and businessmen and has grown into a worldwide movement that's changed the nature of politics, economics, and human interaction, actively destroying all potential for agency other than being an entrepreneur or consumer. The other is public work, emerging from the democratic populist traditions of the Popular Front, which is working to build a very different world: one where people come together and work, as collective producers, to make the world they—we—live in.

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Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him.

—J. R. R. Tolkien

PROLOGUE
The Theory Effect

The word "academic" is a synonym for irrelevant.
—Saul Alinsky, Founder, Industrial Areas Foundation[1]

Avoid Ph.D.s. They can't act. They get lost in writing books for one another…
—Ed Chambers, Director, Industrial Areas Foundation[2]

The Story of Me[3]

I'll get to Saul and Ed in a bit. First, I want to talk about Tom.

There are a lot of reasons to talk about Tom at the start of this dissertation. But the most immediate one is that he died, suddenly and unexpectedly, less than two weeks before I finished the first draft. The hole he left in my world and my family, in those days and weeks and months since Tuesday, January 7, 2014, has been palpable. I miss him in so many ways; there were so many conversations we never had; and I regret that only after he died did I start to realize just how important he'd been to me, and the extent to which he'd set me on the road that's brought me here.

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[1] Saul D. Alinsky, "Introduction to the Vintage Edition," *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), ix.
[2] Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 110.
[3] I've taken the rough structure of this prologue from Marshall Ganz, the organizer and Harvard professor and one-time Obama strategist. (Which does not mean I'm aligning myself with Obama. As you will see, I draw from many different political traditions in the pages to follow.) Ganz consolidated a lot of ancient and modern organizing wisdom into the concept of a "public narrative," a structure for understanding and communicating about ourselves in a way that builds and reinforces the essentially public nature of these selves: the way in which our deepest, most personal selves are connected to, and part of , the narrative of the people we share our world with, and the moment we all find ourselves in. Ganz explains: "Public narrative is woven from three elements: a story of why I have been called, a story of self; a story of why we have been called, a story of us; and a story of the urgent challenge on which we are called to act, a story of now. This articulation of the relationship of self, other, and action is also at the core of our moral traditions. As Rabbi Hillel, the 1st Century Jerusalem sage put it, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?'" See Marshall Ganz, "What is Public Narrative?" (2008), http://wearesole.com/What_is_Public_Narrative.pdf (January 15, 2014).

Thomas J. D'Amore was not a famous man, not exactly. Unless you're a member of my family, or somehow involved in Connecticut politics, you probably haven't heard of him. But in those worlds, he was *known*. And, maybe just as universally, loved. This despite his eminently unlovable profession: Tom was a career politician. The consummate fixer, operative, and insider. The kind of guy who'd feel at home in a smoke-filled room. Yet while he fully embraced all these stereotypes, right down to the wide stance and the gut and the newsboy's hat—I don't think I ever saw him with a cigar, but I can easily imagine it—he made them a *good* thing. Tom was a cunning and well-connected pol, but used his cunning and his connections to bring people together, across all kinds of so-called irreconcilable divides. Not cleanly or easily, but messily, and beautifully. He fought the two-party system and the electoral college. He ran the state Republican Party, brokered the state's first income tax, and challenged Joe Lieberman from the left. He prodded and provoked pretty much everyone—yet the love remained.

On the day of Tom's funeral, the Catholic church in his hometown of Winsted was filled almost to capacity with his big family and many friends, including governors, legislators, senators and Congresspeople, and political operatives across the spectrum, some of whom he'd campaigned for, and yes, many of whom he'd campaigned against. His old friend Father Bill "Sang" Sangiovanni, who gave the homily, compared Tom to Thomas Aquinas. For both Toms, he told us, *politics* meant *people*. Getting to know people, working with them, making this happen. And above all, it was about love—which, Sang reminded us, was written right into Tom's name.[4]

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[4] For a lovely recollection by a longtime acquaintance who was also there that day, see Christopher Keating, "Political Who's Who Gathers To Recall Tom D'Amore," *The Hartford Courant* (January 13,

Tom's way of doing politics involved a lot of jokes, a lot of stories, a lot of informal deals and understandings, and a lot of Italian food and wine. It's a kind of politics that feels strikingly anachronistic, in a world that, we're told, is driven by technology and mass- and social-media. It's the kind of politics that isn't supposed to exist anymore, that "millennials" like me weren't supposed to get to see. But I got to see it. And it's affected me, and this dissertation, profoundly. I don't think Tom ever knew Saul Alinsky, but I can see him grinning and nodding as Alinsky would argue that a "radical" was simply someone "who really liked people, loved people—all people."[5] Alinsky, and the tradition of broad-based organizing he played such a big role in starting, came into my life relatively recently. But I took to it so quickly and so fiercely, I realize now, because Tom had taught me these same lessons, long before. They were part of who I was. I nearly lost them, in my brush with anti-democratic elitism as a University of Chicago student. And in getting to know Alinsky, and the living tradition of power, agency, and public work he represents, I found them again.

I knew Tom through my father. The two of them met in 1984, just after we had moved from Washington, D.C. to West Hartford, Connecticut. Back then, Tom was Republican state chairman, my father was a young reporter with the *Hartford Courant*, and I was an infant. The two of them quickly became close colleagues, and then close friends. Tom was a fixture throughout my childhood. When I was seven, he arranged a

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2014), http://articles.courant.com/2014-01-13/news/hc-politicos-damore-funeral-0114-20140113_1_weicker-jr-lowell-p-republican-party (April 8, 2014.)

[5] Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 9. It's worth noting how many of the great radicals and revolutionaries write about love. Like its opposite, loneliness—which we'll discuss in Chapter Four—love appears to be deeply political. To be a radical who loves all people, Alinsky stipulates, is an ideal to strive toward more than a reality. It is definitely an ideal I strive toward in this book. I know I do not always succeed in reaching it.

private meeting for me with the Governor Lowell P. Weicker, whose campaign he had managed. I was extensively prepped. I still remember it quite well: the governor met me in the lobby, took me upstairs to his office, and asked me typical seven-year-old questions about my school and my parents. I answered his questions politely, then shifted the conversation to the state income tax and the death penalty.

This was my childhood. One of my earliest memories is talking with my parents about Bush and Dukakis, when I was four. When I was eight, my third-grade Hebrew school teacher was teaching us about Rosh Hashanah and asked if we knew about *other* kinds of New Years—expecting the Chinese New Year, etc. My hand shot up, she called on me, and I said: "What about the Fiscal New Year?" I spent a lot of time in the newsroom, with my father (think Season Five of *The Wire*), and in the state Attorney General's office, with my mother. Our house was, and still is, filled with piles of newspapers and the sound of the TV news. I grew up talking with lots of grown-ups—reporters and lobbyists, senators and representatives. Politics, for me, was never separate from "real life." It *was* life: the most public, large-scale, exciting part of life.

Given all of that, it may not shock you to learn I had some trouble making friends. I couldn't understand, when I left the governor's office and went back to second grade, why no one else wanted to talk about the income tax or the death penalty. Why no one else, not even the teachers really, seemed to like or even care about politics. I got teased a lot—and in those last innocent years before we started taking bullying seriously, my teachers just told me to "ignore it." Looking back on it now, as much as it hurt, I don't blame the other kids. They didn't, and couldn't, see the world the way I did. And I

couldn't, or wouldn't, see the world the way they did. I was too stuck in my own head even to try. I'm sure I seemed arrogant and condescending to my "peers"—a word I came to hate, because it appeared in all the parts of my elementary-school report card where I did the worst. Relating to my "peers" is something I've struggled with my whole life. I've spent long stretches of time feeling, with varying degrees of self-indulgence, that I couldn't relate to anyone.

When I did finally make friends, it was through making art together. Specifically, through singing in a chamber chorus and directing plays—two activities that I cared deeply about, that I couldn't do alone, and that are still a big part of my life. My parents encouraged me to grow as an artist. They paid for me to sing in children's choruses and act in youth theaters; they drove me to an increasing number of rehearsals and venues, as some of this work became professional; and maybe most importantly, they sent me to camp at Appel Farm Arts and Music Center in southern New Jersey, where I made my first real friends, and where I now run the theater and creative writing program.

Then came the moment, just after I'd turned sixteen, when I tried to direct Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins* in high school.[6] It was perfect, I thought. It combined all my nerdiest interests in politics, history, music, and theater, and it was exactly the kind of questions we high school kids needed to be asking, in the wake of Columbine two years earlier. I *really* wanted to do it. I spent six months planning it. I researched all the history. I read lots of books to try to learn how to direct. I even negotiated an affordable

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[6] For the uninitiated: Stephen Sondheim is one of the greatest and most controversial musical-theater songwriters of all time. He started his career writing lyrics to *West Side Story* and later wrote *Sweeney Todd*. *Assassins* is probably his most radical show: a 1991 surreal variety show that tells the stories of nine real-life presidential assassins in a way that makes them remarkably relatable. Just the thing that would ruin the sleep of any high school administrator.

contract with Music Theater International, the notoriously overpriced licensing company. I did all of this with tacit permission from my school's theater department. But of course, the day we were supposed to send in the contract, they had second thoughts. I spent the next three months fighting every bureaucrat in my school and district-wide administration. At several points, I thought I'd almost won. But I lost. The administrators were arrogant at best and patronizing at worst. The teachers said they'd support me, then didn't. My parents didn't necessarily *oppose* what I was doing. They were just worried about me, and understandably so. They wished I weren't so intense, and that I didn't obsess so much, because they saw it hurting me. They saw it consuming my time and my thoughts and my life. And of course, they saw it making it hard for me to relate to my peers. I see all this now. At the time, I felt abandoned. Alone. Me against the world.

This experience of trauma—first-world trauma, but trauma nonetheless—ended up being pivotal. In two ways. First, it made me realize I needed my peers. While trying to claw myself out of the depression that followed the *Assassins* debacle, I made friends for the first time. I intentionally taught myself, with my parents' help, how to ask people about themselves, and how to care about what they cared about. I was taking my first steps, unbeknownst to me at the time, toward being an organizer: I had felt the pain of being powerless, and I was learning the skills I needed to become powerful. Second, it made me really, really want to get out of West Hartford, Connecticut—a place I came to identify with closed-mindedness and censorship.

And I did. I went a thousand miles away for college, at the intense nerd utopia that was (then) the University of Chicago. After that I went even farther away, to go teach and make theater in Berlin, and then Minneapolis. It was eleven years before I came back for longer than a visit. When I finally did, it was to write this dissertation.

The tension I felt post-*Assassins*, between the impulse to build a community and the impulse to uproot myself from a community, has stayed with me ever since. It's the same tension that made me pour a year of my life (2005) into founding and running a theater company in Chicago, which produced seven productions during the course of that year (while I was still a full-time student)—and that also made me feel like I needed to leave Chicago altogether, when that company collapsed in an awful moment of betrayal and apathy. It's same the tension that made me build a close relationship with a band of renegade musical theater artists in Berlin—a relationship that continues to this day—and that also made me feel like I needed to leave Berlin and get back to my "real life," when my Fulbright year was up. And it's the same tension that drove me to graduate school: I wanted to be somewhere awhile, to really invest in a project—the project of learning to teach, and of completing my formal education—but I simultaneously still felt the need to float, to be transient, to survey the whole field from above, to not quite land yet.

It's a tension I'm still working through. It's caused me to make many good friends in many places, and to produce a lot of good work in a lot of different fields, but it's also caused me a lot of pain. It's made me feel, in a way, that nothing I've done has been *real*, that somehow my life has been still-born. And in a very direct way, it's caused me to write this dissertation. This dissertation, in its most radically personal reduction, is

my three-hundred-page working-through of this tension. Of course, I wouldn't have gone through the effort—or made you, dear reader, go through the effort—if I didn't have a hunch that my tensions might have something to do with yours, too.

The Story of Us

"The personal is political." That's what the second-wave feminists said, and since then, many others have agreed.

I agree, too—in certain ways. I don't think the personal is *entirely* political. Yes, there are political implications to every aspect of our individual lives: the plastic seltzer bottle I'm drinking out of right now is implicated in environmental destruction and the profits of the oil industry. But it doesn't work the other way around: my individual decision to buy that seltzer bottle, or not to buy it, has no meaningful effect on the environment or the oil industry. (To organize a public campaign to purchase or boycott plastic seltzer bottles—or better, Big Y-brand plastic seltzer bottles in particular—would be another matter. That becomes an act of collective production, not individual consumption.)

Nor do I believe that the political is entirely personal. To understand a political issue, it's not enough just to understand my (or your) personal feelings and stories relating to that issue. There are important categories, which I'll call "markets" and "interpretive communities," that are bigger than individuals, and that are the main building-blocks of politics. But at the same time, we can't understand political issues—what forms they take, how they got that way, why people care so much about them—

without understanding people's stories and feelings. I'll argue in Chapter One, following in the footsteps of a lot of recent researchers, that we have our feelings first and our abstract positions second, not the other way around. To talk "politics" with people, without talking about their personal stories, is to miss the point.

I make no exception for myself. I told you some of my own stories of loneliness, so that you'll better understand my arguments about the politics of loneliness in Chapter Four. I told you about the tensions I've felt between investing in my community and uprooting myself from that community, so that you'll better understand my arguments about the destructive impulse to *just leave* in Chapter Two. I told you how central Tom was to my childhood, so that you'll better understand my allergic reaction to the elitist, consumer-based politics of culture war—whether practiced in the popular media (in Chapter One) or in academia and para-academia (in Chapter Three)—and my own deep need to build a politics in people and love. I can explain and defend these positions with complex, sophisticated rational arguments, and I will, but those arguments don't actually explain why I hold these positions. The answer to that, for me and for everyone else, is in our stories, and in our feelings—or, technically speaking, in our habitual dispositions and interpretive strategies.

This understanding of people and their politics—again, backed by a lot of recent research I'll cite in Chapter One—explains the presence of some pesky pronouns throughout this dissertation: "I," "me," "you," "we," and "us." As for "I" and "me": I hope we're far enough into the postmodern moment that I can admit my biases and subjectivity—i.e., my humanity—without having my arguments thrown out as

illegitimate. I will bend over backwards to acknowledge and explore the effects of these biases and subjectivity, in the chapters to come, but I can't—and shouldn't—deny that I have them. (As I explained to a colleague from the zAmya Theater Project, who responded to one of my Book Updates on Facebook (see Appendix), I don't claim to be unbiased, just honest.) I cite my sources exhaustively, and I encourage you to look for yourself and question the conclusions I draw. I intend this dissertation as an incitement to dialogue, a set of questions and suggestions, rather than a litany of definite answers.

"You," "we," and "us" are a little trickier. Of course, I can't legitimately claim to know what *you*, or therefore *we*, are actually doing or thinking or feeling at a given moment. But I use these terms for a couple of reasons. First, there's no good way around it. To write about politics is, by definition, to write about *people*, not about *a person* or *persons*. (Or as Hannah Arendt puts it, more poetically if less inclusively, it's to write about *men* and not *man*.) The basic unit of politics is people, in their plurality and their relationships with each other. Many political writers will get around the use of second-person-plural pronouns by talking about "people," "men," "the populace," "the nation," "society," and so on. But to use these kind of words, here, would be to miss a basic point: we're not talking about something over there, distanced, apart from us. We're talking about us. Here. Now. In using these vulgar second-person pronouns, I will no doubt make some unfounded assumptions about "you," "we," and "us." (Maybe I already have.) But at least this way, they're not shrouded in abstraction; they're out in the open, for *us* to discuss, debate, and deal with.

Second, my use of these pronouns reflects one of the major arguments I'll be making: *we're not so different, you and I*.[7] Yes, we may have various differences—in our race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic class, religion, regional background, education level, political positions, triggers, traumas, and Tumblrs, not to mention feelings about *Star Wars* versus *Star Trek*—but it's easy, especially for us academic/activist/artist types, to make too much of them.[8] (See what I did there? Sometimes, like just now, I'll specify a "we," which you may or may not belong to. Either way's good.) As important as our differences are, there's no reason to assume our relationships have to be *defined* by them. If it's oppressive to assume "we're all the same," it's also oppressive to assume "we're all fundamentally different"—because it denies us the chance to work together out of the traditions and interests that we *do* share. At the very least, you and I speak a similar-enough language that I can write this and you can read it. We probably share more than that, too. In so far as our individual *selves* are socially produced, they bear the mark of the common culture and society that produced them. We don't share everything, but we do share some things, and they're important.[9]

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[7] See "Not So Different," *TV Tropes* (website), http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/NotSoDifferent (April 8, 2014); see also Shaun Munro, "10 Most Overused Lines In Movie History," *What Culture*, http://whatculture.com/film/10-most-overused-lines-in-movie-history.php (April 8, 2014).

[8] Before you say it: yes, I am absolutely a well-educated, well-off-enough, able-bodied straight(-ish) white U.S.-American cis-man. I make no claims to be anything but. I fully recognize that it's easier for me to "look past our differences" than it is for many. All I'll say in my defense—if I'm even being attacked—is that this argument, like pretty much every argument in this dissertation, is something I've formulated in dialogue and collaborative work with people of all kinds of different backgrounds, including those with significantly less privilege. (See Chapter Three for a detailed discussion of privilege, including its relationship to oppression.) Having said that, of course, I do not claim to speak for anyone but myself.

[9] There are a few other specific cases and reasons why I employ second-person pronouns. Like a lot of rhetoric in this dissertation, I use them with varying degrees of seriousness, playfulness, and—if you will as it were—citationality. I will often use them to indirectly (and often satirically) quote other people who make assumptions about "you," "we," and "us." I'll also often use them idiomatically, to sound less stilted and formal—"you" or "we" often just sounds better, and more conversational, than "one" or "someone" or

But of course there will be times when my appeals to "you" and "we" and "us" will suggest some questionable assumptions about who my readers are. In my ideal world, my readers are pretty much everyone. I have spent a lot of effort to make this text something that pretty much anyone with enough patience and curiosity—and literacy, yes, but not necessarily the advanced-degree kind—can pick up and read. You'll notice that this prologue is the only place I refer to a "dissertation" rather than a "book." That's very intentional: I have written the four core chapters—but *not* this prologue—as the first draft of what might become a popular book. (That technically makes the entire text of my dissertation a performance, but then again, isn't that true of every text, anyway?) This intention should explain a lot of other rhetorical choices I've made, too. I intentionally keep the sentences (relatively) short, the vocabulary (relatively) simple, and the language (relatively) colloquial. I keep my explicit references to "theory" to a minimum—this text *enacts* a lot more theory than it *cites*—and I try to describe and explain every theory and theorist I do cite, so that no academic background is required to read it. Finally, I try to keep the narrative flowing at a decent pace; I relegate a lot of the more technical talk to the footnotes.[10]

"a person." Sometimes I am legitimately making a claim about pretty much all human beings: "we" and "us" in the broadest sense. And sometimes I am literally talking to you, the reader, and about us, literally the two of us, you and I. I will try to make these distinctions clear, based on the context…except where a little performed ambiguity is part of the rhetoric.

[10] My use of footnotes, then, is a little unusual. In some ways—and increasingly, as the book goes on and the theoretical and historical issues grow in complexity—the footnotes end up being a second book of their own. (I imagine that they will become endnotes in whatever final published form this text may one day take, lest they seriously hinder the book's visual accessibility; witness the page-and-a-half long footnote near the beginning of Chapter Four, for example; but I've decided to keep the footnotes as footnotes for now. As a doctoral dissertation, I feel it's important that the scholarship be easy to access.) This "second book" in the footnotes is also intended to be legible by pretty much anyone with enough patience and curiosity; it just requires somewhat *more* patience and curiosity than the main text. I imagine it will appeal mostly to academics, and to others with a vested interest in whatever topic is being discussed—philosophy, cyberpunk literature, the practice of broad-based community organizing, and so on. It is also intended to

That being said, I know it *won't* be read by everyone. It will be read, at minimum, by the four professors on my doctoral committee: Robin Brown, Sonja Kuftinec, Harry Boyte, and Michael Kuhne. (All of whom, as you will see, also figure in the text itself in various ways.) Beyond that, in its current incarnation it will be read by the handful of friends and colleagues who have asked to read it and whom I've been sending chapters to, and maybe by some others whom they chose to send it to, and perhaps the odd soul who finds it in the library. These people are different in various ways—age, region, gender, sexuality, occupation, academic background (or lack thereof), and to a lesser extent race and class and political orientation—but I can be reasonably sure they have a few things in common. They are fairly *literate*: able and willing to take on large hunks of prose, if not always academic prose. They are *intellectual*: interested in ideas and comfortable with abstract thought. ("Intellectual," contrary to popular belief, does not mean "academic." There are many intellectuals who are not academics, and there are many academics who are not particularly intellectual.) And they are, variously, *political*: they are dissatisfied with "the way things are," they believe that change is possible, and they are interested in being part of that change, in one way or another.

These three basic descriptors—intellectual, literate, and political—pretty much describe my assumed audience. Within those parameters, I hope to be as generous as I

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provide some of the "accountability" to different theoretical sources and positions within academic interpretive communities that is expected of work in my field—especially after the post-68 turn toward theoretical "rigor" (see Chapter Three)—without compromising the narrative flow for those who don't care about such things. I must give credit, here, to Brown University biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, and specifically to her wonderful book *Sexing the Body*; I am using my footnotes very much as Fausto-Sterling does, in this book. As she explains, the main text of the book is for an audience that just wants to understand the claims she makes; the endnotes, nearly as long as the main text itself, are for those interested understanding the primary and secondary evidence she marshals in support of those claims. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

can. I hope in particular that, without being coy about my own political leanings, I have written a book that a dedicated right-wing conservative can read and appreciate, too, and maybe even sometimes agree with. (To my right-leaning readers: I know I sometimes use "we" as a stand in for liberal/leftist/progressive-type folks. When I do that, I hope you understand that I'm just describing myself (sort of) and people whose views are (often) similar to mine—people who, I imagine, will make up the majority of the readership of this book. I'm not trying to exclude you from the story, or to tell you that that's what your political views should be. As you'll see, I'll sometimes end up quite critical of left/liberal/progressive positions, and quite sympathetic toward some conservative ones.) Outside those three parameters, though, there's not much I can do. I don't try very hard to please people who are uncurious or apathetic; this isn't the right genre or medium for it. And though I've worked hard to make this text as accessible as possible to people with various kinds of literacies, I know I've had only limited success.

But now to the most important question of "we": who is we, to me? Whom do I see my own narrative bound up with, and with what results? I want to answer this question in two ways. In the first way: I see myself as part of two broad communities (interpretive communities), which I'll lay out in detail in Chapters Three and Four. One of these big communities is academia and para-academia: that vast constellation of educational institutions and (usually nonprofit) corporations, from arts centers to health centers to even some unions, that operate on the "service" model—i.e., whose basic goal is to provide services to external consumers, often consumers who are considered needy or lacking in some way. The other big community is broad-based organizing, which

includes members of the four nationwide Alinskyan networks (IAF, Gamaliel, PICO, DART), as well as various unions, associations, collectives, agencies, and for- and nonprofit corporations that operate on the "power" or "agency" model—i.e., build power around themselves and their members, collectively and out of shared self-interest, to make structural change in the wider world.

I have spent a lot of time in both of these interpretive communities, and I am writing, in a lot of ways, to members of both. My sympathies, as you can already see in the title, lie more with the "power" people: I find their theory more robust and their results more effective, and above all—feelings, as usual, precede abstract opinions—I've just felt better working with them (for reasons I'll discuss later). Having said that, the "service" community is extremely important. For one, it's a whole lot bigger, and it has a lot more resources. For two, it's much more connected with mainstream culture, and it gets a lot more media attention. For three, it's the point of entry into "politics" for most people: most of us, before we get the chance to learn a politics based in power and self-interest, we first learn a politics (for "power" people, a pseudo-politics) based in service and charity—which we must then un-learn, Yoda style, if we want to enter the "power" world.

So I guess my audience, construed most narrowly, is myself, circa 2009: in the moment where Chapter One begins. Myself when I was fully ensconced in the "service" world: two years into a doctoral program, on the board of directors of a nonprofit that does arts and education and activism, full of guilt at my various privileges, anxious to assert myself lest I get called out for those privileges, unaware of what it would even

mean to build power around myself, worried that if I did such a thing it would be somehow selfish, sick of feeling all this guilt and anxiety and self-hatred, unsure of how to feel otherwise, and prone to writing run-on sentences. I'm writing the book that I wish I could offer to my 2009 self: if I did, maybe I'd have gotten where I am now a little quicker, and with fewer bruises. More importantly: I'm writing the book I'd like to offer to people who are *similar* to my 2009 self, who might not have the dumb luck (as I did) to stumble ass-backwards into a bunch of brilliant, renowned, deeply generous organizers and public work scholars who wanted to work with me, make theater with me, live with me, and advise my doctoral dissertation.

I'm also writing, a little more indirectly, for those in the "power" community: those organizers and others who just don't get why everyone else just doesn't get it. Who don't understand why homeless shelters are so condescending toward their "clients," when that's clearly not getting them to their goal of ending homelessness. Who try to work with academics and can't understand why they're so obsessed with getting the facts and wording exactly right, when that kind of precision obviously won't do anything to build the necessary relationships or move the necessary people to win the campaign.[11] Who feel, like the renowned IAF organizer Ernesto Cortes, that their organizations are "monasteries of democracy, surviving the dark ages of a degraded culture"[12]—or, like Alinsky and Chambers in the opening epigrams, that academics are irrelevant and Ph.D.'s can't act. It's not that these guys don't have a point. It's just that if they want to emerge

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[11] Here, as in most other places where I seem to be writing "hypothetically," I'm actually thinking of specific instances—in this case, two conversations I've had with friends who are professional organizers.
[12] See Harry C. Boyte, "Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap" (Kettering Foundation, 2013), http://kettering.org/wp-content/uploads/Reinventing-Citizenship.pdf (January 8, 2014), 16.

from their monasteries and broaden their base to include the huge numbers of people who speak service, including but not limited to academics, they need to learn their language. Calling out people for their flaws—and, implicitly, dismissing them—is no more productive for master IAF organizers than it is for my teenage students on Tumblr (see Chapter Three). Inability to communicate is, always, a two-way street.

The other way I want to answer the "we" question—about whom my own story is bound up with—is generational. As I'll discuss more in Chapter Two, I am at the older end of what's become known as the "millennial" generation. That designation does not fill me with joy. According to Rush Limbaugh and Fox News, "millennials" are indolent slobs living in our parents' basements and too busy updating our Instagram accounts to go out and get a job. (I resent that. I live in my parents' *attic*, thank you very much.) According to NPR and MSNBC, on the other hand, we are the sexy, hipster-y, social media-driven wave of the future, sweeping away repressive governments (and industries) with a single Tweet, embracing (and commodifying) every possible difference in sexuality and nationality and lifestyle, and far too busy creating revolutionary startups to notice (or care) that we might never have Social Security or a steady job.

Obviously, I have some feelings about this. I don't feel these stories are my story. Nor are they the stories of most other "millennials" I know. Yes, we spend a lot of time on the Internet—but that's partially because that's where the jobs are, or because we've had to move far away to find a job and that's the only way we can spend time with the people we care about. Yes, we stay in school for a long time (maybe too long) and jump from job to job and often start our own little companies—but that's partially because the

job market has been terrible for years, and a lot of times There Is No Alternative. Yes, we might find a certain chic in poverty and joblessness—as have some youth from every modern generation—but I've never met a single "millennial" who is *happy* that we'll probably be the first generation in modern U.S. history to make less than our parents.

I'm not saying our lives are all gloom and doom. What I am saying, though, is that the way we live often isn't a conscious choice, or a desired one. We're a generation that's experienced a lot of *loss*, and a lot of our lives are shaped by this loss. We spent our entire childhoods living in a time of peace and relative, if unequal, prosperity. This is the context where we developed our hopes and dreams and expectations for ourselves, and in where our parents and teachers and mentors developed their expectations of us. Then, just as we were coming of age, 9/11 happened—followed by several years when political agency, of all kinds, felt nearly impossible. Then, just as we were becoming adults, the bottom fell out of the economy. Worst recession since the Depression. And this time around there was no FDR—and no Popular Front—to pick us up and enlist us in the Brains Trust, the Civilian Conservation Corps, or the CIO. No, this time the agenda was being set by the neoliberals (of both parties): cuts, not public commitment, were the order of the day.

All this loss goes a long way, I think, to explain our generation's interest in questions of agency: questions of how we can "do something," how we can make change in a world that's clearly not functioning as we know it should. For some of us, these agency questions have taken on a neoliberal form: since "Washington is broken"—government has failed to solve all our problems for us—we must turn to the only other

great source of agency: "the market," or its cyberpunk twin, "the Internet." (These are the members of our generation most likely to show up in news stories about us.) But for many others, the same questions have taken us in a direction that's more democratic (with a small d) and populist (in the good way). The Occupy movement is the most obvious example here—it's sufficiently individualist and technology-driven to fit the media narrative—but it's only one among many others. Unions, workers' centers, neighborhood organizations, and faith-based and other organizing networks are filled with "millennials."

And I'm convinced a lot more of us would get involved, especially those in various reaches of academia and para-academia, if they just knew how. This book is for those people (you?), in particular. The remarks I made above, about the tension between the "power" and "service" communities, are particularly important for our generation. This is our world, which we're going to inherit in the next decade or two. The direction we take it has a whole lot to do with how, and how much, and how intentionally, we're organized.

The Story of Now

Days before I started graduate school, back in August of 2007, I got an email from Professor Robin Brown—then my boss and Director of Graduate Studies, now my doctoral advisor, co-teacher and co-author, and close friend. The email concerned mostly mundane matters of our TA appointments, but it started with Marx: "the moment of labor defines everything that follows."

Robin, like many of my best friends, is a Marxist. I am not, for reasons I'll discuss later.[13] Regardless, this quote hit home. When I think about everything that went into making this dissertation what it is, here and now, so much of it has to do with the different kinds of work I've done over the past many years—as a university instructor, a youth arts educator, a theater director, a choral singer, an organizer, and a nonprofit consultant. Meaning no disrespect to all the books I've read and archives I've scoured, the "theory" that really matters here is theory in its most elemental sense: the antithesis of practice, my reflections on the things I've done and made, reflections which have then (I think) allowed me to do and make better things, and then reflect on those things, and so on.[14]

My work as a teacher, the bulk of my life for the past eight years, has been particularly important. Both at the University of Minnesota, where I tested out most of the ideas I write about here, and at Appel Farm Arts and Music Center, where I learned how deep and loving the relationship between teachers and students can be—and where this book will end. I want to mention, here, one particular discovery I've made through my teaching, and my reflecting on that teaching in my work with Robin and my reading of books by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the Brazilian teacher Paulo Freire. That discovery is: I approach all teaching as *literacy* teaching. All teaching, or at least all teaching that goes beyond the simple transfer of facts, is about learning a new language, of words and gestures. It's about getting the body to *move* differently—which

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[13] For a discussion of the relationship between Marxism (and Marxist organizing) and the populist-derived tradition of broad-based community organizing at the core of this book, see Chapter Four.

[14] For a particularly useful explanation of this notion of theory (as part of what's sometimes called *praxis*), see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2005), especially 87.

means creating a culture where we can play, laugh, and make mistakes, which is necessary to learn any new kind of movement. And this learning always happens on both sides. Your students are learning a new language—the language (of Chinese, of critical theory, of chemistry) that you're teaching them—and so are you: you're learning that same language better, as you investigate it with them, and you're also learning your *students'* language, with their help, in order to work with them most effectively.

Teaching, for me, is a very bodily affair. The classes I teach involve a lot of interpersonal interaction, and literal movement, in the form of various kinds of physical games and exercises and role-plays and other kinds of play.[15] Which all raised a difficult question for me, as I sat down to try to write a book. How, absent the possibility of face-to-face and body-to-body interaction, can I effectively teach someone something? This conundrum stopped me from writing for a long time.

I have not solved it, at least not entirely. But while teaching rhetoric last spring, I at least found a temporary way forward. I'm talking about Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a "theory effect": a "pre-vision…[which] operates in the margin of uncertainty resulting from the discontinuity between the silent and self-evident truths of the ethos and the public expressions of the logos." That is, in those moments—such as our own—where there is a clear and widely-felt discontent, a gap (a "discontinuity") between what *feels*

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[15] Another contributor to this form of pedagogy is, of course, the great Marxist and Freirean theater director Augusto Boal, who codified a lot of these abstract principles (for better and worse) into a huge "arsenal" of concrete games and exercises. See especially Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian Jackson, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002). I have studied Boal and his work for many years; I worked with him briefly before he passed away in 2009, and I have worked with his son Julian and several other major practitioners of his Theatre of the Oppressed since (see Chapter Three). There is, as you can imagine, a lot of overlap in how I teach theater and how I teach cultural studies—because it's all literacy, embodied. The difference is only on emphasis. (You will find this argument very reminiscent of my claims about the differences among organizing, making art, and teaching—practiced as public work—in Chapter Four.)

right to many people ("the silent and self-evident truths of the ethos") and what is possible given the current political situation ("public expressions of the logos"), it is possible for a new and different truth to emerge:

> Thus, it is true that one can trace (virtually as far back in history as one wishes) the first manifestations of class struggle…the fact remains that it is only after Marx, and indeed only after the creation of parties capable of imposing (on a large scale) a vision of the social world organized according to the theory of class struggle, that one could refer, strictly speaking, to classes and class struggle….Marxist theory…has exercised a theory effect unrivalled in history.[16]

Bourdieu, himself active for many years within the French Communist Party and various other political organizations, has no illusions that Marx just wrote the *Communist Manifesto* and—presto!—classes and class struggle sprang into existence. As he makes clear, it took a whole lot of intensive, face-to-face, body-to-body organizing work ("the creation of parties…") for Marx's "pre-vision" to become reality. But at the same time, all this organizing work would not have created this new reality—*pace* Alinsky and Chambers—had Marx not also done the work of writing it down.

So I guess that's what I'm doing here. In writing this book, I am doing *part*—an important part, but only one part—of the work necessary to produce a theory effect. What is the nature of that theory effect? What new reality am I looking to enact? That took me a little while to articulate. I *knew* it, I *felt* what it was, but for a long time I didn't know how to *say* it. It finally became clear, thanks to another work-related event. I had left my teaching job in Minnesota (after six years), left Minnesota altogether, come back to live in Connecticut (after eleven years away), taken up work as a nonprofit

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[16] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 132-133.

consultant—and, for the first time, found myself in need of a business card. As I struggled to figure out what to put on it, the nature of my desired theory effect became clear.

I needed to have "Research Consultant" on there; that was my job at present. "Arts & Humanities Educator" made clear sense, given my work at Minnesota and at Appel Farm. But those two titles didn't say it all. Some important part of me was still missing, I felt: the part that explained not just *what* I did, but *how* I did it. The part that was different from how other people did things, the new thing I felt I had to contribute to the world.

It took me several tries, but I think I finally got it: "Rhetorician (Organizer)."

A little affected, maybe, but it does the job. Those two words, in parenthetical relationship to one another, sum up the pre-vision (or theory effect) that this book proposes: *rhetoric necessarily involves organizing*. To be a rhetorician—to effectively convince people of things—it's not enough to write the right speech; you also have to be involved in the work of organizing people into communities where they'll understand what you're saying in the "correct" way (the way you want them to).[17]

This pre-vision, this intended theory effect, may sound simple and almost stupid. Then again, you could say the same thing about class struggle: *people are divided into classes, and history is produced by those classes struggling with each other*. Duh. Except not. Except it flew in the face of a ton of received beliefs about politics, the

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[17] Essentially, I'm taking the argument that historian Charles Payne makes about the black freedom movement—that "more has been written about the role of oratory in the movement than about the role of organizing," which for Payne represents a vital omission—and arguing that it applies much more generally. See Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 237.

economy, and human nature. The same applies here. It feels obvious, to say that effective rhetoric always involves organizing, but it goes against assumptions about rhetoric that we've had since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, and that we very much still have today. Go on Facebook or Twitter or Tumblr right now—or into a cultural studies seminar—and you're sure to find arguments about whether some movie or ad or song *is* or *is not* racist, homophobic, radically queer, or whatever. If we're serious about rhetoric necessarily involving organizing, then these kinds of arguments become utterly meaningless. That movie/ad/song *is nothing*, in and of itself. It only *becomes* racist or homophobic or radically queer, or not, within a certain community of people (large or small), when that community interprets it that way. Is the Bible an oppressive text? A revolutionary text? Both, and/or neither. The answer doesn't lie in the Bible itself. The answer lies in the communities that interpret it—and in the way those communities are *organized* (built, developed, maintained, changed, grown, shrunk, destroyed)—and, relatedly, in the *work* that this organizing requires.

Here's how Bourdieu explains all this—where "heretical discourse" means a not-yet-fulfilled theory effect:

> Heretical discourse must not only help to sever the adherence to the world of common sense by publicly proclaiming a break with the ordinary order, it must also produce a new common sense and integrate within it the previously tacit or repressed practices and experiences of an entire group, investing them with the legitimacy conferred by public expression and collective recognition. Indeed, since every language that makes itself heard by an entire group is an authorized language, invested with the authority of this group, it authorizes what it designates at the same time as it expresses it, drawing its legitimacy from the group over which it exercises its authority and which it helps to produce as such by offering it a unitary expression of its experiences. The efficacy of heretical discourse does not reside in the magic of a force immanent to language, such as Austin's 'illocutionary force,' or in the person of its author, such as Weber's 'charisma'

> (two screen-like concepts which prevent one from examining the reasons for the effects which they merely designate), but rather in the dialectic between the authorizing and authorized language and the dispositions of the group which authorizes it and authorizes itself to use it. This dialectical process is accomplished, in the case of each of the agents concerned and, most of all, in the case of the person producing the heretical discourse, in and through the *labour of enunciation* which is necessary in order to externalize the inwardness, to name the unnamed and to give the beginnings of objectification to pre-verbal and pre-reflexive dispositions and ineffable and unobservable experiences, through words which by their nature make them common and communicable, therefore meaningful and socially sanctioned. It may also be accomplished in the *labour of dramatization*, particularly visible in exemplary prophecy, which alone is capable of destroying the self-evident truths of the doxa, and in the transgression which is indispensable in order to *name the unnameable*, to break the censorships, institutionalized or internalized, which prohibit the return of the repressed; and first of all in the heresiarch himself.
>
> But it is in the *constitution of groups* that the effectiveness of representations is most apparent, and particularly in the words slogans and theories which help to create the social order by imposing principles of di-vision and, more generally, the symbolic power of the whole political theatre which actualizes and officializes visions of the world and political divisions.[18]

My whole book, in a way, is an extended gloss on this passage. "Heretical discourse" can indeed become acceptable and legitimate—changing the world in the process—but it doesn't happen magically. It happens through a whole lot of work. First, there's the *labor of enunciation*: creating an effective piece of rhetoric. Second, there's the *labor of dramatization*: finding or creating the appropriate situation in which to deliver or enact that piece of rhetoric. Third, and most importantly, there's the *labor of the constitution (organizing) of groups*—those groups that I, following the American literary theorist Stanley Fish, will keep calling "interpretive communities."[19]

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[18] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 129-130. Some emphases added.

[19] See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 167-173. I've been advised that I should say a few words about my choice of such unfashionable theory. The current trends on the market of academic theory would have us believe that Fish's concept of interpretive communities is considerably outdated, having been replaced by more complex and delicate

So that's the argument: you can't do rhetoric without doing organizing. Plus a corollary: when we start understanding rhetoric as essentially organizing-based, and start acting on this understanding, we will recognize our unrealized political potential. ("We" Americans in general, and perhaps we "millennials" in particular.) Specifically: we will find that it's possible, and maybe even easier than we think, to do politics in a way that's not based in elitism, Manicheanism, and consumerism—what I call "culture war." And,

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theories of community such as Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*. Bourdieu, likewise, usually just gets a passing reference these days (yes, habitus and field something or other), before moving on to more currently-valued theories, such as those of Jacques Rancière. Rancière, a student of Louis Althusser, got a lot of recognition for accusing Bourdieu of *legitimizing* the very class inequalities he sought to undermine, as well as legitimizing his own role as teacher and analyst. (For Rancière, basically, those inequalities don't exist; the oppression is in *thinking* they exist. Students can *always* teach themselves without much help, and teachers are oppressive for behaving otherwise; spectators are *always already* emancipated, and artists are oppressive for behaving otherwise.) I won't argue these claims have no merit. (Rancière's in particular, share a lot with—or, depending on your perspective, steal a lot from—Freire and Brecht, whose work is very important to mine.) Nor will I try to disprove or argue against them; I'm not even sure if this would be possible, as we're more in the realm of faith-based political convictions than in the realm of empirically provable (or disprovable) hypotheses. I'll just make two claims of my own, to explain my preference for Fish and Bourdieu over these others. First, whatever the veracity of these other theorists' claims, they're not very useful for organizing and building collective agency. At most, they offer a *weak* theory of agency and organizing: as things that are mostly done *to* us, not *by* us. When their adherents engage in political practice, beyond writing more theory, it's usually of the decentralized, un-strategic variety, without much potential to build organizations or structures that last (see Chapters Three and Four). Second, conversely, the work of Fish and Bourdieu—put together in the particular way I do, here—*is* very useful in understanding and practicing organizing and building collective agency. This is not necessarily Fish and Bourdieu as they're usually read. I'm performing a very specific synthesis—of Fish's concept of interpretive communities, combined with Bourdieu's concept of habitus / market (field) / cultural capital, both read through the American populist praxis of broad-based community organizing (codified in the writings of Alinsky and others)—that bring out an implied, but not stated, *strong* theory of agency and organizing in both of these theorists' work. My reading of Bourdieu brings out the implicit politics of Fish's "interpretive communities": how they produce not just different ways of reading Milton, but also different ways people's bodies move, and different ways that people understand and assign value to their world; and, maybe most importantly, how these communities can be (and are) intentionally organized and dis-organized. My reading of Fish, on the other hand, brings out the non-fatalistic potential of Bourdieu's "habitus," "market," and "cultural capital": how they are not only tools of the oppressor to keep the poor man down, as he uses them, but also concepts that the oppressed (in many different configurations) can and do use to build new and different realities. For a more detailed description of this central synthesis of Fish and Bourdieu, the theoretical engine of the whole project, see Chapter One. See also Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) and *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009).

relatedly, to finally solve that central impasse of American politics that sometimes goes by the slogan, "What's the matter with Kansas?"[20]

It's an argument I develop, necessarily, through stories. Cases. Experiences. And reflections on those stories and cases and experiences. Which lead to different approaches to future stories, cases, and experiences. Theory and practice, again, at their most elemental. I try to be true to Alinsky's dictum, to love people—all people. I try my best to resist the temptation to divide people into categories: good and bad, friend and enemy, oppressed and oppressor. ("No permanent friends, no permanent enemies," said Alinsky; it's all about the task at hand.) I try; I do not always succeed; but I keep trying.[21] To criticize one's colleagues, constructively, is a lot harder (and more spiritually taxing) than to demonize one's enemies. But if we're going to get outside of the good/bad frame—i.e., out of the culture wars—we have no choice.[22]

A lot of the people I criticize the harshest in this book are people I know, people I've worked with, people whom I deeply value. Likewise with the institutions I criticize:

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[20] See Chapter One, in particular. About halfway through my process of planning this book, I realized that it was, in a sense, my "second book." My first, which I haven't written, and may or may not ever write, is called *Schools of Thought: Frankfurt, Chicago, Birmingham*—and, I might have recently added, *Highlander*. This book would explore, in discrete and contrasting historical cases, the same synthesis of Fish and Bourdieu I'm making here, namely that the ideas that drive our cultural, political, and economic life need to be understood as the products of organization (they are *organized ideas*)—in this case, the products of the organization of very different, very influential "schools." It would be simple and controlled in structure and rigorous in research, the way a doctoral dissertation should be. The book you're reading, on the other hand, is neither simple or controlled: like a good *second* book, it takes the same theoretical arguments from the first book and applies them on a far wider, more complex, and more ambitious scale. But there I am. I've written my second book first—not by design, but simply because I didn't figure this all out until it was too late to turn back. Truthfully, I'm not sure if I would have wanted it any other way.

[21] I'm pretty good with the cultural conservatives in Chapter One, I think, and even with the neoliberals in Chapter Two. I have the most trouble, probably unsurprisingly, in Chapter Three, where I'm talking about the people who are closest to me: the academics and para-academics, and especially Louis Althusser and other "anarcho-liberals." To be a true, universally-loving radical, as Alinsky himself said, is an ideal to strive for, more than a reality to attain. Thus I strive, and will continue to strive harder.

[22] Unless, of course, we just stop criticizing everything. I will entertain this possibility, and ultimately argue against it, at the beginning of Chapter Four.

I've often worked for them, or in or with them, in very positive and productive ways. I never mean my criticisms, serious as they are, to take away from these deeply valuable people and organizations. On the contrary: I aim to *add* to them. I intend my criticisms as agitations: the age-old organizing practice of showing the people we're working with the gap between who they are and who they could be, and offering them a way to get there—as I hope and expect they will do for me, in turn—so we may both grow and further the important work we're doing together.[23]

Because there's a lot of work to do. If much of my generation has been spared the myth that some *deus ex machina*—be it a functioning government, a functioning social safety net, or a functioning market—will save us from all harm, it still falls on us to take that knowledge and act on it. Spending our time calling each other out, including calling each other out for calling each other out, won't do. Nor will sequestering ourselves in insular communities of people just like us, however affirming they might feel. We've got to go do the long, hard work of building a broad-base, over a long term, with people we will not always like, but must learn to love. We can (and must!) have fun along the way. And we've got to start, and right soon.

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[23] See Chapter Four.

CHAPTER ONE
We, Other Kansans

Quite honestly, there's a lot of dumbfucks out there who THINK they know what they need but honestly have no clue.

—Ben Fink, email to theater collaborators, 11/16/04

A Tale of a Fail

It was about 7:30 on a Sunday morning. I was sitting in a laundromat in Minneapolis. (And reading, of all things, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.) As usual, I kept quiet. I read my book and vaguely took in the TV and the sound of the machines and the voices of the handful of other folks who'd gotten up early that morning to do their laundry. Not long after I put my clothes in the dryer, two of those voices grew more distinct. I looked up and saw those voices belonged to two men, a white laundromat employee and a Latino customer. They both looked to be working-class, in their late thirties or forties. They were angry. Angry about Barack Obama.

It was September 13, 2009. Obama had been elected president less than a year ago. He had spent the summer promoting what he, too, would soon start calling "Obamacare." At stops across the country, he had been greeted by conservatives toting assault rifles and claiming to belong to something called the "Tea Party." And today he was coming to Minneapolis. And the two men standing near me in the laundromat were not happy about it. He was coming to "tell people what to think," they kept saying, over and over.[1] He was coming here to tell people what to think, and spending our tax money

[1] This is important language on its own, as we will discuss. It may also contain other meanings, including racially-coded ones. In late 2013, John Boehner refused to criticize birthers—conservatives who believe

to do it. The previous day—the day of Glenn Beck's "9/12" march—thousands of people had come to express their views, on their own time. How dare Obama spend taxpayer money to tell them, or us, what to think. He will never help us. He's always going to help the rich, because they're the ones who give him lots of money and they're the ones who run things.

That was the gist of their conversation. And it kept going, over and over, for nearly an hour. I know, because that's how long it took my laundry to dry—so I had to keep sitting there. Sitting there, reading my Freire, grinding my teeth. I wanted to do something, of course. I wanted to say something. I wanted to get up and walk over to them and introduce myself. I wanted to tell them, truthfully, that I agreed with them, on so many things. That yes, there is a powerful elite that doesn't care what they think—what *we* think—and that often tries to tell them—us—what to think. That because of this elite, so many of us have lost so much of our dignity as workers and citizens, and our ability to play a meaningful role in creating the world we live in. That I understood why they were so angry, and I was angry too. And that if anything, the conspiracy is deeper and more complicated than they thought. That yes, Obama's health care law was a conspiracy to help the big corporations, but in the process it might give them free health care. And that yes, Glenn Beck might sound like he's standing up for our freedom against this government-corporate elite, but he might also be part of it.

I wanted them to understand all this, so badly. These two men, and millions like them, had so much to gain from the more just, equitable, and fair society that Obama—

Obama was not born in the United States and is therefore not a legitimate president—because "it's not my job to tell people what to think."

whatever his shortcomings—was trying to build. And yet these same men, and millions like them, were rejecting it. They were running headlong into the arms of their oppressors. They had been fooled, betrayed, duped into acting against their own interests. Instead of fighting for their right to good, affordable health care, they were fighting *against* it.

But I didn't say any of that. I didn't say anything. I just sat there, frustrated and dismayed, with my nose in my book, as the most intractable and dangerous paradox of American politics played itself out right in front of me.

Did I do wrong? I don't think so. At the time, I was paralyzed; I'm not sure I could have gotten up out of my chair, even if I'd tried. Even now, after years of reflecting and evaluating and analyzing, I'm still not sure there's much I could have done. Sure, I could have gotten up and tried talking with them. I could have tried to help explain things, or to ask them questions that could have guided them to their own, better understanding. But I doubt they would have opened up to me. They were pretty angry. If I tried to intervene, I thought, I might even make them more convinced that Obamacare was all about getting talked at by bespectacled professor-types like myself. Even if they'd taken me seriously, I don't think I could have convinced them of anything. We'd both come too far down the road for that. Our positions on Obamacare were far too bound up with our identities, our sense of who we were in the world. There was no way they were going to change their minds and be able to live with themselves—anymore than they would have been able to change my mind, in the other direction.

No, I don't think I did anything wrong. And neither did they. The *fail* wasn't in our individual behavior, but in the culture we were all a part of, and actively participating in. A culture that was causing them to actively resist the chance to get better and cheaper health care, for themselves and their families and millions of others. A culture that was causing me to stay glued to my seat, thinking—and now writing—*about* them, but not *with* them. A culture that separated us into an *us* and a *them* in the first place, and set us against each other, despite how much we share. There were so many places we could have found common ground. We all clearly wanted to be heard, wanted to think for ourselves, wanted to take control of our lives back from the elites that seemed to be taking over everything. With a little conversation, we probably would have found even more common ground. We probably were all looking for decent and meaningful work, a decent and affordable place to live, decent education for ourselves and the people we care about, and—yes—decent health care. We might have even found a way to build something on this common ground, to work together out of our mutual self-interest to get closer to some of our common goals.

But none of that happened. I stayed sitting down, over here, and they stayed standing up, over there. The divide was un-breached. The connection was not made.

The Culture Wars, and What it Would Mean to "Defeat" Them

This book is about why. Why so many of us, even though we want and need so many of the same things, tend to stay on our respective sides of the laundromat: not talking together, not working together, and often positioned against each other. And it's

about how. How it got to be this way, and how we—you, and I, and the people we know, and the people they know—can change it.

In academic language, it's a book about *rhetoric*. Nowadays, people tend to talk about rhetoric like it's a bad thing. "Oh, that's just rhetoric." "Don't give me rhetoric, I want the facts." "You've been manipulated by their rhetoric." But rhetoric, in its classic sense, is a lot more than this. It's the ancient art of convincing people of things, of making an effective appeal. If we want to make things different from how they are now, we'll need effective rhetoric. Not to manipulate people, or to win arguments against them, but to break down the walls that divide "us" from "them" in the first place. Not to *win* the culture wars, but to *defeat* them.

This might be a hard thing to wrap your mind around. "Politics," as it's presented in election cycles and on cable news shows and on our Facebook feeds, is about *winning*. Winning the election. Winning the news cycle. Winning the issue. Convincing "the public," that huge, undefined amoeba out there, that *we're* right, and *they're* wrong. Which means we have to draw a very clear line between "us" and "them."[2] This way of doing politics is what I'm calling "culture war." Culture war is about a lot more than abortion, pornography, prayer in schools, or other religiously-tinged so-called "social

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[2] The popular linguist Deborah Tannen calls this condition "agonism…a pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight….Nearly everything is framed as a battle or game in which winning or losing is the main concern." This is to be contrasted with the view of political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, who would characterize this condition as "antagonism," as opposed to "agonism" or "agonistic pluralism," a more positive, deliberative negotiation among interests that's seen as the basis for a more democratic political life. I agree with the spirit of Mouffe's critique but will argue, in the spirit of fellow "public work" theorists, that for this kind of deliberation to actually transform political life for the better, it cannot be its own sphere; it must be connected, intimately, to everyday life, and especially to work. See Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture* (New York: Random House, 1998), and Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000).

issues." Culture war is about the whole way we do politics. And arch-conservative Pat Buchanan, who coined the term in his 1992 speech "The Cultural War for the Soul of Our Country," knew it. Culture war, he declared, "will quickly replace the old battles over the conduct of the Cold War."[3]

Buchanan was right. Culture war is Cold War 2.0. The actors may change, and are interchangeable, but the characters and plot stay the same. On one side is "us," the God-loving Americans, who are good, right, just, and true (all rolled into one). On the other side is "them," the godless Communists, who are bad, wrong, unjust, and false (likewise)—and will stop at nothing to impose their badness, wrongness, injustice, and falsehood upon us—unless we stop them. And just like Cold War 1.0, these characters and this plot define the way pretty much every political issue gets dealt with, regardless of what side you're on. The main fight, as Buchanan said, "is about power." It's about which people, groups, interests, norms, and values will organize our lives. Culture war knows no difference between "social" and "economic" issues. They're all part of culture, how it's organized, and who's got the power to do that organizing.

The term "culture war" may be only a couple of decades old, but Americans have been fighting culture wars for centuries: at least since the early 1600s, when plantation owners in colonial Virginia discovered they could keep power by turning their poor Anglo workers against their poor African and indigenous workers, and along the way, invented modern racism.[4] (Skin color, like point-on-the-compass and point-on-the-political-spectrum, provides a particularly easy way to separate "us" and "them.") You

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[3] Patrick J. Buchanan, "The Cultural War for the Soul of America," http://buchanan.org/blog/the-cultural-war-for-the-soul-of-america-149 (September 10, 2013)—better known as the "culture war speech."
[4] This history will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

might think about culture war as a *genre*: a set of expected conventions and formal elements. We turn on a Western and know we'll see warring cowboys and Indians; we turn on CNN and know we'll see warring liberals and conservatives. But I'll be talking about it, mostly, as a *frame*: a metaphor (politics = conflict), combined with a story (we, the good/right/just/true must stop them, the bad/wrong/unjust/false, from taking over everything), which structures the way we understand things. Like a picture frame, culture war is something made by people, which gives us a particular view of a portrait or landscape. Depending on its shape, size, and placement, it makes some things big and important, other things small and unimportant, and other things still not visible at all.[5]

Cognitive scientists argue that everything we know, we know through a frame. We can see this in our everyday lives. Think about the last time you misplaced your keys. Did you see this event through the successful-person-makes-momentary-mistake frame, or the one-more-step-on-the-road-to-senility frame? Or another frame entirely? There's no such thing as un-framed knowledge; we wouldn't know what to do with it, or how to process it. So however we look at something, big or small, we're looking at it through one frame or another. And the frame we choose—or the frame that's chosen for us—determines the story we're telling, and the part we and others play in that story.

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[5] The most relevant theorist of genre—and its companion terms, conventions and formations—is Raymond Williams, the Welsh drama professor, literary critic, and sociologist who arguably invented the field of cultural studies. (See Raymond Williams, *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Penguin, 1973), especially the introduction, and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), 173-185). Framing, as a concept, was pioneered by the sociologist Erving Goffman (see Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 1986) and brought into the fields of linguistics, cognitive science, and progressive politics by the linguist George Lakoff (see, most recently, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (New York: Viking, 2008)). It is currently practiced most explicitly by the FrameWorks Institute, a progressive D.C. think tank (www.frameworksinstitute.org)—though I would argue, following Lakoff, that it's being practiced implicitly all over, and often better by non-progressives.

So what about the culture-war frame? Well, it's got its perks. It allows us to understand a wide range of facts and issues, quickly and efficiently. See how many ways you can complete the phrase "The War on _____" in the next ten seconds, and you'll see what I mean. Buchanan, in that one speech in 1992, managed to throw together abortion, homosexuality, race, pornography, history, the environment, education, the LA riots, national holidays, popular movies, and classical painting into a single argument. And a powerful one at that: every effective politician knows that invoking culture war can net a lot of popular passion, a lot of fundraising dollars, and a lot of volunteer hours in a hurry. The culture-war frame is also attractive in the way it solidifies our identity: it gives us a quick and clear sense of where we stand, who our allies and enemies are, and even of who we ourselves are.[6] And, of course, it's profitable. Aside from generating campaign contributions, it keeps the books moving off the shelves, it keeps people tuned in to Fox and MSNBC (and more recently, Facebook and Tumblr), and it's the backbone of the entire talk-radio industry and a good slice of the Internet. For media profits, culture war is a very good thing.

The problem is, it's death. Specifically: the death of public life. To risk stating the obvious: it's really hard to have a meaningful discussion, let alone build meaningful relationships that allow for meaningful work and change, when half the people in the room are trying to obliterate your way of life, and the other half is spending all its energy defending you against the first half. (Exhibit A: the 112th and 113th Congresses.) The

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[6] An old Borscht-belt joke solidifies this point. Saul, a generic old Jewish man, is stranded on a desert island for many years. When he is finally rescued, his rescuers are surprised to find that among the many things he has built on the island are not just one but *two* synagogues. Dumbfounded, they ask him: "Saul. You're the only one here. Why did you build two synagogues?" Saul answers without missing a beat: "It's very simple. This is the one I *go to*…and this is the one I *wouldn't set foot in!*"

dominance of the culture-war frame has caused a whole lot of Americans to turn away from "politics" altogether. And who could blame them? Why would anyone want to be involved with something so frustrating, so useless, and so downright unpleasant—especially when it feels so far away and so distant from the things that matter in our everyday lives?[7] And for masochists like me, who for one reason or another still manage to care about politics, the culture-war frame has led to an impasse. A confused, grinding, intolerable standstill. It has led, ultimately, to the laundromat. To the place where I found myself sitting, uncomfortably trying to read my Freire, watching those two men rail against their own affordable health care, knowing there's nothing I could say to stop them, and asking myself why. Why do they act against their own interests? And why won't they talk to me?

These seem to be two separate questions—one about politics and economics, the other about culture and communication. But the more I discussed them with friends and colleagues, the more I've come to think of them as part of the same question. For two reasons, one structural and one psychological. The structural reason: the culture war of the laundromat had two clear sides, but only one side gets to tell this story. Me. I get to define who they were, what their interests were, and how they acted on them (or didn't). I'm not saying I made this stuff up. It's true, as far as I can recollect. All I'm saying is that when I ask why they acted against their interests, that implies that I know what their interests were. But I don't, not really. I saw them once, I never spoke a word to them, and I have never seen or heard from them again. And it's not likely we'll ever hear their

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[7] For an elaboration of this argument, see Chapter Four; see also E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, reprint ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

side of the story: they probably won't be writing a book, about themselves or about me, anytime soon.[8]

Which leads us to the second, psychological reason: given that I'm representing both sides of the story, any honest analysis of *them* and how they might be acting against *their* interests has got to include an analysis of *me*, and what *my* interests are—because *my* interests will always affect the way I define *their* interests. It's very important to me, it's in my self-interest, to think about myself as a good American organizer in the tradition of Saul Alinsky. Which means, I should be able to talk with anyone. But here, I couldn't, and didn't. My image of myself was challenged. I got anxious. And in this anxiety, I may have unconsciously taken the scary question "Why can't I talk with them?" and distorted it into something less scary, less likely to compromise my understanding of myself. First I turned it around, and made it: "Why won't they talk with me?" Then I added a level of abstraction, another layer of comforting distance, and made it: "Why are they acting against their interests?" A classic Freudian defense mechanism.

For what it's worth, I don't think I'm the only one who does things like this. Try it yourself. Why do *you* think (other) people vote against their interests? Or maybe let's add an abstraction-cushion: why do *people you know* think (other) people vote against

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[8] This is a classist statement, which reflects a classist reality. Journalist and author Barbara Ehrenreich (of *Nickel and Dimed* fame) observes the oft-overlooked obvious, that those people "invited to opine" on "matters of general interest or national importance" are nearly all "well fed, well educated, and employed in physically restful occupations such as journalism or college teaching. [Guilty on all counts.] When we see a man in work clothes on the screen, we anticipate some grievance or, at best, information of a highly local or anecdotal nature." In other words, to borrow from science scholar Donna Haraway, only people like me, not they, get to play the "God-trick": to speak with an assumption of neutrality and universal knowledge, including about "them." See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 4.

their interests? The people I know, for the most part, tend to answer with some variant of: "Because they're dumb." Or maybe slightly more delicately: "Because they're ignorant." Or slightly more generously: "Because they've been duped." When I've challenged them on this interpretation, they've tended to get defensive, fast. I learned this a few years ago, when I heard a brilliant lecture by theater historian John Fletcher, a former colleague of mine at the University of Minnesota. He was talking about the Christian Right and the ways they read and teach postmodern theory: he argued that contrary to what *we* may believe about our own open-mindedness compared to *theirs*, *they* seem a lot more interested in learning about *us* than the other way around, and that *we* need to change this.[9] When I left the session and excitedly told a friend about it later that day—an accomplished young art historian with a serious interest in progressive change—she stopped me cold: "I have no interest in talking with those people."

These kinds of defense mechanisms—mine or hers—don't make us bad people. They're the product of trauma, the real pain and real oppression we've all experienced as our social selves got formed in the context of constant culture war. But if we want to go beyond these kinds of gut reactions, we need to deal with them. We won't be able to understand why *they're* messed up, why they go out of their way to get rid of their own affordable health care, without also understanding why *we're* messed up.

More recently, while working on the first draft of this book, a New Yorker friend of mine asked me what it was about. I started explaining how it's a problem when

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[9] For a good introduction to Fletcher's work navigating and questioning the boundaries of *us* and *them*, see "Sympathy for the Devil: Nonprogressive Activism and the Limits of Critical Generosity," in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, ed. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 110-122.

Democrats call working-class Republicans dumb, when she interrupted and asked, with classic New York sensitivity: "Well, *aren't* they?" I surprised myself by cooling my knee-jerk outrage, taking a breath, and taking her question seriously. Are working-class Republicans dumb? In my experience, not at all. But for a moment, let's assume they were: dumb, duped, and uninformed. It still wouldn't matter. We live in a democracy, or at least in a system of representative government that we might someday be able to turn into a democracy. Making that happen—not winning a given issue, or finding the absolute truth about a political party's mental capacity—is the point.[10] To learn to talk. To better understand ourselves, and other kinds of people, and our various interests, and where those interests might overlap. To find ways to work together, in pursuit of those overlapping interests, to make a better world for all of us. That's what's necessary, if the goal isn't simply to "win" the culture wars but actually to *defeat* them.

Pollyannaish? Maybe. Possible? Definitely. Easy? Not at all.

The Matter With (The Matter With (The Matter With)) Kansas

> You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for twenty-five years and nothing's replaced them.…And it's not surprising they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or apathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.[11]

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[10] This is why I'm suspicious of all of those studies that try to prove that there is a natural, unassailable, even biological difference between culture-war factions (liberals vs. conservatives, gays vs. straights, northerners vs. southerners, etc.)—such as Ryota Kanai, et al, "Political Orientations are Correlated with Brain Structure in Young Adults," *Current Biology* 21 (2011): 677-680—which, like many articles of its kind, got cited widely and popularized by pundits across the liberal-conservative spectrum. There may well be demonstrable differences—but who cares? We're not going to get around the need for pluralism anytime soon, so we might as well accept it.

[11] Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 368.

So declared candidate Obama, a year before his presidential appearance in Minneapolis, before a wealthy audience at a closed-door California fundraiser. When his comments got leaked, both sides responded as expected. According to conservatives, Obama was an elitist. According to liberals, Obama was telling the truth.[12] According to labor historian Jefferson Cowie, who has studied culture wars extensively, they were both correct: Obama's facts were more-or-less right, but his rhetoric was very wrong. "While the displacement of material concerns onto cultural questions was not an unreasonable interpretation of the politics of the heartland, there was an inescapable condescension when it came to speaking *about* other people rather than *to* them, which perpetuated the problem of the 'liberal elite' who discussed and dissected working people but actually knew precious few."[13]

This is an age-old rhetorical problem. I've seen it more often among left/liberal types, but there are definitely right-wingers who are guilty of it, too. We get frustrated that other people don't agree with something that seems obvious and apparent to us, and rather than talk *with* them—listen to them, understand where they're coming from, etc.—we talk *about* them, with people who agree with us. We marvel at how dumb "the masses" (or more recently, "the sheeple") can be, and we accuse them *in absentia* of things like "false consciousness" and "repression." (We the accusers, of course, are always rational, independent thinkers.) This kind of elitist-critical rhetoric has been especially common since 1968, when radical-ish traditions stemming vaguely from Marx

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[12] Four years later, almost exactly the same thing happened again—to the other side. Mitt Romney was caught on tape at another closed-door fundraiser, disparaging the "47 percent" of Americans who supposedly paid no taxes and were freeloading off government largesse. His facts were correct, at least if you interpret them a certain way, but his rhetoric cost him a lot of votes.

[13] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 368.

and Freud got mashed together and variously integrated into pop culture. Over time the radicalism faded, but the corrosive criticism remained.

My own intellectual tradition, cultural studies, followed this exact course. Once an adult-education movement that worked directly with working-class folks in Britain, by 1968 it had found its way into the university, where it would remain. The central, critical question remained unchanged: how did the lower classes of Britain get convinced to give up their own "popular culture" (what we'd call folk or indigenous culture) and willingly embrace a corporate-produced "mass culture" that was making them act against their interests? Only now, people actually from these lower classes no longer took part in the discussion. Ten years later, cultural studies would give up the question altogether. By the time cultural studies came to the United States in the 1980s, it was entirely off the agenda. It hadn't been solved. It just got abandoned, as the culture wars intensified (both inside academia and out) and cultural studies folks felt pressed to spend more and more of their time defining and defending "us"—women, minorities, and the otherwise oppressed and underprivileged—against an encroaching, re-energized "them."

So in a sense, this book is an excavation project. It seeks to dig up, dust off, and resuscitate the oldest questions in rhetoric—how do you convince people of things?—and cultural studies—how did the 1 percent make the 99 percent take it, and like it?[14]—both of which have never really been answered, and desperately need to be.

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[14] A quick note on terminology: the Occupy movement did not, contrary to popular belief, coin "the 99 percent" and "the 1 percent." Recall Al Gore's discussion of the "wealthiest one percent" during the 2000 debates—for which he was widely mocked across the pundit class, and on *Saturday Night Live*. These are old populist terms, which express a basic truth using a broad, perhaps overgeneralizing brush: that there is a small number of people (actually more like the *0.1* percent) that have an immense amount of concentrated wealth, power, and influence—versus the vast majority of the population (the 99(.9) percent), which does not. "The haves and the have-nots" expresses the same basic sentiment. What the Occupy movement did,

I'm not the first to attempt this kind of project. My most important forebear is a fellow cultural studies renegade: the historian-turned-pundit Thomas Frank. Frank started his political writing career as founding editor of the magazine *The Baffler*, where he spent years taking witty potshots at mass culture and probing the question of how we'd all become willing slaves of the consumer capitalist market. (The titles of Frank's book-length *Baffler* compilations—*One Market Under God*, *Commodify Your Dissent!*, *Boob Jubilee*—give you a sense of what you're in for.) Frank's first "serious" book, *The Conquest of Cool*, is a very insightful and under-read analysis of corporate culture in the wake of the 1960s. Frank argues that during the 1960s advertising executives, no less than hippies, caught the counterculture bug—and countercultural rhetoric remained a central part of corporate culture and advertising ever since.[15]

Then in 2004, Frank hit pay dirt. He published *What's the Matter with Kansas?* in June of 2004. In the wake of the election five months later, it felt prophetic. Frank seemed to ask, and answer, the question that burned hottest in the hearts of liberal America: how could George W. Bush, a swaggering scion of the 1 percent, get not only elected but *re-elected* by a sizeable portion (even if not an actual majority) of that 99 percent?[16] His book skyrocketed up the *New York Times* bestseller list; liberals across the country—myself very much included—cheered Frank on as he spun our outrage into diatribes that bordered on the poetic:

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critically, was to popularize and legitimize these old populist terms for our moment. These days, when you use them, you get taken seriously.

[15] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[16] Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

> From the air-conditioned heights of a suburban office complex this may look like a new age of reason, with the Web sites signing each to each, with a mall down the way that every week has miraculously anticipated our subtly shifting tastes, with a global economy whose rich rewards just keep on flowing, and with a long parade of rust-free Infinitis purring down the streets of beautifully manicured planned communities. But on closer inspection the country seems more like a panorama of madness and delusion worthy of Hieronymous Bosch: of sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in midwestern cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a "rust belt," will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover.[17]
>
> All they have to show for their Republican loyalty are lower wages, more dangerous jobs, dirtier air, a new overlord class that comports itself like King Farouk—and, of course, a crap culture whose moral free fall continues without significant interference from the grandstanding Christers whom they send triumphantly back to Washington every couple of years. By all rights the charm of Republicanism should have worn off for this part of the conservative coalition long ago.[18]
>
> The ills described here…have been going on for ten to twenty years now. Nobody denies that they have happened, that they're still happening. Yet Kansas, that famous warrior for justice, how does it react? Why, Kansas looks its problems straight in the eye, sets its jaw, rolls up its sleeves—and charges off exactly in the wrong direction…[attacking not the corporations and their Republican enablers but] an overeducated ruling class that is contemptuous of the beliefs and practices of the masses of ordinary people….despicable, self-important show-offs. They are effete…they are arrogant. They are snobs. They are liberals.[19]

Maybe the most appealing part of Frank's book—and certainly what's given it its cultural staying power—is the clear answer it gives. Why have the good working people of Kansas done such an illogical thing? Why have they sided with their Republican oppressors against the very liberals who might save them? Basically, Frank argues,

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[17] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 10.
[18] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 136.
[19] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 68, 115.

because they've been duped. "Cultural anger," about abortion and evolution and all those Buchanan-style, religiously-tinged "social" issues, "is marshaled to achieve economic ends."[20] This "marshalling" is done by those Kansans who, unlike the working-class dupes, "suffer no derangement, the people who know precisely where their interests lie and who go directly about getting what they want." Namely, the rich—the CEO class of sub- and exurban Kansas City—and the opportunistic Republican politicians who serve them, who have learned to mouth the culture-war talk well enough to ignite the fury of the unwashed and un-jobbed masses, get their votes, and then continue to govern at their expense.[21] These people make little effort to hide their duplicity—McCain's seven (eight?) houses and Limbaugh's four wives on down—"and yet the suspicions of the rank and file are not aroused. The power of their shared vision of martyrdom is sufficient to overcome any set of facts that are merely material, merely true."[22]

The tragic result is "a populist uprising that only benefits the people it is supposed to be targeting…a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people."[23] And it shows no signs of stopping. There is no hope in sight. The ending of *What's the Matter with Kansas?* isn't just pessimistic; it's literally apocalyptic:

> As you cast your eyes back over this vanquished Midwest, this landscape of lost brotherhood and forgotten pride, you can't help but wonder how much farther it's all going to go. How many of those old, warm associations are we willing to dissolve? how much more of the "garden of the world" will we abandon to sterility and decay?

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[20] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 5.
[21] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 36-38.
[22] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 236.
[23] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 109, 6.

> My guess is, quite a bit. The fever-dream of martyrdom that Kansas follows today has every bit as much power as John Brown's dream of justice and human fraternity. And even if the state must sacrifice it all—its cities and its industry, its farms and its small towns, all its thoughts and all its doings—the brilliance of the mirage will not fade. Kansas is ready to lead us singing into the apocalypse. It invites us all to join in, to lay down our lives so that others might cash out at the top; to renounce forever our middle-American prosperity in pursuit of a crimson fantasy of middle-American righteousness.[24]

That, in brief, is Frank's argument. And a powerful and important one it is. This is important to acknowledge, given that I'm about to spend some serious time criticizing it. I don't want to perpetuate a culture war, to turn Frank into a "them" that I'm marshalling you, reader, to fight against. Frank wrote a good book. A very good book. He raised some critically important questions. If there are some problems with his answers—if they aren't always as complete or as generous as I wish they were—at the very least they break a lot of important ground, upon which I can only hope to build. Frank, as he works get to the bottom of the conservative movement in Kansas, sets up all the big questions that will concern us for the rest of this book. It is through understanding the matter with Kansas, and *the matter with* the matter with Kansas, that we will catch our first glimpse of how the culture wars might be defeated.

The basic problem with Frank's argument is that he gets self-interest wrong. He makes the same mistake Obama made at the fundraiser, and I did at the laundromat: he decides what the self-interest of working-class Kansans should be, without consulting them in the matter, and then he criticizes them for not following it. Larry Grossberg, dean of American cultural studies, seizes on this error as a reason to throw out the whole book: "The answer to Frank's question—what's the matter with people living in the so-

[24] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 250-251.

called 'red' states?—is—nothing. The fact that they disagree with progressives does not mean there is something wrong with them."[25] True. But Grossberg either misunderstands Frank's argument, or else he's being a little smug. It's not that working-class Kansans just "disagree with progressives." It's that they're actively working—voting, campaigning, fundraising, going to jail, taking out new mortgages on their houses—for the very movement that, over the past two decades, has objectively ruined their way of life. And from the looks of it, many of those same working-class Kansans are doing everything in their power to ensure many decades more of the same: they are actively working to impoverish themselves. Something, clearly, is the matter.

For Kansas senator-turned-governor Sam Brownback, the answer is simple: "Kansans just don't care about economic issues."[26] Frank, despite obvious political differences with Brownback, seems to agree—he just thinks it's due to false-consciousness, rather than Kansans' genuine self-interest. But is it true? Do Kansans actually not care about economic issues? According to political scientist Larry Bartels: no. Bartels subjected Frank's claims to some quantitative analysis, in a review irresistibly entitled "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*," and he found some problems. If "working-class" means white people with incomes in the bottom third, then Frank is simply wrong: over the past fifty years, "contrary to Frank's assertions, white voters in this group had not become less Democratic in their voting

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[25] Lawrence Grossberg, "Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should It? (Or What's the Matter with New York?)," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 2006): 1-32, 26. Grossberg continues, by way of explaining his title: "On the other hand, there may be something wrong with people in the so-called 'blue' states if they think that there is something 'wrong' with conservatives (in Kansas) simply because they vote or think differently."

[26] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 68.

behavior or less [*sic*?] conservative in their views about economic or social issues. Nor could I find any evidence that they cared more about social and cultural issues than about bread-and-butter economic issues."[27] If "working-class" means "white voters without college degrees"—as Frank suggested in a response to Bartels—then there is indeed a steady, if slow and uneven, rightward shift. But there are two complications. First, it's only true if we accept "the assumption, implicit throughout Frank's account but never stated, that he is writing about the *white* working class." When non-whites without college degrees are included, there is "a two-point *increase* in Democratic support among the working class as a whole over the past half-century." Second, it masks the fact that "white voters without college degrees were actually more likely to have incomes in the top third of the income distribution than in the middle third, much less the bottom third"—hardly "working-class" as it's commonly understood.[28] To add a final twist, these higher-income but lower-education white voters "see themselves as closer to the Democratic Party on social issues like abortion and gender roles but closer to the Republican Party on economic issues"[29]—so if anything, they seem to support Republicans not *in spite of* economic issues, but *because* of them.

Even if Bartels is right, and being Republican does directly correlate with income even in Kansas, there's still far more than one percent of voters who support the party of the One Percent. And as Bartels demonstrates, it's not because they don't care about economics. Nor is it because they're dupes. Though this is what Frank ends up arguing,

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[27] Larry M. Bartels, "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1 (2006): 201-226, 204.
[28] Bartels, "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*," 205-206.
[29] Bartels, "What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*," 201.

along the way he provides much evidence to the contrary. He observes that the writings of right-wing favorites like Limbaugh and Coulter may be "jam-packed with errors and omissions and preposterous interpretations," but "readers don't mind; theirs is an intensely personal politics, concerned far more with the frustrations and indignations of everyday life than with scholarly rigor or objective material interests."[30]

It's not that Kansans don't *know* that these errors are there. It's that they don't *care*. Despite the lies and the errors and the tortured logic, these texts are *giving* Kansans something, something that helps them through the frustrations and indignations of everyday life, in a way that nothing else seems to. That is, their conservatism *is* in their self-interest; it might just not be in the *economic* part of their self-interest. And before you call it "the opiate of the masses," note that it seems to work just as well for the elites. Consider the curious tale that Frank hears from Kansas "archconservative" leader Dwight Sutherland, Jr.:

> A friend of mine who's a millionaire…told me in all seriousness that he couldn't vote for [George H. W.] Bush's reelection because Bush was less than committed to a woman's right to choose. Of course in '93 this guy's taxes go up, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars, and he's screaming and yelling about Clinton and the Democrats, and I said, "Yeah, but you made the symbolic choice and repudiated those nasty pro-lifers, and that's worth it in psychic income alone."[31]

Here we see Frank's own argument in hilarious, ironic reversal: Sutherland, a *conservative* critic, criticizes a *millionaire* friend for his "false consciousness" (yes,

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[30] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 137. Frank continues: these writers "understand this, and they have developed an elaborate theoretical system of generating the policitized anger that is so much in evidence these days and for diverting this resentment from its natural course." Who died and left Frank arbiter of the natural remains unexplained.
[31] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 160-161.

Sutherland actually used that Marxist term) because he voted *Democratic* against his economic self-interest. And why? Because of something as hippie-dippy-sounding as "psychic income." "Psychic income" not only exists, Sutherland is forced to admit, but it's also *powerful*: powerful enough to make this sad dupe of a millionaire part with "hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars."

Frank doesn't seem sure what to make of all this, and he moves on quickly. Which is a shame. Had he lingered a little longer, he might have discovered that Sutherland, someone who purportedly stands on the "wrong" side of every culture war one can imagine, had just given Frank the missing piece of his own argument. If Bartels demonstrates that working-class Kansans are often more in touch with their economic self-interest than Frank suggests, Sutherland demonstrates the converse: that upper-class Kansans are *not* always so single-mindedly rational. Taken together, the two of them suggest that neither working-class nor upper-class Kansans are driven by economic self-interest alone. Self-interest turns out to be a little more complicated. If you measure it by sheer economics, then every Kansan is a dupe. But when you factor in what Sutherland called "psychic income," their behavior, and ours, starts to make a lot more sense.

The Nature of Self-Interest

Frank, like most of us, sometimes falls prey to nostalgia. Once upon a time, he laments, the world was clearer. "One problem the old left didn't have was explaining

how the world worked…The answer was always *money*…But drain economics out of the world, and you're left with few tools for explaining anything."[32]

We know from Bartels that reports of the death of economic-based reasoning have been somewhat exaggerated. But what *has* died, among all but the most reactionary Marxists and Econ 101 professors, is the idea that self-interest is all about money. Behavioral economist and Internet sensation Dan Ariely spells this out: "Standard economics," otherwise known as neoclassical economics, developed in the mid- to late-nineteenth century and still taught in economics departments to this day, "assumes that we are rational—that we know all the pertinent information about our decisions, that we can calculate the value of the different options we face, and that we are cognitively unhindered in weighing the ramifications of each potential choice." But in fact, Ariely contends, "we are all far less rational in our decision making than standard economic theory assumes." Ariely's books and talks provide a near-endless supply of amusing examples of our "irrational" economic behavior, from his own research and that of others. We're much less likely to cheat on a test if we think about the Ten Commandments first, regardless of how religious we are. We're much more likely to be organ donors, or contribute to a 401(k), if "yes" is the default option on the registration form. We're much more likely to feel relieved of our pain if we had to pay 50 cents for our Aspirin, instead of a penny.[33]

Ariely and his 2008 book *Predictably Irrational* are but one example of many recent popular books, in the "according-to-a-recent-study" genre, that debunk the

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[32] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 131-132.
[33] See Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape Our Decisions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 239.

assumption that humans are rational, utility-maximizing machines. The linguist George Lakoff, of "frames" fame, gave us *The Political Mind*, in which he observes that "meaning is embodied," quite literally, as "the brain extends throughout the body via the nervous system," and argues that the rational mind, as separate from the emotional body, is a myth.[34] Economic psychologist Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* contends, along the same lines, that while we have the capacity to reason analytically (what he calls "System 2" thinking), it's a slow process that takes a lot of time. Most of the time, we default to the judgment of feelings and intuition ("System 1" thinking), which is much quicker and often necessary (think about driving), but also often wrong (think about stereotypes).[35] Finally, there's moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, whose *The Righteous Mind* claims that "an obsession with righteousness (leading inevitably to self-righteousness) is the normal human condition. It is a feature of our evolutionary design, not a bug or error that crept into minds that would otherwise be objective and rational"—or more bluntly: "we are all self-righteous hypocrites."[36] Many of these books cite neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's studies of patients with damage to the part of the brain that processes emotion (the ventromedial prefrontal cortex), which he wrote up in a book called *Descartes' Error*. Damasio's conclusion: there is no meaningful difference between "reason" and "emotion." In fact, emotions are *necessary* in order to reason effectively.[37]

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[34] Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, 232.
[35] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
[36] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012), xix-xx, xxiii.
[37] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin, 2005).

There are, several of these authors point out, some humans who *do* reason without emotion. They, and maybe they alone, are not self-righteous, hypocritical, or self-contradictory. They can weigh costs and benefits coolly and objectively in any situation; their self-interest conforms nearly perfectly to the nineteenth-century "standard" economic ideal. These humans are known as psychopaths. It should come as no surprise, then, that capitalism and psychopathy seem to fit hand-in-glove. British journalist Jon Ronson has claimed that "the way that capitalism is structured really is a physical manifestation of the brain anomaly known as psychopathy"—and compiled data suggesting that "the incidence of psychopathy among CEOs is about 4 percent, four times what it is in the population at large."[38] Joel Bakan, creator of the book and documentary film *The Corporation*, has likewise suggested that if a corporation is in fact a person, as the Supreme Court recently affirmed, that person "would probably qualify as a full-blown psychopath."[39]

Given all that, let's pause for a moment and meditate on the absurd situation we find ourselves in. It appears that Thomas Frank, avowed leftist and foe of capitalism, finds himself longing for a far-right capitalist utopia, in which everyone is a psychopath. That is, in desiring a world where people always act according to their interests, Frank ends up acting against his own interests! Which is simply to say: he's acting like a normal, non-psychopathic human. It's not that he, or his Kansans, don't know how to reason. They do—we do—and we do it well and often. It's just that because we're not

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[38] Jeff Bercovici, "Why (Some) Psychopaths Make Great CEOs," *Forbes* (June 14, 2011), http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2011/06/14/why-some-psychopaths-make-great-ceos/ (September 19, 2013).
[39] Simon Caulkin, "Portrait of a Corporate Psychopath," *The Guardian* (October 23, 2004), http://www.theguardian.com/business/2004/oct/24/politics.money (September 19, 2013).

psychopaths, we tend to reason "in support of [our] emotional reactions," not the other way around.[40] We all—Frank, the Kansans, and the rest of us—may be irrational, but as Ariely's book title suggests, we're "predictably irrational."

This might sound complacent. (They're irrational; we're irrational; everyone's irrational together! Cue the "Kumbaya.") This kind of naïve whiggishness is in fact a big danger of the "according to a recent study" genre. Read enough Malcolm Gladwell, Thomas Friedman, or David Brooks, and you might start believing that *every* political problem is actually a mere question of engineering.[41] If Frank's pessimism can be stifling, so can Jonathan Haidt's relentless equivocating: "Liberals sometimes say that religious conservatives are sexual prudes for whom anything other than missionary-position intercourse within marriage is a sin. But conservatives can just as well make fun of liberal struggles to choose a balanced breakfast—balanced among moral concerns about free-range eggs, fair-trade coffee, naturalness, and a variety of toxins, some of which (such as genetically modified corn and soybeans) pose a greater threat spiritually than biologically."[42]

Yes, both sides are irrational. Yes, the Kansans are no more irrational than we are. But that doesn't let any of us off the hook. Literally minutes after I finished the first draft of this chapter, in the fall of 2013, the government shut down—over the very same health care law the laundromat guys were talking about back in 2009. In the weeks that followed, the global economy came close to collapse. Something's definitely the matter.

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[40] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind,* 29.
[41] This dangerous position, with deep roots in the Enlightenment and modernism, is what critic Evgeny Morozov calls "technological solutionism." See Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).
[42] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 15.

And it's urgent to figure out what it is. Dwight Sutherland, unwittingly, provided an important clue. He recognized that his friend voted Democratic, even though he knew it meant paying hundreds of thousands of dollars more in taxes, because of the positive feelings he got (the "psychic income") when he symbolically repudiated the pro-lifers.

If we accept that what's true for Sutherland's rich friend is equally true for others, such as Frank's Republican-voting workers and my health care-opposing laundromat compatriots, than we see the huge importance of what Sutherland called our "symbolic choices." These are choices we all make, not to make us richer (indeed they often make us poorer), but to let us *feel like we can live with ourselves*, to make us *feel like the people we see ourselves as*, and/or *want to be*. You choosing to give your hard-earned money to charity. Me choosing low-paying do-gooder jobs instead of a well-paying corporate gig. Our friends who went to their awful family reunion last weekend. Everyone, you could even say, who has ever chosen to have children. These are not choices we make because they make us wealthier, or even always happier. They are choices we make because…they're what *feels right*.

Rhetoricians, unlike most economists, have developed a way of understanding these non-money (but very real) dimensions of self-interest. It's a method derived from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. On one hand, Bourdieu was a committed Marxist, who took economic self-interest very seriously. On the other hand, he was a sociologist, who understood that most people (everyone except psychopaths) don't experience their economic situation in a detached, rational way. Generally, moment by moment, we just do what feels right. But how, Bourdieu asks, do some things come to feel right (such as

voting Republican if you're a working-class Kansan, or voting Democratic if you're Sutherland's rich friend), while others (such as the reverse) don't?

Like a good French academic, Bourdieu starts by giving this sense of "what feels right" a technical, foreign-sounding name: he calls it a "habitus." Everybody's got one. Our "habitus" is the sum-total of all our various "dispositions": those things that we're *disposed* to do, that feel right/natural/comfortable when we do them. (Roughly: our *habitus* = all of our *habits*.) Every habitus is different. Some of us have a habitus that includes dispositions to, say, camp in the woods, dance at clubs, and/or speak in front of crowds. Others of us don't. We can't *decide* what kind of dispositions are in our habitus, any more than we can decide what kind of foods we like. We just feel it in our bodies. These dispositions usually feel natural, but a minute of thought will prove otherwise. For many of us, our habitus includes the dispositions required to drive a car: we jump in and do what feels natural, without needing to give it much thought. But is that how it felt the *first* time we did it? No way. The disposition to drive, like (almost) all the dispositions in our habitus, are *learned*. And this learning often doesn't come cheap. Think about what it takes to learn to drive: all the time and money it takes to get a car, to take lessons, to practice, and to repair the car after a few initial…mishaps.

Not everybody has this kind of time and money. The makeup of our habitus, the kind of dispositions that are in it, has a lot to do with our *socioeconomic class*. (And, relatedly, to our race, gender, region, occupation, and every other form of social distinction.) It's usually a lot easier for people of higher classes to speak "properly" and behave "correctly" at fancy dinner parties, job interviews, university seminars, and other

high-class functions—because their bodies have been trained for it since birth. At the same time, the dispositions that are highly valued these kinds of situations won't get you very far in a fistfight—and vice-versa. Every habitus has a *value*, and that value depends on the *market* it's being valued on.[43]

"Value" and "market" are not metaphors. Start trash-talking and punching people in a corporate meeting, and you'll probably lose your high-paying job: your low-value habitus will lead to a large loss of cash—what Bourdieu calls "fiscal capital." Try to have a refined business discussion during a fistfight, and you might not lose actual money (except in medical bills), but you'll still lose value in the form of lost standing and a bad reputation—what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital." Cultural capital doesn't come in dollars and cents, but that doesn't make it any less real: just like fiscal capital, it circulates on markets; you can build it and invest it and gain and lose it; and it affects the kinds of things you're able to do, places you're able to go, and person you're able to be. And in a lot of cases, the two are exchangeable: we invest fiscal capital (tuition) into building cultural capital (getting a degree), and then draw profits off that cultural capital (the degree) in the form of money (a higher-paying job).[44]

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[43] In Bourdieu's words: "The definition of acceptability is found not in the situation [itself] but in the relationship between a market and a habitus, which itself is the product of the whole history of its relations with markets." For a good and concise (if not terribly readable) description of habitus and market, see Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 81-89. In many of his other writings, Bourdieu calls markets "fields"—a far less helpful term in understanding the relationship between culture and economics. But both terms refer to the same concept.

[44] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 70-71: "this initial status-derived capital [of being born into a high socioeconomic class] is enhanced by the advantages which precocious acquisition of legitimate culture gives in learning cultural skills, whether table manners or the art of conversation, musical culture or the sense of propriety, playing tennis or pronunciation. The embodied cultural capital of the previous generations functions as a sort of advance (both a head-start and a credit) which, by providing from the outset the example of a culture incarnated in familiar models, enables the newcomer to start acquiring the basic elements of the legitimate culture, from the beginning, that is, in the most unconscious

It's unlikely that Dwight Sutherland, Jr. has read Bourdieu. Nonetheless, he is thinking along the same lines. His poor (rich) friend finds himself in a bind. He knows that to maximize his value on the fiscal-capital market he should vote for the tax-cutting Republican. But his habitus, formed on a cosmopolitan suburban cultural-capital market that deeply values a woman's right to choose, won't let him do it. Does this mean he acted against his self-interest? Not at all. It just means he gave up some of his economic well-being so that he could live with himself. (I do the same, when I give money to a homeless person on the street.) Had his habitus been formed on a different market, one that valued women's rights less and, maybe, patriarchal religion more, he might have acted very differently. (The concept of cultural capital provides a much more precise way of understanding what it means to act based on our "values.")

Run this same argument in reverse, and we can understand Frank's Republican-voting working-class Kansans. They might know that to maximize their value on the fiscal-capital market they should vote for the (somewhat) wealth-distributing and job-protecting Democrat. But their habitus, formed on a homogenous exurban (more often than rural) cultural-capital market that deeply values evangelical Christianity and the rhetoric of self-reliance, won't let them do it. Does this mean they are acting against their self-interest? Not at all. It just means they give up some economic well-being so that they could live with themselves. And no, they can't just talk Republican in public and then vote Democratic in the anonymity of the voting booth. That's not how habitus

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and impalpable way…a social power over time which is tacitly recognized as the supreme excellence." Bourdieu uses various terms at various times to get at this same idea: "cultural capital," "social capital," "symbolic capital," "educational capital," etc. The difference among these terms is slight, and I am not writing a work of Bourdieu scholarship, so I will follow convention and use "cultural capital" as a catch-all term for non-fiscal capital, stored in the bodily habitus.

works. They couldn't live with *themselves* if they voted Democratic—even if no one knew—any more than I could live with myself if I secretly drove a Hummer. When your habitus is Republican, you don't just *talk* Republican, or *act* Republican; you *are* Republican. "After a lifetime of inculcation from all aspects of our everyday lives," my colleagues Robin Brown and Carl Herndl explain, "our habitus is us."[45]

This is a pretty radical way of understanding people's political behavior. It undercuts a whole lot of traditional theories, such as rational choice, ideology, and the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. It suggests that our political beliefs are less like rational, well-thought-out opinions and more like our tastes in fashion and food—which, in turn, turn out to be more political than we usually assume, tied closely to money, labor, and class. And it makes self-interest a much, much more complicated thing. Not just for *them* but also for *us*—as I discovered, all too well, while writing this chapter. I was living with my parents, marginally employed, and without good health insurance, all for the first time in my adult life. I got a bad cough. I knew I needed to get it checked out. My parents said they'd pay for a doctor. But I couldn't make myself go. I had been independent and self-reliant for so long—or at least I'd *felt* that way—that I just couldn't bring myself either to "waste" a lot of my own money or rely on my parents' "charity." It just *felt wrong*. It wasn't *who I was*. A week later I finally went to the doctor (or rather, the Minute Clinic), but I insisted on paying.

I was, it turns out, exactly like the two men in the laundromat. I had access to free health care. And I turned it down—I acted against my economic (not to mention

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[45] Robert L. Brown and Carl G. Herndl, "Beyond the Realm of Reason," in *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*, ed. Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 213-235: 223.

medical) self-interest—because my habitus wouldn't let me accept it. You want to get up, walk over here, and tell me I'm a dupe? Go ahead and try. I don't think I'm a dupe. And I'm not interested in talking with someone who thinks I'm a dupe. (How about you?)

Right-wing rhetoricians seem to understand these complicated, contradictory feelings better than liberal or left-wing rhetoricians—and they are skilled at exploiting them. Take a look at *The Battle*, the 2010 anti-Obama tract written by Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute. Brooks's arguments are pretty boilerplate. He lays out a sweeping right-wing economic and social agenda, and he explains it through the frame of culture war. "We" are the seventy percent of Americans who, according to various dubiously-worded polls, believe in "free enterprise." "They," who don't, are what he calls "the 30 percent coalition." We good, they bad; join us, fight them.[46]

What makes *The Battle* interesting, and worth a look, is how Brooks communicates this message. He addresses his readers in a very particular way. Here are all the moments in Chapter Two (entitled "A Bill of Goods: The 30 Percent Coalition's Story of the Financial Crisis") when Brooks addresses the reader directly:

> "Imagine you bought a home in June 2006 for $400,000…"
> "Say you are an investment firm with $1 million in capital…"
> "How much has [the bailout] cost you, the taxpayer?…"
> "Congress members…are working to make sure that the repaid [TARP] money is directed to people more deserving than you…"

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[46] Arthur C. Brooks, *The Battle: How the Fight Between Free Enterprise and Big Government Will Shape America's Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). Romney's "47 percent" comments no doubt owe a lot to arguments like this.

> "Anybody surprised by [the housing defaults] was either willfully ignorant (your congressman) or was unable to follow what was really going on (most of the general public)…"[47]

Brooks is telling "you" a very specific, very compelling story about yourself: you are wealthy and successful (you have a $400,000 home and a $1 million investment firm). Your wealth and success is being threatened by the government, which is taking money from you and your business and giving it to someone else, whom the government values more than you.[48] And then, after taking your money, the government couldn't even solve the problem, because neither they nor the people that elected them are as intelligent or well-informed as you. (Brooks takes care to distinguish "you" from "most of the general public.")

It is, of course, unlikely that you are one of those few Americans who (1) owns a $400,000+ house, (2) owns an investment firm with $1 million in capital, and (3) perfectly understood and predicted the housing crisis. It's much more likely that you, like I, live in a less valuable abode, have had less success in business, and/or were quite perplexed by the housing crisis. So when you read Brooks, you're faced with an identity crisis: do you accept the higher fiscal- and cultural-capital identity that Brooks has ascribed to you? Do you follow Brooks, who tells you that you are reasonable, smart,

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[47] Brooks, *The Battle*, 30, 40, 42, 66, and 39, respectively. Order altered, slightly, for dramatic effect. Note how in the first two quotations, Brooks provides the reader with what Lakoff calls a "hedge"—"*imagine* you bought…," "*say* you are…"—to ease readers' transition from their objective class position to the higher position that Brooks is ascribing to them. Without these hedges, readers might be much more likely to conclude, correctly, that Brooks's economic proposals are beneficial only to people considerably wealthier than themselves.

[48] This is another probable instance of race-based code language: "people more deserving," in this context, often means non-white folks.

well-informed, and about to get rich?[49] Or do you turn away and follow Thomas Frank, who tells you that you are ignorant, deluded, uninformed, and probably going to stay poor forever?[50]

For most of us, it's a no-brainer. (Near-literally: it doesn't arise as a conscious choice.) Frank, tragically, doesn't get this. He cannot understand why so many Kansans are "devoted to something like Fox News, a network that offers its viewers nothing but torture—endless images of a depraved world that, it tells them, they are powerless to correct."[51] He can't see that for a person with a certain kind of habitus, Fox is far from torture. It affirms who they are, which feels good. Frank is likewise *baffled* by the appeal of Kansas pundit Blake Hurst, who says things like: "Into the ghettoes, kids, we're not wanted in polite society….I'm stupid, and if you're reading this, you probably are too." He doesn't seem to understand that Hurst isn't calling himself or his readers stupid; he's building solidarity among the oppressed. Like Fox, he's not insulting but

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[49] Brooks insists, with a straight face, that taxes over the next two years (2011-2012) will increase for *all* Americans, not just for the richest 1%, as Obama and the liberals insist. "The biggest reason for this," he explains, "is that as incomes increase, millions of low- and middle-income Americans will be forced into higher tax brackets." In other words: you're gonna get rich soon, and when you do, you won't want to be taxed either!—a mainstay of Republican-party rhetoric since 1896. (Brooks, *The Battle*, 60.)

[50] Bourdieu might call Brooks's rhetoric a "strategy of condescension"—which is a misleading term. Brooks is not being "condescending" in the normal sense of the word. He's not "talking down to" his audience, but exactly the opposite: he addresses them in a way that seems to assume they have *more* cultural (and fiscal) capital than they actually do, not less. But through doing so, Bourdieu suggests, Brooks—who has greater fiscal and cultural capital than his readers—manipulates them: he appears to negate the hierarchy that exists between them (suggesting they're as smart and rich and successful as he is), but he does so only symbolically: readers know (at least tacitly) they don't actually have the knowledge that Brooks does, and they are grateful to Brooks for treating them, they who thus acknowledge that they are lesser, as though they were greater. Brooks can thus "combine the profits linked to the [in reality] undiminished hierarchy with those derived from the distinctly symbolic negation of the hierarchy—not the least of which is the strengthening of the hierarchy implied by the recognition accorded to the way of using the hierarchical relation." In other words, Brooks wins all around: he's still higher up than them, and they know it; only now they like him better and are less likely to oppose him. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 68-71.

[51] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 237.

affirming. You could accuse him of making a straw-man argument—except that people like Frank actually *are* calling him and his readers stupid.

Frank and his fellow liberal pundits thus end up playing a crucial, unwitting role in propping up their conservative counterparts. In the throes of the culture wars, it is all too easy for Hurst, and Brooks, and Fox and Limbaugh and Coulter and Beck and the rest of them, to step in, rescue the persecuted conservatives, and give them something that is in all of our self-interests: a place where we belong, a place where we can feel good about ourselves.[52] And it appears to be working quite well: according to Pew Foundation reports released in the years after Frank's book, Republicans are considerably happier than Democrats. Across the board. Even when you control for income, and every other variable researchers could think of. It might be hard for Frank (or me) to understand, but something's clearly working for these folks.[53]

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[52] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 120. I am indebted to Robin Brown and Carl Herndl for developing the concept of rhetoric as a *place*, and specifically as a place to belong: "When we enter our favored…rhetoric as native speakers, we reenter a world of mirroring wholeness—one we worked hard for, and one we're good at. As we hear familiar words, familiar references, familiar names, we're accepted. In a way, rhetoric can be the enfolding, supporting place where we feel safe, complete, at home." In terms of object-relations theory (a branch of psychoanalysis), "rhetoric…can serve as a self object," an object in relation to which we develop our habitus, our very self. Like other self-objects, such as our parents and trusted friends and mentors, this rhetoric can become, in a very real way, a part of who we are. To part with it, to change it, makes about as much sense as cutting off our arm. See Brown and Herndl, "Beyond the Realm of Reason," 228-230.

[53] The original data comes from a general Pew happiness survey called "Are We Happy Yet?" (Pew Research Center, February 13, 2006), http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2006/02/13/are-we-happy-yet/ (April 17, 2014). The follow-up report, on Republicans in particular, claims (with survey data) that they are happier because "they have more money, they have more friends, they are more religious, they are healthier, they are more likely to be married, they like their communities better, they like their jobs more, they are more satisfied with their family life, they like the weather better, they have fewer financial worries, they're more likely to see themselves doing better in life than their parents did, they're more likely to feel that individuals—rather than outside forces—control their own success or failure, [and] they have more of what they most value in life. (No, it's not money.)." That is, all in all, their habitus is far better attuned to the market it's on. See Paul Taylor, "Republicans: Still Happy Campers" (Pew Research Center, November 11, 2013), http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2008/10/23/republicans-still-happy-campers/ (April 17, 2014).

So to conclude: no one's a dupe. Or everyone's a dupe. If we define self-interest as a detached calculation of what will maximize our economic utility, pretty much no one acts according to self-interest. If we define self-interest as acting based on an intuitive, bodily feeling of "what feels right," based on a habitus whose dispositions *include but are not limited to* the acquisition of wealth, then pretty much everyone acts according to self-interest. When we see people who appear *not* to be acting in their self-interest, Kansans for instance, it usually means we don't sufficiently understand their self-interest. Most likely, we don't entirely understand the value of the cultural capital they're carrying around in their bodies, on the markets they participate in.

Again we face the threat of Pollyanna. If we're all acting in our self-interest all the time—what's the problem? The problem is the Kansans are still voting themselves into poverty and economic destruction—and 99 percent of us keep tacitly supporting an economic system that doesn't benefit us—and as long as our political life is framed almost entirely in terms of culture war, it's unlikely either of these things will ever change. Thus far, we haven't solved the problem; we've just found a more useful way to pose it. There's nothing the matter with Kansas, or Kansans, or any other kind of *them*, no matter who they are. *They*, like *we*, are just doing what *feels right*, based on their particular habitus and the cultural-capital market it's been formed on. But how did so many self-destructive behaviors (voting and otherwise) come to feel right?

That's the question. The question that Frank calls "what's the matter with Kansas?"—which will concern us for the rest of this book—is better (if less poetically) phrased: "why are there so many powerful cultural-capital markets out there, which

place such high value on so many destructive and self-destructive dispositions, and therefore make developing a habitus that includes those dispositions in so many people's self-interest? Who maintains them, and how? And how did they get built, in the first place?"

Organized Ideas

For *built* they have been. Cultural-capital markets don't occur naturally, any more than the New York Stock Exchange or the Minneapolis Farmers Market do. If markets exist, it's because some group of people built them. (Or, *socially-constructed* them.) None of the infrastructure, none of the rules and systems of exchange or value-setting, occurred by accident; they are the way they are because a group of people, working together, made them that way. But the group that *constructs* a market will not always be the same people that will *use* it—nor will they necessarily construct it with these users' best interests in mind.[54]

This situation explains, among other things, one of the stranger phenomena in contemporary politics: the populist conservative craze for Ayn Rand. Ayn Rand, the Soviet expat novelist and hyper-capitalist, is also a consummate elitist: her flagship mega-novel *Atlas Shrugged* is the story of a godlike corporate elite that frees itself from

[54] We could thus translate Karl Marx's famous declaration—"Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already"—as: people make their own habitus, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it on a self-made market, but on a market existing already. See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm (March 12, 2014).

the fetters of the masses of idiotic, conformist, helpless ordinary Americans.[55] So it may seem odd that many within the Tea Party movement, which places great value on being ordinary Americans, have embraced her and her book. I'm tempted to call them dupes, of course, but as always, there's a better and more useful explanation. They have simply developed a way of reading Rand that resolves this contradiction: when they read *Atlas Shrugged*, they don't see themselves as one of the ordinary Americans that Rand pillories. No, they see themselves as member of John Galt's elite, or maybe even as Galt himself. Is this a correct reading? I don't think so. But here's the frustrating part: it doesn't matter what I think. They have built a market, where a certain way of reading *Atlas Shrugged* is valued, and I say, or you say, will change that.

Besides, it's not entirely clear what it means for a reading to be "correct" or "incorrect" in the first place. *Atlas Shrugged*, on its own, without any people to read it, doesn't mean anything. It's just literally a bunch of paper and ink and glue sitting on a shelf. It only starts to mean something when people pick it up, read it, and start *making* it mean something. But these people, like all people, come with baggage. The way they approach the text, and the meanings they make out of it, will have a lot to do with their habitus, and with the values of the market it was formed on. In the slightly convoluted language of literary scholar Stanley Fish: readers always approach a text with a "disposition" toward certain "interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually

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[55] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1991). For a (relatively) quick introduction to Rand's writing style, philosophy, and general outlook, skip right to John Galt's speech, on pages 915-979.

assumed, the other way around." Different readers, with a different habitus, will be disposed toward different interpretive strategies. Fish gives a name to groups of readers who share the same interpretive strategy when approaching a given text: he calls them "interpretive communities."[56]

Meaning-making, Fish argues strongly, is *only* possible within interpretive communities. And if an interpretive community develops the right interpretive strategies, it can pretty much make a text mean…whatever it wants to. There's evidence of at least one interpretive community in which Stephen Colbert is a subtle and uniquely effective *conservative* commentator, whose pseudo-satire has duped all the liberals into following him. (Note I don't say that this community "believes" this about Stephen Colbert. If you're in that interpretive community, it's the *truth*.)[57] There is another interpretive community—started 1500 years ago by St. Augustine and still including over a billion people around the globe—in which every text and experience, when properly read, is a sign of God's love for us and our responsibility to love each other. (If you see something that's *not* a sign of God's love for us and our responsibility to love each other, you're reading it wrong.)

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[56] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 167-173—the last pages of his essay "Interpreting the *Variorum*," subtitled "Interpretive Communities." Interpretive strategies are often learned, Fish points out, but they "can also be forgotten or supplanted, or complicated or dropped from favor ('no one reads that way anymore')." Which, ironically, is exactly what's happened to Fish's own theory. No one in academia talks much about interpretive communities anymore—though a few decades ago, they were vey much in style. I am thus intentionally and heroically compromising my own cultural capital, on the academic market at least, by dusting off this highly unfashionable concept. Not for hipster cred, but simply because no other adequate concept has been invented in the decades since—to articulate the connection between ideas and social groups—so it's high time we revisit this one.

[57] See Heather L. LaMarre, et al, "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 2 (April 2009): 212-231.

Interpretive communities can be bigger than nations, or smaller than families—think about the private language shared by siblings or avant-garde art movements, which everyone else "doesn't get." Most of us belong to a number of different interpretive communities, and we've learned different interpretive strategies from each. (When I was in eighth grade I encountered an interpretive community whose primary interpretive strategy was positively Augustinian in its singular, world-encompassing simplicity. As I worked to learn this strategy, and thus to become a part of this community, I acquired a whole new understanding of objects whose shape was cylindrical or spherical, and of previously-innocent words such as "long," "hard," and "come.")

It would be pleasant to imagine a world full of diverse interpretive communities, each understanding texts in ways that make sense to them, fulfilling their own material and spiritual needs. Alas, interpretive communities are in constant conflict with each other. "The assumption in each community will be that the other is not correctly perceiving the 'true text,'" Fish explains—an assumption that has caused…a fair bit of conflict. It's hard to convince members of a different interpretive community to change their interpretive strategies—not least because they will use their same alien interpretive strategies to interpret the very words you're using to try to convince them. That's fine when we're interpreting a poem. It's less fine when we're interpreting Obama's birth certificate, or the evidence that climate change and the Holocaust are real.

And so, again, we've reached the same impasse from back in the laundromat. How do I convince *them* they're wrong? Go over and tell them? Present a well-reasoned argument? Yell at them until they listen? Publish a well-documented article in a peer-

reviewed journal? Go on TV and denounce them as idiots, or appeal to them as well-meaning but misguided friends? None of it seems to work.

The discipline of classical rhetoric doesn't offer much help here, either. What may be an "effective appeal" to members of one interpretive community may be entirely ineffective at convincing members of another—and vice-versa.[58] I could give the greatest speech in the world, but if each interpretive community just "perceives the text (or texts) its interpretive strategies demand and call into being," then it doesn't matter what I say; each interpretive community will hear what its interpretive strategies let it hear. There's still always a chance of breaking through: most people's habitus includes a tangled mess of overlapping and often contradictory interpretive strategies, from all the different interpretive communities they've been part of, so people's differences are not absolute. And a good speaker will know something about the interpretive communities s/he's speaking to, and what kind of language will command the most value on their markets. Still, if you make me watch a speech by Rand Paul or Sarah Palin, I don't think I'll be convinced—no matter how good a speech it is.

No, to understand what really constitutes an effective appeal, we can't just focus on the speech itself. We need to look at what happened long before the audience ever got into the room, or in front of the screens. We need to look at the interpretive communities themselves—how they function, what kind of interpretive strategies they use, and especially how they got built. It's precisely here, on this most crucial point, that Fish's

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[58] Fish seems to conflate two definitions of interpretive communities: (1) self-conscious, variously cohesive groups of people who share and teach interpretive strategies, and also (2) the set of all people in the world, who may or may not have any idea of the others' existence, who happen to share an interpretive strategy. For my purposes here, working toward the central concept of "organized ideas," I privilege the first definition.

account gets thin. He observes that on one hand there's "a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities," and at the same time "interpretive communities grow larger and decline, and individuals move from on to another," but that's about it.[59] He doesn't say much about *how* and *why* interpretive communities grow and shrink, or get created or destroyed, or gain or lose members. He seems to assume it's a natural process, like the weather—and according to many, like the economy.

It's not true. Interpretive communities, including that very large interpretive community called "the economy," exist because they have been *organized*. Behind every interpretive community is some collection of people that's poured time, money, and labor into making that community exist in the ways that it does—or, in some important cases, into making that community *cease* to exist. We know this from our everyday lives. Think about the time, money, and labor we put into building and maintaining our smallest interpretive communities: our relationships with our closest friends, family, colleagues, and significant others, which literally give meaning to our lives. Now think about the time, money, and labor that goes into the maintenance and growth of our larger interpretive communities: social groups, workplaces, places of worship. Now just think about how much more time, money, and labor must go into maintaining a university, a professional network, a political party, a nation. None of it happens by accident.

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[59] Astute cultural theorists might hear echoes of Italian Marxist organizer Antonio Gramsci here, especially his notion of a "leaky" hegemony. Hegemony and interpretive communities have a lot to do with each other, even though Fish's and Gramsci's own interpretive communities don't overlap much. One could even argue that hegemonic language itself is a large, well-policed interpretive community. From this perspective, what I'm trying to do is bring Gramsci's sense of politics and organizing into Fish's concept of community and interpretation. For more on Gramsci and his relationship to organizing, see Chapter Four.

So who built the ever-growing interpretive community of lower-income people who read *Atlas Shrugged* and understand themselves to be John Galt, not part of Rand's idiot masses? Tough to say. But we know it's been around for a long time: it's essentially the same interpretive community that embraced Horatio Alger; the same interpretive community that buys lottery tickets year after year and expects one day to win; the same interpretive community that, against all odds, dares to open a business, or emigrate across the world, or revolt against the British Empire. It's an interpretive community that's distinctly, frustratingly, beautifully American.

Which isn't to say nothing has changed. Consider Frank's epigram to *What's the Matter with Kansas?*:

> Oh, Kansas fools! Poor Kansas fools!
> The banker makes of you a tool.
> —Populist song, 1892[60]

There are at least two things we can learn from this epigram. First: this same interpretive community, which makes people recklessly entrepreneurial and aspirational in the face of their actual economic interests, was around back then, too. Even back in the heyday of Midwestern Populism, it seems, the banker was still making a tool of the "Kansas fools." But second: back then, this interpretive community wasn't the only game in town. There was at least one other important interpretive community: the one that led people, including working-class Kansans themselves, to write catchy, popular songs that analyzed their own oppression. This other interpretive community let Kansans understand their economic desperation not as something natural, or as a result of personal

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[60] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, v. For full music and lyrics, see "Kansas Fool," *Digital Tradition Mirror* (website), http://sniff.numachi.com/pages/tiKSFOOL;ttKSFOOL.html (March 13, 2014).

failure, but as a result of the greed of a corporate class that they can, and must, fight together.

This explains why back in the 1890s, when Kansas was "a reliable hotbed of leftist reform," some farmers and workers could proudly understand themselves as part of the masses of ordinary Americans—not as John Galt—and direct their righteous anger against the real elite: the big banks and the corporations that were fleecing them.[61] This versus today, when "Kansas has got the hell-raising farmers and the class-conscious workers, all right…but when they come sweeping through the state legislature, clearing out the old guard, what they are demanding is more power for Wall Street, more privatization, and the end of Progressive Era reforms like the estate tax."[62] "By all rights," Frank insists, "the people in Wichita and Shawnee and Garden City should today be flocking to the party of Roosevelt, not deserting it." But then he adds, with atypical insight: "Culturally speaking, however, that option is simply not available to them anymore."[63]

What's the matter with Kansas? That's the matter with Kansas. And with a great deal of America, and increasingly of the rest of the Western (and eventually non-Western) world. It's not that Kansas has changed all that much. The basic habitus, with its characteristic disposition toward loud, aggressive activism against the elite, is the same as it was at the height of Populist power. What's changed, with tragic results, is the choice of available interpretive strategies through which Kansans can express this disposition. Frank wonders aloud, near the beginning of his book, why working-class

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[61] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 9.
[62] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 71, 80.
[63] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 245.

voters have abandoned the Democrats: "the party of workers, of the poor, of the weak and the victimized." But near the end, he inadvertently answers his own question: "What politician in this success-worshipping country really wants to be the voice of poor people?"[64] Or by the same logic: what poor or working-class person, in a culture where success-worshipping is the only interpretive strategy left standing, wants to understand him- or herself as part of "the poor, the weak, and the victimized"?

"Not too long ago," Frank asserts, "Kansas would have responded to the current situation by making the bastards pay."[65] And they still do. All that's changed is the available selection of bastards. What Frank observes about Kansas conservatives is also true for most Americans: "the operations of business are simply not a legitimate subject of social criticism…business is natural; it is normal; it is beyond politics."[66] This is the position not only of Sam Brownback but also of NPR's *Marketplace*, of all but the most unfashionably populist of TV and Internet pundits, and of nearly every academic discipline: from the conservatives of the economics department, who will present the radically free market as a wonderful and natural fact, to the liberals of the humanities, who will make a perfunctory nod toward the inevitable crushing forces of "capital" or "neoliberalism" before turning back to the more workable issues of language and representation. No matter how much the workings of business and finance are hurting us, if every interpretive community and interpretive strategy we have makes us understand "the economy" as out of our control, then we'd be idiots to waste our time trying to fight it. We might as well launch a political campaign against the weather. Kansans,

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[64] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 1, 243.
[65] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 67.
[66] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 128.

rationally enough, choose to devote their undying populist energy to problems they might be able to solve, such as abortion and evolution.

It is here that we find our glimmer of hope—the hope that will propel us through the next three chapters. "The economy" is not, in fact, an unstoppable force of nature. And people haven't always thought about it that way. "The economy" is an idea, hatched in the mind of a human. If it appears natural and inevitable, that just demonstrates how effective the rhetoric has been. And by rhetoric, I'm not talking about speechifying—though that plays its part. I'm talking about organizing: the long, hard labor of bringing interpretive communities into existence. About the work of constructing, maintaining, and growing interpretive communities that enable certain understandings of politics and economics, of ourselves and the people around us, and of what is possible and impossible to do. And, just as importantly, about the work of weakening, dismantling, and destroying other interpretive communities, which challenge those understandings.

How do you organize an interpretive community? The same way you organize any community: by building power. This is the basic wisdom of broad-based community organizing, one of the most important and least-understood traditions in American political life. It has its roots in the Popular Front of the 1930s, the black freedom movement, and the work of Saul Alinsky. It continues to make lasting, institutional change in cities and towns across the United States today. Its adherents work in the White House, and the Tea Party, and many, many places in between.[67]

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[67] Yes, the Tea Party. *New York Times* reporter Kate Zernike attended a Tax Day protest in 2010 and heard a speech by young Tea Party leader Brendan Steinhauser, who "could quote from the classics of Austrian economic theory but included among his heroes Bayard Rustin, the gay black civil rights leader." Zernike observed Steinhauser as he convinced a gathering of hundreds of Tea Party insiders, initially skeptical, that

Power, observes longtime New York organizer Michael Gecan, is the universal truth of politics. For a very simple reason. With power, you can make things happen. Without it, you can't:

> Without power, you can only be a supplicant, a serf, a victim, or a wishful thinker who soon begins to whine. Power in the new millennium is the same as power when Thucydides was writing about the Melians and the Athenians. It's still the ability to act. And it still comes in two basic forms—organized people and organized money….How do you think new and better schools will be built? Because they are desperately needed? Because it's a good idea? Because the honchos at the Board of Education wake up in the morning and decide to do the right thing? Because the city is appalled by the chronic overcrowding? No, new and better schools will be built when you have the power to force them to build them….You're going to have to have enough organized people and enough organized money, enough discipline and enough luck, to *make it happen*. That's the way it works in the world as it is.[68]

This is the standard formula. When you get trained as an organizer—as I have—you get this formula drilled into you. And for good reason: it cuts through a whole lot of bullshit.[69] Do-gooder liberals, utopian idealists, and overthinking academic types need not apply. The goal is to build power. And power equals organized people plus organized money. "Period."[70] Got a problem with that? Maybe you find this ideological construct to be problematic? Get over it, or get out of the way. The work we're doing is too important.

"true community organizers are what this movement is all made of. We don't like that term because now we have a Community Organizer-in-Chief who got his lessons from Saul Alinsky. I say, let's read Saul Alinsky, let's read [his most famous book] *Rules for Radicals*, and let's use it against them!" See Kate Zernike, *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 2-3.

[68] Michael Gecan, *Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 36-37.

[69] A defining feature of organizer-speak is the liberal use of profanity. I would be remiss not to follow suit.

[70] To quote one of my own trainers. For a much deeper, critical discussion of these concepts and the tradition of broad-based community organizing, see Chapter Four.

But in recent years, some organizers have questioned this formula—in a small, yet crucial way. At a training I attended in 2011 at TakeAction Minnesota, organizing director Pamela Twiss told us there was an "esoteric debate" going on within the field of organizing, about whether we need a third term in the power equation, next to "organized people" and "organized money." Namely: "organized ideas."

Given the title of this book, you can guess where I stand. The concept of "organized ideas" is critically important, both for understanding how we've gotten where we are (for good and ill), and for understanding where we can go from here. Three decades ago it was possible to debate a full-employment bill on the floor of Congress. Now even the most "liberal" of pundits would laugh it out of the room. If we don't organize ideas, other people will.

At the same time, I understand why some organizers are against it. Having spent many years in the network of institutions I will call academia and para-academia, I share their concern that "organized ideas" could be a back door through for all kinds of wishy-washy idealism. Above all, for that most dangerous of all academic and para-academic myths, which has spelt doom for so many well-intentioned efforts toward social change: that the truth, by itself, will set us free. "Organized ideas" is a necessary but risky concept. For it to function effectively in building power, it needs to be defined and understood as precisely as possible.

That is one goal of this book: to provide my colleagues in broad-based community organizing with a workable definition of organized ideas and an understanding of how organized ideas are, have been, and can be used to build power.

Another goal, the broadest, is to defeat the culture wars—or at least, to lay down a conceptual plan for their defeat. I have a few other intermediate goals, too. One is to tear down the wall between the interpretive communities of broad-based community organizing on one side and academia and para-academia on the other: we have too much to learn from each other to stay apart. Another is to probe the notion of self-interest, the other key concept in broad-based community organizing (besides power), more deeply: I am convinced that there are at least a few key places where all of our self-interests may actually align, and I wonder about the possibilities for new, trans-partisan and trans-cultural organizing based on this overlooked alignment. And a final goal—the one I usually tell people when they make the mistake of asking "what's your book about?"—is to finally get to the bottom of the matter with Kansas: why, when so much of our government and economy serves only the most well-off, do the rest of us willingly go along with it?

A few more words about this last question will explain where I'll be going in Chapter Two. What is Frank's final answer? Why has the structure of interpretive communities in Kansas shifted so drastically since the 1890s—or even since the 1980s—to the point where the only option available to legitimately-disgruntled Kansans is self-destructive culture-war conservatism? Frank ends up blaming it mostly on the Democrats:

> While the Wichita Cons[ervatives] worked hard to build their movement, they would not have succeeded so extravagantly had it not been for the simultaneous suicide of the rival movement, the one that traditionally spoke for working-class people. I am referring, of course, to the Clinton administration's famous policy of

> "triangulation," its grand effort to minimize the differences between Democrats and Republicans on economic issues….While the Cons were busily polarizing the electorate, the Dems were meekly seeking the center. In Wichita Republicanism appeared dynamic and confident; the Democrats looked dispirited, weak, spent….If basic economic issues are removed from the table, [local conservative leader Mark] Gietzen has written, only the social issues remain to distinguish the parties.[71]

My liberal heart broke when I read further down the page and met the union worker at Boeing who, like all his friends, was a lifelong Democrat but couldn't bring himself to pull the lever after Clinton endorsed NAFTA. But here, as usual, Frank raises a tantalizingly important question and then leaves it agonizingly unexplored. In this case, he skips over the question of *agency*—the academic word for *the ability to make things happen*. (Power, the product of organized people and money and ideas, is one specific type of agency.) Who had the agency to change the game in Wichita? The way Frank tells it, it was the Democrats. They had labor in their pocket. They were golden. Then they made a strategic miscalculation: out of a desire to appeal to socially-liberal rich people, they abandoned the "Archie Bunker types" and gave up the pro-labor, anti-corporate rhetoric that compelled them. And it brought the whole house down.

The truth is a little more complicated. Clinton may have made some bad moves, but by the time he came into office, organized labor had been decimated for nearly twenty years—by structural shifts in the economy, and also by an organized campaign from the right that took advantage of those shifts. The "Archie Bunker types" had been wooed away from the Democratic party ever since Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act—by another related, organized campaign from the right. Even within the Democratic

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[71] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 175-176.

party, the move to the center was not a conscious, unified decision but the result of a prolonged conflict among organized party factions (i.e., interpretive communities). And as Frank himself points out, the winner of this conflict, Clinton's centrist Democratic Leadership Council, was itself partially funded by the right—the Koch brothers and the Cato Institute, among others.[72]

I'm not saying the radical rightward realignment of interpretive communities in Kansas was the result of a conspiracy of a few super-rich men on the far right. But I'm also not *not* saying that. It's easy to overestimate the role of intentional organizing (i.e. conspiracy theories) in these kinds of major cultural shifts. But it's also easy, and much more common, to underestimate it. The Koch brothers, among the most adept and effective organizers of ideas in current U.S. politics, definitely had some agency in the process. As did other funders and leaders of the DLC, and of the Democratic Party as a whole. As did the organizers in politics, business, and academia, who crippled the labor movement and drove a culture-war wedge between workers of different races, religions, and regions. And of course, as did the conservative organizers on the ground in Wichita.

The agency is spread around. It's messy and complicated. But it's also traceable. This "middle space" can feel uncomfortable. Most of us are accustomed to understanding agency as either very concentrated—an event is the result of one powerful person or group of elites that flips the switch, and "the masses" follow—or hopelessly diffuse—an event is the result of "society," "market forces," or some other intangible, inhuman entity. Neither one explains Wichita, or most actual political conflicts—which tend to be the result of clashing interpretive communities, of organized people, money,

[72] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 82.

and ideas being pitted against each other in ways that are complicated but legible, if we take the time to understand them.

Our political future is not predetermined, either by the market or The Man. It was commonplace in Kansas, Frank shows, to find underfunded radical conservatives who defeated more moderate Republicans with lots more money and ads and airtime. And it cuts the other way, too. Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, after the labor movement had been decimated for decades, it still had immense agency:

> Take your average white male voter: in the 2000 election they chose George W. Bush by a considerable margin Find white males who were union members, however, and they voted for Al Gore by a similar margin. The same difference is repeated whatever the demographic category: women, gun owners, retirees, and so on—when they are union members, their politics shift to the left. This is true even when the union members in question had little contact with union leaders. Just being in a union evidently changes the way a person looks at politics, inoculates them against the derangement of the backlash. Here [culture-war] values matter almost least of all, while the economy, health care, and education are of paramount concern.[73]

No wonder the Right goes after organized labor so hard. Unions haven't just given workers weekends and the forty-hour workweeks and the eight-hour workdays; they've also created a powerful interpretive community. Powerful not just in how they can organize people and money—which they do, in large amounts—but also in how they can organize ideas. Busting a union means a lot more than depriving some workers of a chance to bargain for better wages and shorter hours, or depriving a Democratic candidate of some campaign cash and turnout. It means depriving those workers of the interpretive strategies that give them agency. To bust a union is to bust an interpretive community. To bust a world where we can participate, as actors and agents, and to

[73] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 246.

replace it with a world where we are just spectators, without much power to improve, change, or transform it.

No one likes feeling powerless. In fact, I will argue that agency, the ability to work with the people around us to make the world we live in, might be a universal human need. We're united both in our need for agency and, for the most part, in our lack of it. That goes for the three of us in the laundromat, for sure. We might have had different positions on health care reform, but we were all frustrated by our lack of agency. The two other men felt powerless against a government and corporate elite that "told them what to think" and was taking away their freedom. I felt powerless against an incomprehensible working-class culture that duped people out of following their own interests. We all got some of our facts wrong. But our shared feelings of powerlessness, and of anger at that powerlessness, were all too real.

We shared more than these feelings, though. We also shared a basic self-interest: a desire to take part in making our world, rather than letting someone else do it for us. In a different reality, we could have entered into a beautiful Freire-inspired dialogue, challenging and learning from each other as we built solidarity born out of the shared experience of the same oppression. But we couldn't do that. We couldn't even talk to each other. Not because we disagreed on an issue—we all can talk with lots of people we disagree with—but because we'd been organized into interpretive communities that made us hostile aliens to each other: not just in how we voted, but right down to how we talked, walked, sat, ate, and gestured. The culture-war frame had organized our ideas for us—the way we thought about Obama, about the health care bill, about each other, and

about ourselves—before we even knew what was happening. It had built a wall between us that seemed impregnable. And none of us felt we had the agency to do anything about it.

That's the question. What *can* we do about it? And how?

And who, exactly, is *we*?

CHAPTER TWO
Cyberpunk Neoliberalism

*This got me thinking: how could you translate the principles of a union into current technology? That's not to say unions are inherently antiquated or anything - but if you were to re-invent unions for the digital age, would it be possible to somehow make them more effective? The internet is the single biggest change to our ability to act collectively in human history, you'd *think* something could be done with that. [11:26 A.M.]*

I'm afraid I don't really know jack about unions. [3:56 P.M.]
—A computer programmer-friend, Facebook comments, 9/24/13

The conclusion was also reached that under the influence of education we could leave the result to the people.
—Mark Hanna, Republican Party strategist, 11/10/1896[1]

A Tale of a Fail

In the fall of 2010, I was co-teaching an introductory cultural studies course at the University of Minnesota. We had given our two hundred students a brilliant assignment, or so we thought: to change another student's mind. Specifically, about labor politics. We started by administering a ten-question, *Cosmo*-style quiz (e.g., "workers should always have the right to organize": 0 points if you agree, 1 point if you disagree), and asking them to arrange themselves on a spectrum, from 0 to 10 points—literally, from left to right. We got the predictable, more-or-even spread, and we asked them to find a partner roughly 5 points away from themselves, to get a maximum difference in each pair; then we gave these pairs some time to talk and get to know each other and write about each other's background, especially about their personal relationship to issues of labor and work. We then watched *Harlan County, USA*, Barbara Kopple's Oscar-

[1] See William T. Horner, *Ohio's Kingmaker: Mark Hanna, Man and Myth* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 211.

winning documentary about the 1972 miners' strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, which depicts the extreme plight of mine workers and their struggle against the bosses in brutal, graphic, unapologetically pro-labor terms. Finally, the main part of the assignment: (1) write something to your partner, to try to get her/him to see the film as you do, and then (2) write a response to whatever your partner sent you.

We expected a culture war.

What we got was near-perfect consensus.

Most students, regardless of where they'd stood on the spectrum, expressed feelings very similar to these five samples (all direct quotes):

> The workers are complaining about how bad their job is, yet they fight to have their jobs back with a little more money/benefits. I would rather be looking for another job than be protesting everyday to get my 'shitty' job back…the strike was not handled in the right way, and could have been hastened by harder work or by changing their lifestyle.
>
> The policeman [whom the miners talked with] was making much more, but not doing as much work. It is possible that the mine workers could be in that situation, if they would have searched out those other jobs.
>
> The thing that I don't understand about these people is why they don't go try and get a different job, and why they are wasting their time (9 months, they said in the movie I believe) going on strike when they could just go and find different jobs.
>
> As long as there are humans working in the mines, accidents are inevitable. New technology, such as respirators, improved mining tools, and much safer mine tunnels improved conditions exponentially. These new technologies, however, were NOT implemented developed [*sic*] by the unions. They are the product of modern science and engineering. Really, the only way to improve conditions is to discover new technologies to improve miner conditions even further, until all the mines are completely automated (which will probably occur in the not so distant future).
>
> I believe that the government raising the minimum wage would be more beneficial than negotiating higher wages through a union because that helps all American workers, not just those in a union.

Deep breath. Okay, so it's not that most students were pro-corporate and anti-worker, at least not exactly. Many of them, elsewhere in their writing, claimed to be very sympathetic with the workers' cause—and from the spectrum exercise, it was clear that a good number were pro-union in their conscious political beliefs. No, it's something more diffuse, something harder to get at. A generalized sense of detachment. A removed, defeatist feeling that while unions might be a nice idea, they don't really work. An abstract, cold assurance that action based on solidarity and confrontation doesn't really make sense, and that technology is going to make it all irrelevant anyway. And an unquestioning conviction that if you want a better life, there's no point in working together with the people around you to fight your oppressors and make a better world. No, you just need to work harder, or to better yourself as an individual, or—the most common response of all—to *just leave*.

As I read these responses, I got outraged, in all the predictable ways. My students had missed the fact that these workers can't *just leave*. They can't quit and go find a better job—there were no better jobs. They were broke and in the middle of a recession and couldn't even afford to move if they wanted to. (And unlike *some* people I could mention, I thought in my less generous moments, they couldn't just go ask mom and dad for some money to go to college, and do some unpaid internships while they networked their way into an entry-level corporate job.) Besides, did my students really expect these people to leave behind their whole livelihoods, and their whole lives? Leave everyone and everything that made them who they are, the community they'd spent their whole lives building, the fight they've spent their whole lives working to win? Leave their coworkers and neighbors and friends there to suffer, as if they never mattered at all? And

then, of course, there was my students' adorable faith in our high-minded government to raise the minimum wage out of the goodness of their hearts….

More than outraged, I was disgusted. Disgusted at my students' insensitivity, at their unchecked privilege, and above all, at their lack of any sense of solidarity. I didn't know what to do with all these feelings, so I did what felt natural. I complained. I talked about it with my grad-student colleagues, who were all too happy to affirm my feelings and contribute their own stories about their students' illiteracy and ideological backwardness. My students, I exclaimed any chance I got, had become so obsessed with individualism, so addicted to the romance of mobility (upward class mobility and mobility across space) that they no longer saw themselves as in any way connected to the people around them.

It took almost two years for the other shoe to drop. It happened in the spring of 2012, when the long campaign to organize the graduate assistants at the University of Minnesota into a union ended disastrously. I had worked on this campaign. I knew all the main organizers; many were friends. I was deeply invested in the issues. I'd worked at the University for a half-decade. I knew what low wages, exorbitant student fees, and an indifferent administration felt like. This *mattered* to me. And when we lost the vote, by an embarrassingly wide margin, I was crushed. I felt like I'd been personally slapped in the face and told my work, what I'd been doing for the past five years, wasn't worth anything.

So what did I do? Did I regroup, stay connected with my fellow workers, and keep working to build solidarity? Nope. I did the same thing I did after reading my students' writing on *Harlan County*: I complained. (The disposition to complain clearly

enjoys a comfortable place in my habitus.) I didn't complain strategically, as good organizers do together when they evaluate a failed action in order to learn from it. I complained randomly. To anyone who would listen. I complained about how bad the union was, how poorly-run the campaign was, how apathetic and misguided my fellow grad workers were.

And then, not long afterward, I *just left*. This was no act of false-consciousness; I knew what I was doing, the whole time. I knew I was betraying my principles. I knew I should stay and keep up the fight, in solidarity with my comrades. But…I just couldn't make myself do it. It just felt so *wrong*. Intolerable, even. I imagined what it would feel like to stay and fight, and I couldn't bear it. It felt like being trapped, sucked in, barred from living the life I wanted to live and doing the things I wanted to do, kept from fulfilling my potential in the world. And I didn't just have negative feelings about staying. I had *positive* feelings about leaving. It felt good. It felt right. Most of all, it felt like the only viable option—to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, like there was no real alternative.

So I did it. Greetings from West Hartford, Connecticut, where I am writing this book while living rent-free with my wealthy (enough) parents, employed precariously as a contracted research consultant, in solidarity with no one—and, honestly, much happier for it. Empowered, even. If my students had proven themselves insensitive, blindly privileged, and unable to feel any deep sense of solidarity with their fellow suffering workers, then so had I.

Epic fail.

Neoliberalism: The Conspiracy to Turn Us Into Consumers

So what to do?

First, of course, I can take a moment to flagellate myself.

Okay, I'm done.

Guess that feels a little better.[2]

Now for the important question. How did I—how did we—get here? To the point where this kind of utterly antisocial behavior feels normal, natural, even good—and, most importantly, like the only viable possibility?

I argued in Chapter One that working-class conservatives are neither dumb nor dupes. They're just people, doing what feels right to them in the situations they're in. If they're acting in ways that seem contradictory or self-destructive, we can understand this behavior by understanding how certain things have come to feel right to them: by understanding the market on which their habitus has been formed, and the interpretive communities they've been organized into. In this chapter, I aim to extend this same generosity to myself, my students, and all the rest of us who are guilty of this same kind

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[2] I don't mean this (entirely) as a joke. Given how important habitus is to this discussion, it's important to be in a place where we feel okay—okay enough, at least, to proceed. If self-flagellation is a way to get there, then amen to that. Too often, though, self-flagellation can be paralyzing; it can perpetually keep us in a place where we *don't* feel okay enough to proceed, and even make us feel that given all the privilege and other sins we're flagellating ourselves for, it would be more moral and righteous to do nothing. This pervasive feeling, which I'll discuss at greater length in Chapter Three, is one of the major limits on political agency in the twenty-first century West. The response to this feeling that I am arguing for, and attempting myself to enact, was laid out by pragmatist philosopher John Dewey: "For [Dewey] what makes us moral beings is that, for each of us, there are some acts we believe we ought to die rather than commit. Which acts these are will differ from epoch to epoch, and from person to person, but to be a moral agent is to be unable to imagine living with oneself after committing these acts. But now suppose that one has in fact done one of the things one could not have imagined doing, and finds that one is still alive. At that point, one's choices are suicide, a life of bottomless self-disgust, and an attempt to live so as never to do such a thing again. Dewey recommends the third choice. He thinks you should remain an agent, rather than either committing suicide or becoming a horrified spectator of your own past. He regards self-loathing as a luxury which agents—either individuals or nations—cannot afford." See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 33.

of awful behavior. What, I will ask, is the nature of this sick, twisted interpretive community that my students and I all seem to have been organized into together? Where did it come from? Who organized it? How did it get to be so big, and so powerful, and so seemingly-inevitable?

My opening fail provides some initial answers. It's an interpretive community that seems to skew young, white, and educated, though there are exceptions to all of these. It transcends all kinds of traditional barriers of culture, ideology, and identity—my students and I are all over the map in terms of the political spectrum and the culture wars, and yet we all ended up feeling the same way about our work-lives and our relationship to our fellow workers. And it's defined by some basic interpretive strategies, which we, as members of that interpretive community, use to understand ourselves and our world. *We are, basically, isolated individuals.* We pursue our own individual paths, toward well-being and away from suffering. We connect ourselves with other people only provisionally—sometimes right down to our families and closest friends and colleagues. We feel we have the right and the privilege and maybe even the responsibility to sever these connections, when they no longer serve our needs. *We are, basically, mobile.* We are no more connected to a place, even the place we're from, than we are to other people. We have the right and the privilege to move where we want to, when we want to. *We are, basically, risk-averse.* We do what we can, whenever we can, to maximize our own individual well-being and minimize our own individual suffering. We may wish to increase the pleasure or reduce the suffering of others—and we sometimes work very hard to do so—but we understand this work as altruism, as charity toward others. We do

not understand their suffering, or their pleasure, as fundamentally bound up with our own.

Human nature? Not in any simple sense. Humans exist, everywhere we've ever been and for as far back as we've been able to trace, in groups—families, tribes, religions, nations.[3] This impulse toward hyper-individualism and mobility is much, much newer. We aren't built for it, evolutionarily, and we often don't like it. But we believe, feel, know deep down in our guts—i.e., have been convinced—that that this is just the way the world works. That, again in Thatcher's words, "there is no alternative." (Or, as popularly abbreviated, "TINA." Hence my references, below, to the "TINA interpretive community.")

Thatcher didn't coin this phrase. Wikipedia traces it back to the great nineteenth-century social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, who did a great deal to legitimize and popularize this kind of individualism.[4] But what distinguishes Thatcher from earlier radical individualists such as Spencer is that she did not simply *believe* TINA was true; she actively built and used her power to *make* it true. Like her compatriot across the pond, Ronald Reagan, Thatcher employed the organized people and money of the nation she governed to promote and build the TINA interpretive community: through speeches and propaganda, through new laws and new law enforcement, and through direct action to bust any and all other interpretive communities that stood in its way, from trade unions

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[3] For a recent, readable, and well-cited (if also controversial) introduction to the huge amounts of anthropological research that support this claim, see Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha, *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Human Sexuality* (New York: Harper, 2010).

[4] "There Is No Alternative," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_is_no_alternative (October 23, 2013).

to entire national governments. (This is a process Pierre Bourdieu called the "unification of the market.")[5]

In other words: the triumph of TINA was no accident. It was not simply the winner on some impartial "cultural field" or "marketplace of ideas," as its apologists and even many of its detractors will claim. It was, rather, the result of a massive organizing effort, which propelled people like Thatcher and Reagan to power. It started in the 1930s, got institutionalized in the 1940s, took control of a major academic discipline in

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[5] The details: unification of markets usually happen in the context of nation-building. It is the formation of an "official" language, which alone will value on the "official" national markets that are being built: the markets of government, business, and formal education. And for Bourdieu at least, it's not a happy thing. To unify a market means, practically speaking, to destroy all competing markets. This is what Bourdieu means by "symbolic violence." It's an unfortunate term, which has given rise to all kinds of misuse (in which "symbolic violence" can be everything from assigning a book written by a dead white male to mistakenly referring to a person by an incorrect gender pronoun). But Bourdieu means something a lot more precise: symbolic violence is the process of destroying local and regional markets that might be in a position to compete with the new, dominant market. When certain groups (often, rich white guys) build a nation around themselves, a big part of the process is subjugating other groups (often less rich and/or less white folks). This subjugation happens through *physical violence*, wrought by police and military and paramilitary groups (e.g. the KKK), and through *economic violence*, wrought by redlining and discrimination (to devalue their fiscal capital) and regulating subjugated groups' language (to devalue their cultural capital). It is through this violent process of unification that bigger markets—regional markets, national markets, global markets—are formed. People do not voluntarily devalue their own culture's language, any more than they voluntarily devalue the currency in their own wallets. As Bourdieu writes, describing speakers of non-standard French dialects: "To induce the holders of dominated linguistic competences to collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression by endeavoring for example to speak 'French' to their children or requiring them to speak 'French' at home, with the more or less explicit intention of increasing their value on the educational market, it was necessary for the school system [which valued only standard French] to be perceived as the principal (indeed the only) means of access to administrative positions." Bourdieu implies, but does not outright say, that to successfully organize this idea—the idea that you can only succeed by forsaking your own way of speaking and taking up the standard French of the school system, to the point where people will willingly collaborate in the destruction of their own language out of sheer self-interest—a whole lot of other organizing has to happen, too. Most importantly: organizing the people and money and ideas necessary to dis-organize all of the other markets, the ones that could compete with the school system and the central administrative bureaucracy it serves. To unify the national market, these competing markets had to be destroyed. Or at least, very badly burned. That process of organized, systematic destruction, is a critical part of organizing a dominant interpretive community. When Bourdieu talks about unifying a linguistic market, he means "language" in the narrow sense, of French peasants giving up their traditional rolled-r in favor of the Parisian uvular-r, in order to get better-paying jobs on a market whose values are set—always—by the dominant class. I propose we can use the same analysis to analyze language in a wider sense: in the sense of interpretive strategies. No less than the "correct" pronunciation of a consonant, the "correct" interpretive strategies for making sense of an issue (such as workers' rights), a historical event (such as a strike), or a group of people (such as a union…or a group of students) depend heavily on how—and by whom—a market was unified. And in both cases, once a market is successfully unified, those who wish to succeed on it will find themselves adjusting their habitus accordingly, if not always consciously. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 46-61.

the early 1970s, started taking control of national governments in the late 1970s, and continues to grow to this day. It is directly responsible for a great deal of the cultural and political environment of the past forty years—including a whole lot of events and phenomena we've assumed to be random, spontaneous, and natural. This organizing effort, commonly known as "neoliberalism," is one of the most powerful organized ideas in the contemporary world.

And yet, like all organized ideas, it is still human-made. Humans organized it; humans also can dis-organize it. Powerful as it's become, it is not the Sauron many scholars have made it out to be: a superhuman force, a shadow eclipsing the landscape, crushing all attempts to resist it. It's just a well-organized, real-life conspiracy. Not a diabolical conspiracy, *à la* late-night-AM-radio or Pinky and the Brain, but a normal, everyday kind of conspiracy—the kind described by the world's greatest conspiracy theorist, Adam Smith: "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices."[6] If neoliberalism is a scheme to conquer the world—and it may well be—it's still born out of the same simple self-interest that leads two fruit sellers to get together and fix prices: through secret collaboration, the conspirators can make more money than they could through market competition alone. Like these hypothetical fruit sellers, neoliberals argue in public that markets are natural and occur spontaneously, but in private they know better: they conspire, very intentionally, to organize those so-called natural markets.

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[6] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter VIII, http://www.adamsmith.org/quotes (March 13, 2014).

This chapter shows how it was done. It tells the story of how the political campaign called neoliberalism was organized, and how it succeeded in organizing an interpretive community that has conquered large parts of the world. It also tells the story how a certain literary subgenre emerged, just as neoliberalism was taking over the governments of the English-speaking world, that allowed the TINA interpretive community to spread far wider than its organizers could ever have thought possible. This conspiracy and this coincidence, combined, produced the historical and cultural formation I'm calling "cyberpunk neoliberalism."[7]

Cyberpunk neoliberalism, ultimately, may be the matter with Kansas—and with much besides, right down to my students' writing. Student writing, I'm convinced, is a vast and unexplored archive, a pipeline into understanding cultural-capital markets and interpretive communities. I'm especially interested in the "bad" kind, the writing we teachers hate the most, the kind that's hasty, uninformed, and filled with *clichés*. It comes right from the habitus. Students write this way when they don't understand the assignment, or they don't feel like they can fulfill its requirements—so they write something that *feels right*, something that's worked for them on other formal markets (especially in high school), something they feel their instructor will value. They usually fail in their efforts to impress, but their attempts speak volumes about the dispositions and interpretive strategies they've learned.[8]

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[7] I'm again indebted to drama professor, sociologist, and cultural studies founder Raymond Williams for his concept of "formations." For an introduction, see Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 115-120—and, for a discussion of the related concept "structures of feeling," 128-135.

[8] A key part of Bourdieu's theory of the habitus is that the dispositions in a given habitus represent both what feels right and what it seems like the market-setting authority will value highly—both, at the same time. In technical terms, what a habitus does is anticipate profits on a given market. The more cultural capital (on that market) that a habitus possesses, the more accurately it will be able to anticipate what words, gestures, expressions, opinions, etc. to use on that market, to receive the most profits (higher social esteem, higher grades, greatest prospects for employment and advancement and other awards). So, the

About three years into my university teaching career, I developed a handout for students, with some basic writing tips. I included a few "greatest hits" of bad student writing, as an example of the kind of things *not* to write:

"Every individual is different."

"People need to think for themselves."

"We have to look at both sides."

"Our society is always advancing."

Look familiar? If you've ever read student writing—or even *been* a student yourself—you might be groaning with me. These are the kind of things students say when they don't know what to say. They don't seem "political," or "ideological" or otherwise controversial at all. Just common sense, obviously true, vaguely wise- and mature-sounding. But now think about the coherent habitus they imply. It's a habitus you could almost call liberal—with its vague respect for difference and belief in progress—but above all, it's blasé. Resigned. Disposed to disengage. It treats all politics and public affairs the way Frank's Kansans (and many others) treat the economy: as something we can't possibly have any agency in, and maybe shouldn't, so why bother trying? It is the basic habitus of TINA: disposed to interpretive strategies that make us isolated individuals, with no basic solidarity with each other, who should strive to remain

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more attuned a habitus becomes to a given market, the less distinction there is between "what you're supposed to say/do/want" and "what you really say/do/want." A person actively working to develop a highly-valued habitus on a given market, such as a university student, will often repress this distinction, to the degree that s/he doesn't actively feel it. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 66-89 (the chapter entitled "Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits"). For valuable research and information on how students read and interpret assignments, see the "Writing Matters" series on the website of the Writing Program at the University of Manoa, Hawaii, especially the first entry: http://manoa.hawaii.edu/mwp/program-research/writing-matters/wm-1 (March 13, 2014).

disinterested (if not uninterested) in all public issues, and who stand by, agency-less, as "our society" progresses along its predetermined, alternative-less path.

Again, I'm not sure my students *like* this habitus. I'm not even sure they think the things they're saying are *true*. They say them because that's what they feel they're *supposed* to say, what they *have* to say, if they want their habitus to be valued on the market of academia, so they can accumulate cultural capital in the form of teacherly approval, higher grades, awards, and internships, and ultimately fiscal capital in the form of high-paying jobs. This is how social reality gets made: we say or do certain things, and the more we get rewarded for saying or doing them, the more we keep saying or doing them. Somewhere along the way, we start believing them. Multiply that by an entire culture and these things actually start to be true. Not always a bad thing. It can work productively, as in sociologist Jürgen Habermas's "cognitive dissonance": put someone with a habitus with an unwanted disposition (say, racial prejudice) onto a market where that disposition is not valued, and slowly that disposition will start to change. But all you need to do is imagine this scenario with the terms reversed—a habitus *without* an unwanted disposition goes onto a market where that disposition *is* valued—to see that this process can just as easily be destructive. And in the case of the TINA habitus, that's more often the direction it goes.

How widespread is this habitus? Well, consider a piece of Hollywood trivia. For much of the twentieth century, the most common scripted line in all mainstream films was: "Let's get outta here."[9] (My students and I, it seems, were not alone in our desire to *just leave*.) More importantly, consider my *source* for this trivia: a book called *Words*

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[9] Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 107n.

That Work, by Frank Luntz, the celebrated pollster and Republican strategist, and my one-time neighbor.[10] Between gigs for Newt Gingrich and other conservative leaders (he coined the phrases "tax relief" and the "death tax," among many others), Luntz spends a lot of his time and talents "on the corporate side of labor disputes."[11] That is, he is a union-busting consultant. Take a look at his strategies for busting unions—the ways he tells managers to talk with their workers, to convince those workers to voluntarily give up their agency and often accept lower wages and benefits—and you'll see that they all depend on a workforce that's already oriented toward "getting outta here."

Luntz's main directive: shift the language of labor disputes "from '*employee strike*' to '*employee satisfaction*.'" A world of difference lies between these two terms. A *strike* is an expression of collective agency. It implies that workers are *producers*, who work together—through a union they've built and they own—to build the necessary power to improve their work environment. *Satisfaction*, on the other hand, is an expression of passive contentment. It implies that workers are *consumers*, isolated individuals who are each deciding for themselves on which of two products is superior: the product offered by management, or the other produced by the union. The union, in this latter scenario, is not something *by* or *of* the workers, but something external to them: just another corporation, offering them another consumer good.[12]

To bust a union, Luntz says, first you've got to make sure workers are thinking of themselves as individual consumers, not a collective producer—and then make sure you

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[10] Luntz and I both grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, and graduated from William H. Hall High School (he in 1980, I in 2006), barely three miles from where I currently sit.
[11] Luntz, *Words That Work*, 140.
[12] Hence the anti-union video Target apparently shows its employees, which insists not only that unions will strip workers of right to express themselves as individuals, but that "a union is a business." See Hamilton Nolan, "Behold, Target's Brand New Cheesy Anti-Union Video," *Gawker* (website), http://gawker.com/behold-targets-brand-new-cheesy-anti-union-video-1547193676/+hamilton_nolan (March 25, 2004).

provide them with a better product than that other business, the union, can offer. He encourages employers to ask workers consumer-framed questions like, "*Are you getting value for the dues you're paying? What do your dues actually pay for? Is your union paying attention to YOUR needs and YOUR priorities?*," and "*No one wins in a strike…but union leaders continue to get paid. Is that really fair to you?*" Then, with the rift between leaders and members established, management can rush in and fill the gap: "Employees tend to accept the arguments of the side that made them first, particularly when they are made with a personal and passionate tone." For example: "In a looming strike situation with a Denver supermarket chain…the response was so quick and spread so effectively that employees actually found management more credible and responsive to their questions and concerns than their own official union representatives." (Of course, management's extra funds and sway over workers' livelihoods probably played a role, too.) Finally, Luntz tells employers to promise workers "accurate, unbiased information" and "full disclosure," and to remind them—in language you'll recognize—that "you have a right to hear all sides."[13]

Luntz's union-busting rhetoric, in other words, relies on workers coming into a labor dispute with a well-formed TINA habitus. This doesn't mean Luntz isn't worth the many millions of dollars he's been paid. It just means that no piece of language, however excellent, can ever organize (or dis-organize) an interpretive community on its own. Like Thatcher and Reagan, Luntz owes a great deal of his success to an organizing campaign that started long before he was born. If he's able to convince workers to give up their collective agency and become passive consumers, it's only because they were already on their way there long before they came on the job. We know this. We've read what they

[13] Luntz, *Words That Work*, 140-146.

wrote as students. When "every individual is different" is deep in your habitus, you'll be disposed to understanding "your needs and priorities" as separate from those of your fellow employees, let alone those of "the union." When you reflexively *know* that "people need to think for themselves" and "we have to look at both sides," you'll be more likely to go to management's "conversations" and take what they say seriously—especially given their management's bias toward the "free" individual and their subtle, Luntz-inspired suggestions that the union is a conformist conspiracy trying to put one over on you and suppress your individual greatness. And since "our society is always advancing," you'll want to be part of that advance, and opposed to things—like strikes—that seem to stand in its way.

It's a mighty bill of goods that TINA has sold us. When we understand ourselves as producers, we have agency: we have control over our own lives, and the ability to work together with the people around us to make the world we live in more like we'd like it to be. When we understand ourselves as consumers, we don't have agency: our only freedom is Milton Friedman's famous "freedom to choose," the freedom to consume any one of several products, made by others. The difference between being a producer and a consumer is the difference between being able to do something about it when our boss is screwing us over, and not. Between having some control over our lives and our world, and relinquishing that control to "the market." Between forming close, productive relationships with the people around us, and remaining isolated. And to risk stating the obvious: most of us don't like being powerless, out of control, and isolated. Think, just for a moment, about the number of songs, poems, movies, stories, TV shows, and plays that are about the search for community, for connection, for belonging. If it's not the

number-one theme among all bestselling American art and cultural production, it got to be up there. We know, on some level, that understanding ourselves as consumers is, well, consuming us.

So why do we do it? Because "there is no alternative," say the neoliberals—and the more power they build, the truer that statement becomes. The fewer and further-between the alternatives get, the harder they are to seek, find, and keep. Thanks in no small part to the neoliberals, and the union-busting consultants like Luntz who followed in their wake, organizing a union is infinitely harder now than it was thirty years ago.[14] And besides, unions are old, outdated things that don't really work anyway, not in today's technology-driven economy. *And besides*, we're probably going to *just leave* soon anyway—because we're free and mobile individuals and you can, and/or because we're one of the increasing number of workers without job security—so why bother?

In this context, it may not surprise you to hear how hard it is to organize graduate-student workers. We might be working for peanuts for five years, or more like ten in the humanities, but we're always focused on that prestigious, high-paying professorship we're going get; there may be ever fewer of them, as the neoliberals destroy full-time jobs and replace them with temps and adjuncts and online classes, but that's all the more reason to keep working hard now and out-compete our colleagues and not get distracted by soul-sucking things like unions. What might surprise you more, though, is how widespread this same mentality has become, even far outside the so-called "knowledge economy." My friend Peter Marincel, an organizer with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), once told me about his experience organizing security guards

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[14] See Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 65-72.

in downtown Minneapolis. Yes, they know their wages and working conditions are bad. But no, they don't want to join a union. Why? Because they're about to leave this awful job and become cops. Pete nods, leaves, and comes back a year later. They're still there. Want to join a union now? No, no, for real they're about to leave this job and become cops….

This may be the neoliberals' most dangerously effective rhetorical strategy. It's not the despair of aloneness and isolation—that, at least, can inspire us to act. It's the opposite; it's Pandora's last and worst curse: *hope*. The excited, almost erotic pursuit of the one kind of agency that we feel is still possible: the kind that comes from individual, heroic action, rising above the masses and riding the wave of "our society's" perpetual progress to reach "a level of proficiency exceeding anything [we'd] known or imagined. Beyond ego, beyond personality, beyond awareness." A transcendent, Christ-like agency, at once individual and universal, humble and world-altering, and fueled, always, by *technology*. This is the agency of Case, the lone, emaciated hacker who singlehandedly destroys one of the most powerful corporate empires in the world from behind a computer and, simultaneously, alters the future of all information-exchange on planet Earth—as described by William Gibson in the final pages of *Neuromancer*, a novel that very well may have altered the future of all information-exchange on planet Earth.[15]

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[15] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), 262.

Madison, 2011: Cyberpunk Agency—or, How We Learned to Stop Organizing and Love TINA

In February of 2011, tens of thousands of Wisconsinites had occupied the state capitol in Madison, in a move that anticipated the Occupy movement several months later. Their goal: to stop Tea Party governor Scott Walker and his campaign to severely restrict the collective-bargaining rights of public-sector unions.

They would not succeed. Membership in public-sector unions would decline by 60 percent in the following three years.[16] But in the process, they did drive Rush Limbaugh to finally admit what many had suspected for years: that he doesn't like workers.

Or more precisely, that he doesn't like "workers," as a term:

> There's nothing to me sacred about a union just because it is a union, just because it may be the location of, quote, unquote, "the workers," which is a Marxist term I also object to when being applied to people who go to work in this country. We have entrepreneurs. We have employees. We have associates. Workers exist in China, in the old Soviet Union, in Korea and in Cuba.[17]

In this claim, right out of the Luntz playbook, we can see the entire neoliberal agenda. It's not just about union-busting. It's not just about deregulating and globalizing. It's about making a radically new world, where everything, *everything*, is

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[16] See Steven Greenhouse, "Wisconsin's Legacy for Unions," *New York Times* (February 22, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/business/wisconsins-legacy-for-unions.html?_r=0 (March 14, 2014).

[17] Rush Limbaugh, "Public Sector Unions: Monopolies Organizing Against the Taxpayers," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, February 17, 2011, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2011/02/17/public_sector_unions_monopolies_organizing_against_the_taxpayers (March 25, 2014). In the same segment, Limbaugh elaborates: "when you as an individual join a union, you are essentially saying good-bye to yourself as an individual. You can work as hard as you want, you can be better than the next person on the line, better than the next teacher. It isn't gonna matter. You're all going to make the same amount of money. The difference is maybe you can become a foreman, maybe you can become somebody gets more overtime than someone else, but the basic wage is gonna remain what it is for whatever that contract says no matter how well you do your job—or no matter how poorly."

subsumed under one unified corporate-capital market ("the Market"); where unions, and government, and families, and religions, are just other kinds of businesses; and where "workers," as Limbaugh prescribes, are just other kinds of entrepreneurs.

Let's take a second to reflect on how radical this position is. It's very different from classical liberalism—the philosophy of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill and the Founding Fathers—which understood government, civil society, and the marketplace as separate "spheres," whose separateness was key to a free and well-functioning society. (Corruption, the quintessential liberal vice, happens when one of those spheres intrudes into another: the marketplace into government, civil society into the marketplace, and so on.)[18] The marketplace itself, further, was defined by the interaction of two distinct interpretive communities: labor and capital, workers and entrepreneurs.[19] This was not a controversial position, until recently. (Yes, Karl Marx wrote about it, but so did Abraham Lincoln.)[20] Labor and capital both exist together on a fiscal-capital market (what we normally mean by "the market"), but they have always developed their habitus on two separate cultural-capital markets. The laborer's (or worker's) habitus is defined by the disposition to *make enough to get by*—or in its middle-class variant, to *make a decent living*. The capitalist's (or entrepreneur's) habitus, on the other hand, is defined

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[18] For an introduction to "liberalism" in its various forms, see Stuart Hall, "Variants of Liberalism," in *Politics and Ideology*, ed. James Donald and Stuart Hall (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1986), 34-69.

[19] In this chapter, where I'm writing about "labor" and "work" exclusively in the context of capital-based markets, I use the two terms interchangeably. On a capital-based market, there is no difference between them; in English translations of Marx, it's all "labor." (Marx used the word *Arbeit*, which can be translated both ways. *Werk*, the literal translation of "work," is only used in the noun form, to describe works of art or literature; it's not used as a verb in modern German.) In Chapter Four, where I discuss "labor" and "work" in a wider context—roughly along the lines of philosopher Hannah Arendt—I will make a clear and important distinction between the two.

[20] "Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration." Abraham Lincoln, "First Annual Message, December 3, 1961," *The American Presidency Project* (website), http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29502 (March 14, 2014).

by a disposition to *accumulate as much wealth as possible*. This doesn't mean capitalists are greedy. (Some are, some aren't.) It's just the structure of capital-based markets. No one invests money without expecting to get back more than they put in; and if no one invested money, the market would collapse. This also explains why capitalist markets, unlike other kinds of markets, must keep expanding in order to survive. Which in turn explains why capitalist countries, sooner or later, tend to start fighting imperialist wars.[21]

Most of us, most of the time, are laborers—workers. We might play capitalist on the side, investing money in "the market," but we make our living from our paychecks. Our interests aren't necessarily *opposed* to the capitalists—we all want a healthy, growing market—but neither are they necessarily the same. Again, this is not because capitalists are bad people; it's just the structure of the market. Workers are looking to get hired and paid a decent wage; capitalists are looking to hire as few workers as possible and pay them as little as possible. (Hence the political cartoon where a manager hands a worker a pink slip and tells him: "As a shareholder, you should be happy!")

Both kinds of interpretive communities tend to organize, in order to make members *aware* of their particular interests and to *act* on those interests, collectively. Communities of workers, when organized, tend to look like unions or workers' centers (the latter are particularly common among undocumented workers). Communities of

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[21] Marx didn't invent the distinction between labor and capital, but he might have explained it in the most detail. Laborers, he explained, participate in the economy through what he called the "C-M-C" cycle, where "C" stands for "commodity" and "M" stands for "money." Laborers start with a commodity: their labor. They sell that commodity, to an employer, to make money. They then use that money to buy the things they need to live, at whatever level of comfort, and above all, to their sellable commodity—their labor—in good enough shape that they can keep selling it. Capitalists, on the other hand, participate in the economy through the "M-C-M" cycle, or more precisely, the "M-C-*M'*" cycle, where *M'* must always be kept larger than M. Capitalists start with money, or *capital*. They then spend, or *invest*, that money in commodities—not for their own use, as when workers by commodities—but in order to re-sell them for more than they paid for them, thus making a profit. See Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, Chapter Four ("The General Formula for Capital"), http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch04.htm (October 24, 2013).

capitalists, when organized, tend to look like trade or managers' associations—the kind of groups that hire firms like Luntz's—or para-academic associations like the Mont Pelerin Society, about which more below. The interaction between these two kinds of organized groups, sometimes cooperative and sometimes tense, has been a part of capital-based markets since these markets' origins. Economists, policymakers, and historians have traditionally this interaction a vital part of a well-functioning capital-based market: they keep the economy healthy, active, and responsive to the people it serves.

What distinguishes neoliberals is (1) they totally reject this viewpoint, and (2) they act on this belief. Neoliberals believe that there is, and therefore should be, no tension among interpretive communities within "the Market" (with a capital M)—we're all entrepreneurs selling things, including but not limited to our own labor (as per Limbaugh), and we're all consumers, buying and using things of our choice to lead happy lives (as per Luntz). And they build and use all available power, including state power, to create this reality: above all, to destroy interpretive communities in which people understand themselves as anything but entrepreneurs and consumers.[22]

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[22] The economist Philip Mirowski, a leading historian of neoliberalism, has identified eleven basic positions that neoliberals have tended to take, some in pronouncement and some in practice. Like the positions of any political campaign, these have shifted over space and time, but this is a helpful rough guide. I paraphrase these eleven positions as follows: (1) "Free" markets do *not* occur naturally. They must be actively constructed through political organizing. (2) "The market" is an information processor, and the most efficient one possible—more efficient than any government or (so-called) public sphere ever could be. (3) Market society is, and therefore should be, the natural and inexorable state of humankind. (4) The political goal of neoliberals is not to destroy the state, but to take control of it, and to redefine its structure and function, in order to create and maintain the freedom of corporations. (5) There is no contradiction between public/politics/citizenship and private/ market/entrepreneur-and-consumerism—because the latter *does* and *should* eclipse the former. (6) The most important virtue—more important than justice, or anything else—is freedom, defined "negatively" as "freedom to choose" (in Milton Friedman's famous phrase), and most importantly, defined as the freedom of corporations to act as they please. (7) Capital has a natural right to flow freely across national boundaries—labor, not so much. (8) Inequality—of resources, income, wealth, and even political rights—is a *good thing*; it prompts productivity, because people envy the rich and emulate them; people who complain about inequality are either sore losers or old fogies, who need to get hip to the way things work nowadays. (9) Corporations can do no wrong—by definition. (10) The market, engineered and promoted by neoliberal experts, can always provide solutions to problems seemingly caused by the market in the first place: there's always "an app for that." (11) There is no

A total neoliberal victory wouldn't just mean the end of organized labor; it would mean the end of organized *everything*—except capital. It would mean workers would (have no choice but to) understand themselves as entrepreneurs, who would presumably share their fellow entrepreneurs' interest in deregulating and privatizing and cutting everything that stands in the way of corporate profit…because they themselves would understand themselves as corporations. These newly-christened "entrepreneurs," no longer "bound" by wages and contracts and collectives, would be "free" to pursue any opportunity, come and *just leave* whenever they please—and, often, to starve. Which, as my students would have it, would be their own fault. They should have been better entrepreneurs. The Market hath spoken.

We're not that far off. If Luntz tells managers, "don't call them workers any more—a worker is a lower valued job," that must mean that, in his extensive focus-group testing, he has found that *workers themselves believe it*.[23] The rise of contract labor, in the place of long-term employment, has meant that many of us have been forced to start understanding ourselves as corporations—myself, alas, included. And our popular culture is following suit. Consider our current crop of celebrities: barely a worker, employee, or professional among them. Other than politicians and entertainers—who'll never go away—they're pretty much all entrepreneurs: Steve Jobs. Bill Gates. Even Mark Zuckerberg. Where's our Clarence Darrow? Our Marie Curie? Our Frank Lloyd

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difference between *is* and *should be*: "free" markets both *should be* (normatively) and *are* (positively) most the efficient economic system, *and* the most just way of doing politics, *and* the most empirically true description of human behavior, *and* the most ethical and moral way to live—which in turn explains, and justifies, why "free" markets *should be*, and as neoliberals build more and more power, increasingly *are*, universal. See Philip Mirowski, "Postface," in *The Road from Mont Pelerin*, ed. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 417-455; see especially 434-440.

[23] Luntz, *Words That Work*, 146.

Wright? Our Thurgood Marshall? Nowhere in sight. Entrepreneur-mania has, literally, cornered the market.

The center of this growing, neoliberal über-market is Silicon Valley. Not necessarily the place, but the signifiers it represents. There are lots of people who are still skeptical about the inevitability of "the Market" taking over everything: witness politicians in both parties railing against "Wall Street" in favor of "Main Street." But start talking tech, and suddenly reasonable, rational, Democratic-voting folks start talking like far-right neoliberals. "Policymakers should work with the grain of the Internet rather than against it," argues Google CEO Eric Schmidt. "Without a major upgrade, [our] political system will continue producing legal code that is Internet-incompatible," insists popular tech blogger Rebecca MacKinnon. We need to "learn from the way the Internet has been organized, and apply those principles to help improve the way city governments worked, or school systems taught students," declares science writer Steven Johnson.[24]

These are radical statements—no less radical for being so commonplace they're almost banal. "The Internet," the way a lot of pundits talk about it, becomes (in the words of critic Evgeny Morozov) "the avatar of everything modern and progressive."[25] *It* is good and real and inevitable; *we* must follow it, or at least get out of its way: "We can just stand back and watch; 'the Internet' will take care of itself—and us."[26] But what would it mean, exactly, to "work with the grain of the Internet," to produce laws that are "Internet-compatible," to "learn from the way the Internet has been organized"? Basically, it would mean the same thing as if you took each of these quotes and replaced

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[24] Quoted in Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 23, 25. Morozov calls these kind of people "geeks," but I think "pundits" or "commentators" is more accurate. In my experience, the geeks themselves—the people doing the programming—tend to be a more mixed bag.
[25] Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 38.
[26] Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 24.

"the Internet" with "the Market." (In this context, they pretty much mean the same thing.) It would mean giving up on democracy altogether. It would mean abandoning any chance of working together to make our world, and willingly surrendering our agency to inhuman entities beyond our control or comprehension ("the Market" / "the Internet")—and, practically, to the humans who claim to understand and represent these entities.

Some tech-commentators are just plain-old anti-democratic. Witness Occupy leader-turned-Google engineer (and self-described troll) Justine Tunney, who recently (and apparently unironically) circulated a petition to "(1) Retire all government employees with full pensions. (2) Transfer administrative authority to the tech industry. (3) Appoint Eric Schmidt CEO of America."[27] Or writers Parag and Ayesha Khanna, darlings of the TED-talk circuit, who (again according to Morozov) "warn world leaders that democracy might be incompatible with globalization and capitalism. And that the West needs to be more like China and Singapore." That these nations, along with others they praise such as Russia and the United Arab Emirates, are repressive authoritarian regimes, does not seem to cross their mind, or maybe even to matter much: "politics slows things down; but technology"—individual, entrepreneurial, apolitical—"speeds things up."[28]

But a lot of others either don't have an explicit politics, or even explicitly *oppose* anti-democratic states. Such is the case with William Gibson, whose first piece of

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[27] Alex Hern, "Occupy Founder Calls on Obama to Appoint Eric Schmidt 'CEO of America,'" *The Guardian* (March 20, 2014), http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/mar/20/occupy-founder-obama-eric-schmidt-ceo-america (March 25, 2014).
[28] Evgeny Morozov, "The Naked and the TED," *The New Republic* (August 2, 2012), http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/105703/the-naked-and-the-ted-khanna (October 24, 2013).

nonfiction, written a decade after *Neuromancer* on assignment for *Wired* magazine, was a brutal takedown of Singapore and its repressive government.[29] And yet, the world Gibson creates in books like *Neuromancer* has nothing to do with democracy—it's a veritable neoliberal paradise:

> Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone….Biz here was a constant subliminal hum, and death the accepted punishment for laziness, carelessness, lack of grace, the failure to heed the demands of an intricate protocol.[30]

You'd be forgiven for thinking this is a dystopia—that is, that Gibson is describing a world he doesn't like very much. There is a lot about *Neuromancer* that would seem to place it in the genre of books like *1984* or *Fahrenheit 451*, or even like *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*: it's set in the near future (the 2030s, Gibson has said in interviews), in the aftermath of a massive war (presumably the Cold War gone hot), in a social and political universe where the dignity of human life is a lot less respected than it is now (which is saying something); its protagonist is a lone, socially isolated agent who struggles to navigate this brutal social and political universe; and its plot centers on a life-or-death battle with a powerful authority figure, with the potential to upend the whole world order. Much more simply, Gibson's world of hustle-or-die just doesn't sound like a very appealing place to live.

Except that, for a lot of people, it apparently does. The reviewer from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, featured on the back cover of the trade edition, wrote: "It made me

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[29] William Gibson, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty," *Wired* 1, no. 4 (September/October 1993), http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.04/gibson.html (October 25, 2013).
[30] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 7.

want to live in its world." Surely no one has ever said this about Orwell's Oceania or Collins's District 12—or at least, no one a publisher would want to feature on the back cover. Yet this reviewer is far from alone. Huge numbers of people, in the three decades since *Neuromancer* ushered in the world of cyberpunk, have actively sought to live in its world, and even to remake the rest of the world in its image. I'm not talking about sci-fi and fantasy nerds, LARPing their way into Middle-Earth, or even self-conscious cyberpunks, proudly dressing and living in the style of *Blade Runner*. I'm talking about modern (or if you prefer, postmodern) technology itself, as it's played out in the three decades since *Neuromancer*'s publication. The Internet, and much of the world it wrought, is a literary formation as much as a technical one. Long before the Bay Area's venture capital-fueled tech startups were a glimmer in Thomas Friedman's eye, this world was being formed in the living rooms of a novelists—at least one of whom, Gibson himself, would not even own a computer until well into the next century.[31]

I'm not speaking in metaphor or allusion. I'm talking about that rare and elusive thing: actual literary agency. A book that really, truly changed things. *Neuromancer*

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[31] For a brief, thoughtful introduction to the history and socioeconomic context of cyberpunk—which anticipates several of the arguments I make here—see Paul Youngquist, "Cyberpunk, War, and Money: Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*," *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 319-347. "Cyberpunk," Youngquist writes, "appears shockingly short-lived," starting with *Neuromancer* in 1984 and lasting only until "Neal Stephenson dealt the genre a killer blow with his virtual swift sword in *Snow Crash* (1992)." He suggests that "cyberpunk, the sci-fi subgenre that gave us cyberspace, now seems a thing of the past, an old dystopian dream of Reaganomics gone global," but at the same time, it "is certainly the brainchild of the economic history that fulfills itself in globalization. Frederic Jameson got that much right when he called it *the* literary genre of transnational corporate capitalism. But I want to suggest that its popular force arises from its capacity less to disrupt than to consolidate that history. Cyberpunk confirms the arrival of a world built by cybernetics, sustained by info-tech, and driven by global capital flows," and Stephenson's "own demolition of cyberpunk, *Snow Crash*…answers corporate domination with free enterprise." In other words, cyberpunk as literary subgenre only lasted for eight years—because at the end of those eight years, its mission was accomplished. No more actual cyberpunk novels were needed; the economic history of the world, thenceforth, would itself be a cyberpunk novel. Youngquist's chronology also largely explains my decision to focus almost exclusively on *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* in the analysis to follow: they are the beginning and end, the alpha and omega, as well as probably the two widest-read and referenced books in the subgenre.

alone, back in 1984, gave the world the terms "cyberspace," "microsoft," and "the matrix." It quickly became a must-read for the same young engineers and entrepreneurs who would soon bring these concepts to life. Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, in 1992, ushered in the next wave of innovation by inventing the "Metaverse": not just a hangout for nerdy hackers, as in *Neuromancer* and other earlier stories, but a space for ordinary first-worlders to meet, to be entertained, and above all, to consume. Stephenson's Metaverse, along with his coinage of "avatar" (in its modern, Internet usage), laid the foundation on which software engineers, including many avowed Stephenson fans, would later build programs such as Second Life and Google Earth.

Gibson and Stephenson gave us more than just technology. Interspersed with their prophetic technical innovations is a compelling and downright seductive vision of a social, political, and above all economic future. A future where, it seems, any individual with enough technological know-how could attain the same kind of singlehanded, world-changing agency that these authors themselves had attained. And a future where the pursuit of any *other* kind of agency—especially the collective, political kind—was utterly futile. This is not to say that either author had an intentional political agenda. Stephenson goes out of his way to insist he cares about the technology, not the "social message," and there's no reason to believe Gibson is any different.[32] There's certainly no

[32] Stephenson, in a 2012 interview for a SF fan site, was prompted: "One of the examples you mention in the book [*Some Remarks*] is…about Gibson and cyberspace, and how that kick-started the whole dot com thing, and he's always been intentionally quite sketchy on the science side of things. And another example that springs to mind is *Snow Crash*—with how it obviously inspired Google Earth and Second Life. Now I don't like to use the term dystopian for either of those books, but neither of them are particularly optimistic books either." He responded: "Yeah. I mean in a narrow sense they are optimistic—optimistic about what people could do with the science. The social message isn't necessarily optimistic. But that's alright, really what I'm more thinking of is the technical side, of getting things built." See Tim Maughan, "Geeks, Swords and the *Snow Crash* Movie: Neal Stephenson in Conversation," Tor.com (website) (September 19, 2012), http://www.tor.com/blogs/2012/09/geeks-swords-and-the-snow-crash-movie-neal-stephenson-in-conversation (March 26, 2014).

evidence (that I know of) linking Gibson or Stephenson, or any other cyberpunk author for that matter, to the neoliberal campaign. Yet their writings, intentionally or not, provided the neoliberals with some of their most compelling and widely-distributed rhetoric—at the exact moment when, after nearly fifty years of organizing, they were finally taking state power. To live in the world of cyberpunk, as so many of us apparently want to do, is to live in a world where there is truly no alternative—and what a wonderful thing that is!

A quick note, before I go further. Back when I was in college, the great University of Chicago historian of science Robert J. Richards once suggested, lovingly, that when I write literary criticism I sound a little like Robespierre—a moral crusader, inveighing against authors' moral and political impurities, with a will to send them to the guillotine. I fear he may be right. So let me be clear: I *like* cyberpunk. I find it smart, lyrical, thought-provoking, fun to read, and in many ways, beautiful. If I put such things on Facebook, I'd definitely list Gibson and Stephenson as two of my favorite authors. I met Gibson once, and I found him to be gentle, modest, and utterly charming.[33] (I imagine I'd like Stephenson, too, egotism notwithstanding.) I'm not looking to "take down" or "call out" or "debunk" cyberpunk: I wouldn't send it to the guillotine, even if I

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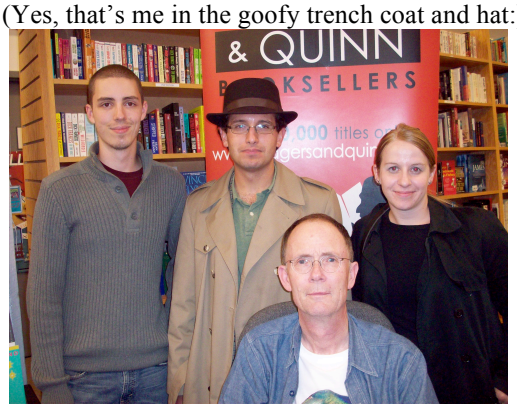
[33] (Yes, that's me in the goofy trench coat and hat:)



could. I'm just looking to explain how this strange formation called cyberpunk neoliberalism came to exist—how so many of us workers have willingly and even happily given up our own interpretive community, and the agency we had there, in order to identify ourselves instead with the capitalists/"entrepreneurs," who extend us no particular sympathy in return.[34]

Snow Crash, like *Neuromancer*, starts with a pretty brutal work situation. The Deliverator, whom we will later know as Hiro Protagonist (natch), has a job delivering pizzas for the Mafia—which, in Stephenson's anarcho-capitalist near-future America, has become a legitimate corporation (or as legitimate as any organization in a country without laws). Their promise: "Your pie in thirty minutes, or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit"—and have Uncle Enzo, head of the "Our Thing Foundation," personally come to your house and apologize. You really, really don't want this to happen:

> The Deliverator does not know for sure what happens to the driver in such cases, but he has heard some rumors. Most pizza deliveries happen in the evening hours, which Uncle Enzo considers to be his private time. And how would you feel if you had to interrupt dinner with your family in order to call some obstreperous dork in a Burbclave and grovel for a late fucking pizza? Uncle Enzo has not put in fifty years serving his family and his country so that, at the age when most are playing golf and bobbling their granddaughters, he can get out of the bathtub dripping wet and lie down and kiss the feet of some sixteen-year-old

[34] In doing this kind of analysis, I'm consciously following in the footsteps of cultural studies pioneers such as Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, who sought to understand the improbable cultural formations of particular historical moments through the close reading of particularly important literary works. Classic examples of this work, done at far greater length and rigor, include Williams's *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and *The Long Revolution* (New York: Pelican/Penguin, 1965), and Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966). Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, though by no means the be-all-and-end-all of cyberpunk, are nearly ideal texts for such analysis: they are equal parts typical and prototypical, examples and exemplars. Pick up any study of cyberpunk, such as Youngquist's (*op cit*), and it's likely to discuss one or both of these novels. For more on the limits and dangers of "debunking" as a critical model, see Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225-248—and my detailed discussion of Latour's article in Chapter Three.

> skate punk whose pepperoni was thirty-one minutes in coming. Oh, God. It makes the Deliverator breathe a little shallower just to think of the idea.
>
> But he wouldn't drive for CosaNostra Pizza any other way. You know why? Because there's something about having your life on the line. It's like being a kamikaze pilot. Your mind is clear. Other people—store clerks, burger flippers, software engineers, the whole vocabulary of meaningless jobs that make up Life in America—other people just rely on plain old competition. Better flip your burgers or debug your subroutines faster and better than your high school classmate two blocks down the strip is flipping or debugging, because we're in competition with those guys, and people notice these things.
>
> What a fucking rat race that is. CosaNostra Pizza doesn't have any competition. Competition goes against the Mafia ethic. You don't work harder because you're competing against some identical operation down the street. You work harder because everything is on the line. Your name, your honor, your family, your life. Those burger flippers might have a better life expectancy—but what kind of life is it anyway, you have to ask yourself. That's why nobody, not even the Nipponese, can move pizzas faster than CosaNostra. The Deliverator is proud to wear the uniform, proud to drive the car, proud to march up the front walks of innumerable Burbclave homes, a grim vision in ninja black, a pizza on his shoulder.[35]

There's a lot here. But maybe what's most important is what's *not* here: any trace of a workers' interpretive strategy. If you've ever worked in the service industry, or known anyone who's ever worked in the service industry, or read anything about people who work in the service industry, you'll know that most people who work in the service industry feel some pretty intense discontent and disconnect in their jobs. They're at the bottom of the totem pole, without much in the way of pay or dignity, and they know it.[36] Not Hiro. He may be a lowly pizza delivery boy, but he understands himself, completely

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[35] Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Spectra, 2000), 3, 5.

[36] The classic account of these kinds of feelings is Studs Terkel's *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, reprint ed. (New York: The New Press, 2004). Marx called these feelings *Entäusserung*: estrangement, or alienation. According to Marx, it is one of the basic experiences of being a wage-laborer in a capitalist economy. In the language of Bourdieu, himself a committed Marxist, we can describe estrangement as the reaction of a habitus formed on a market built by an interpretive community of workers (C-M-C), when it is forced by economic and/or political circumstance to leave this market and seek value on another, one built by the dominant interpretive community of capitalists (M-C-M'). See Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Chapter 22 ("Estranged Labor"), http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm (October 25, 2013).

and totally, as a capitalist. He does not flinch at the idea that he could die for delivering a pizza a few seconds too late: like Case in *Neuromancer*, he accepts "death [as] the accepted punishment for laziness," because he knows it's good for business. He shudders not at the thought of his own death, but only at the inconvenience he'd cause his boss—er, fellow entrepreneur—Uncle Enzo.

Hiro does not see himself as exploited or oppressed at all. This is precisely the kind of life he wants, in the most existential sense: it's clear, simple, exhilarating, satisfying, immediate, all-or-nothing, and utterly individual. And what he lacks in pay and dignity (and, you know, safety) he makes up for in "psychic income": he knows he's better than all of *those* people. Those people with their "meaningless jobs," who have to rely on "competition" in the traditional sense—slow, boring, collective. "If life were a mellow elementary school run by well-meaning education Ph.D.s, the Deliverator's report card would say: 'Hiro is *so* bright and creative but needs to work harder on his cooperation skills.'"[37] Hiro, young and hip and multiracial though he is, represents Limbaugh's ideal of the worker-qua-entrepreneur, the perfect self-denying proletarian. One who will soon save the world—and get quite rich while doing so.

This neoliberal perspective on work, more than anything else, is the mark of the cyberpunk protagonist. Cyberpunk heroes perceive no difference between their wage-labor and their life-purpose. When Hiro's skateboarder sidekick Y.T. complains, "The problem with you hackers is you never stop working," Hiro responds: "That's what a hacker is."[38] And for Case, in *Neuromancer*: "This was it. This was what he was, who he was, his being. He forgot to eat….Sometimes he resented having to leave the deck to

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[37] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 3. Emphasis in original.
[38] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 129.

use the chemical toilet they'd set up in a corner of the loft." And for Case's own sidekick Molly—the leather-clad, razor-clawed *femme fatale* who first appears in *Neuromancer* and travels through subsequent cyberpunk stories like a verse through old folk songs (appearing most famously as Trinity in *The Matrix*, whose title is also a steal from Gibson). "Her being, like [Case's], was the thing she did to make a living." And it doesn't much matter to her how good that living is: "I'm an easy make….Anybody good at what they do, that's what they *are*, right? You gotta jack, I gotta tussle."[39]

This is exactly the kind of language we often hear about so-called "millennials." "Work and life are not different for this generation. Work is not just work for these people. It is their life." So proclaims Jim Deters, founder of the Denver workspace Galvanize, home to the online music service Pandora, the online car service Uber, and over 100 other tech startups. "The 30,000-square-foot space is converted from an old bank note building," explained NPR's Elise Hu on *Morning Edition*; it was retrofitted to

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[39] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 59, 56, 50. There is a whole other article to be written about the gender dynamics of these cyberpunk protagonist-couples, which tend to remain constant across the genre. In some ways they seem to oppose traditional gender roles: the men tend to be weaker, more home-bound, and comparatively cowardly, while the women are strong, mobile, and fearless. But in other ways, more important ways I think, they reassert gender roles that border on the reactionary. The men are always the chief protagonists, the heroes, the ones who do the great deeds. The women do plenty of work, but it is ultimately to serve the men. And in a weird way, given how agency in cyberpunk stories is so much about sitting in front of a computer and transfiguring your body into the endless virtual space of the Internet, the women's greater physical prowess may be a strike against them: as in so much of Western mythology, the women remain bound to earth while the men ascend into heaven. Racial issues receive a similar treatment. Nearly all of the main characters in both books are white—and their whiteness is rarely-if-ever discussed. The major exception is Hiro Protagonist himself, who is half-black, half-Japanese—but more importantly, the narrator assures us, he is an Army brat who grew up without any of the normal oppressions associated with racial minority. There is also a striking amount of casual racism in *Snow Crash*—slurs, stereotypes, and outright violence—that usually goes unexplained. It sometimes seems to have something to do with the lack of a government, which supposedly kept these impulses in check, but that's about it. And given the level of *South Park*-ish meta-irony on which the whole novel operates, it's impossible to determine the extent to which Stephenson is commenting on this racism, as opposed to simply indulging in it. Not that any of this is likely to be intentional. As with the class and labor issues I'm focusing on, I don't see any evidence that Gibson or Stephenson particularly cared about questions of race or gender, one way or the other. As far as I can tell, and as Stephenson suggests in that Tor.com interview (see note 32), the story they wanted to tell was about the technology—and everything else just habitually, conventionally fell into place.

include a giant atrium, a café with full bar, and glass-walled offices "where midstage startups rent space next to one another but don't get tied to long-term leases." Her story, as per usual, is one of triumph and liberation: this is "what the future of work feels like for lots of young entrepreneurs. A place without walls, all kinds of freedom and fueled by coffee and beer."[40]

It's a future very much foretold in *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*. Their heroes' work-lives are always precarious, short-term, and unstable—and they wouldn't have it any other way. Molly has been working her current gig for a "couple of months." "What about before that?" Case asks. "For somebody else. Working girl, you know?"[41] The Deliverator, likewise, "has been working this job for six months, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards," and then not a full eighteen pages into *Snow Crash* he crashes his delivery car. "Hiro…as of thirty seconds ago is no longer the Deliverator."[42] In the ensuing chapters, we almost believe Hiro is just plain-old "broke and unemployed"—until a video-game company offers, nay, *begs* him to take a steady, high-paying job, and he turns it down because "all the programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings."[43] Case, broke within an inch of his life at the start of *Neuromancer*, would no sooner take this kind of job: "He

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[40] Elise Hu, "How The Sharing Economy Is Changing The Places We Work," *National Public Radio Morning Edition* (November 14, 2013), http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2013/11/14/244568645/how-the-sharing-economy-is-changing-the-places-we-work (March 24, 2014).
[41] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 30.
[42] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 2, 18. Literally: before this moment, with the one aforementioned exception about report cards, Hiro is referred to always as The Deliverator, never as Hiro. After this moment, he is always Hiro. The same thing happens again later on in the book, when a boat called the *Kowloon*, captained by a man named Eliot, capsizes. Moments later, the narrator explains: "Eliot used to be the skipper of a boat called the *Kowloon*. At the moment, he is between jobs." Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 347.
[43] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 21, 38-39.

wondered briefly what it would be like, working all your life for one zaibatsu. Company housing, company hymn, company funeral."[44]

So these cyberpunks are poor, but they're poor by choice. Poor because they're too hip to have a steady job. Poor in the right-wing-stereotype way—not meriting any kind of welfare or public service. (If any were even available in these quasi-anarchic worlds, either to our dubiously-deserving heroes or to the genuinely starving masses that choke the streets of Stephenson's Los Angeles.) Basically, they're hipster-poor: too poor to afford dwellings nicer than an industrial-chic 20' x 30' "U-Stor-It" unit or a "coffin" at "Cheap Hotel"—the initial abodes of Hiro and Case, respectively—but never too poor for a top-of-the-line computer or "a bottle of expensive beer from the Puget Sound area, which Hiro really cannot afford."[45] They may be poor in fiscal capital, for the moment, but they've got plenty of cultural capital, all the more so for refusing unhip, un-neoliberal work.[46] When their material poverty get hard to bear, they can always *just leave*—into cyberspace/the Metaverse, where cultural capital *is* fiscal capital, and they are forever wealthy and powerful.[47]

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[44] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 37.
[45] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 21.
[46] Chicago economist Gary Becker, a key player in the neoliberal campaign, might call their capital not *cultural* capital but *human* capital: that set of money-making talents and capabilities, acquired mostly through various kinds of education and training, that would make a flat-broke Bill Gates (if we can imagine such a thing) still a lot richer than a flat-broke you or me, or for that matter, a flat-broke Kim Kardashian. See Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). The relationship between Becker's neoclassical concept of human capital and Bourdieu's Marxist concept of cultural capital deserves further exploration. It is a fascinating case of convergent intellectual evolution. The main difference between them appears to be that Becker, appropriately enough, assumes a neoliberal-style unified capitalist market and reasons (with daunting mathematical complexity) from there, while Bourdieu is more concerned with the (often destructive and oppressive) historical and political processes through which these markets are formed in the first place.
[47] Cyberspace is "[Case's] distanceless home, his country." "Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse. It beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It." Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 52; and Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 24; respectively.

And by the end of both novels, this capital imbalance is redressed in the "real world," too: Hiro and Y.T. receive a whopping "twenty-five million Hong Kong Dollars" from Uncle Enzo and fellow mega-franchiser Mr. Lee, and Case and Molly are "both credited with large amounts in numbered Geneva accounts" by the powerful artificial intelligence they succeeded in freeing.[48] Not that they ever asked for this money, of course. Case and Hiro and their female sidekicks, it turns out, aren't *actual* entrepreneurs. They are spared the tireless, thankless work of running an actual business: going to meetings, raising funds, strategically building relationships—i.e., organizing. No, they're *idealized* entrepreneurs. They don't organize, and they don't have to. They just pursue their own individual passions and do what they love, without regard for strategy or power-building or personal gain, and they end up falling ass-backwards into money and success and unimaginable agency. It's Horatio Alger for the cyber-generation, a neoliberal fairy tale.

So this "millennial" lifestyle, this perverse interpretive strategy that transforms benefit cuts and decreased job security into feelings of freedom and liberation, wasn't invented by millennials at all. (At nearly thirty, I am on the elderly side of the millennial generation, and *Neuromancer* was released in the year of my birth.) It's actually a product of previous generations—who, by the time we came along, had left us with no alternative. Even the gushy NPR piece about Galvanize admits that many of us embrace our so-called freedom "out of necessity." In the words of MIT researcher Denise Cheng, millennials often work so many hours, and in such precarious conditions, because "they actually don't have a lot of the same opportunities…right around the time they were born

[48] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 394; Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 268.

was when a lot of corporate structures started to change, and those benefits started to go away."[49]

But of course, that's only a problem for the non-elite. For the "homeowners, red-faced and sweaty with their own lies, stinking of Old Spice and job-related stress," who "have parallel-parked their bimbo boxes [minivans] in identical computer-designed Burbclave street patterns and secreted themselves in symmetrical sheetrock shitholes with vinyl floors and ill-fitting woodwork and no sidewalks, vast house farms out in the loglo wilderness, a culture medium for a medium culture," who harass busy Deliverators because "against all logic [they] had decided that this was the place to take their personal Custerian stand against all that was stale and deadening in their lives."[50] These are the losers, the little people in their little boxes made of ticky-tacky, who all look just the same and have no agency to speak of. Not individual. Not special. Not worthy of our protagonists' time, or of ours. Just part of the "biomass."

Cyberpunk novels, no less than *Atlas Shrugged*, encourage their readers to shun the biomass—never mind that we'd probably be part of it ourselves. Like my students, shunning the destitute and unattractive miners in Harlan County; and like the pundits of Silicon Valley, with their characteristic "lack of empathy for industries and institutions that are currently in crisis" (as Morozov observed); we cyberpunk readers are encouraged to "worship the god of creative destruction."[51] If life has gotten harder for the downtrodden wage-laborers of the world, that's just the will of the market (or is it the Internet?). And besides, we are not they. Our proper place is with Hiro, floating above

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[49] Elise Hu, "How The Sharing Economy Is Changing The Places We Work."
[50] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 3, 191.
[51] Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 45, 22.

L.A. in a helicopter and loath "to bury himself in it, become a single muddy pixel in some airline passenger's window. Plunging into the biomass."[52]

He, and by proxy we, are part of a distinct elite. "The Deliverator belongs to an elite order, a hallowed subcategory," begins the very first sentence of *Snow Crash*.[53] This line, like so much of the novel, teeters on the brink of self-parody—but *Snow Crash* is no more a parody than *Neuromancer* is a dystopia. It's in fact central to the plots of both novels that Hiro and his fellow "hackers"—and Case and his fellow "cowboys"—constitute what Stephenson calls the "technological" or "technomedia priesthood." Like the regular priesthood, they may be materially poor, but (in Gibson's words) they "lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace…the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat."[54] And through denying the meat, they gained immense, otherworldly power: the power of "the magic word…true names"—"a speech with magical force. Nowadays, people don't believe in these kinds of things. Except in the Metaverse, that is, where magic is possible."[55]

If you're in the technological priesthood, you don't need to organize people, money, and ideas to build power. In the Metaverse, as a lone, isolated hacker, you can discover and properly utter the "true name" of a program and successfully bring down entire corporations, governments, nations. When you've got that kind of agency, who needs a union? Stephenson goes out of his way to note that unionization is "unheard of,

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[52] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 189.
[53] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 1.
[54] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 6.
[55] Gisbon, *Neuromancer*, 173, 243; Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 211. The Christ-like, transcendent nature of cyberpunk agency is particularly apparent in *Neuromancer*, where contact with powerful Artificial Intelligences causes Case to repeatedly flatline—come very close to death—and reawaken with far greater knowledge and power. Maelcum, his Rastafarian ally, wakes him up after one such encounter: "'You dead awhile there, mon.' 'It happens…I'm getting used to it.' 'You dealin' wi' th' darkness, mon.' 'Only game in town, it looks like.'" Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 181.

for hackers."[56] It goes against the whole aesthetic. The technological priesthood is made up of "young, smart people…who take the risk of living in the city because they like stimulation and they know they can handle it." "The city," like "the Internet," easily becomes a stand-in for "the market": they face it all alone, unafraid, knowing their priestly essence will get them through, safely and prosperously.[57]

Cyberpunk novels, in other words, are structured around a culture war. It may look like a war against capitalism, but it is actually a war *within* capitalism.[58] It is a war between the old institutionalized capitalism and the new entrepreneurialism-for-all. Not between left and right, but between cool and uncool, between technological priesthood and biomass. It's the culture war Thomas Frank describes in the story of Gary Aldrich, a righteously old-fashioned conservative political writer who is angry that his old-fashioned conservative values are being shunned by contemporary culture. Aldrich is right, Frank argues—his values are in fact being shunned—but not for the reasons he thinks:

> It's not because radicals have secretly taken over the world that people like the intensely anal Aldrich feel so uncomfortable; it's because the new, turbocharged capitalism has no place for hyperorderly, gray-flannel people like him, and it informs him of this every chance it gets. It tweaks a nation of Gary Aldriches in all its signature cultural outlets—in management books, TV commercials, and Tom Peters PowerPoint presentations. Consumer capitalism's only use for such ramrod-straight men is in showing them to be visibly upset by the liberating potential of some Internet portal or corn chip, filming them as they inveigh against some soda pop because it breaks the rules or lets the consumer be an individual or tastes too outrageous or whatever.[59]

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[56] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 115.
[57] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 191-192. A tech-booster acquaintance of mine once suggested to me that I free myself from the shackles of the university—what with its job security and whatnot—and "throw myself upon the market." (I did not oblige.)
[58] Gibson seems to get this, at least on some level. His neo-Rastafarian character Maelcum says: "this no m' fight, no Zion fight. Babylon fightin' Babylon, eatin' I'self, ya know?" Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 248.
[59] Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 134. Frank is paraphrasing the argument he made in far greater detail in his earlier book *The Conquest of Cool*. In brief, Bourdieu-inflected summary: by the end of the 1960s, whatever your political persuasion, it was clear that conformity and (traditional) conservatism had

This is, basically, the plot of both *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*—and of so many cyberpunk-inspired stories since, from *The Matrix* to the American film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The villains of these stories resemble Gary Aldrich, *writ large* and *reductio ad absurdum*. *Neuromancer* pits Case and Molly against the industrial clan of Tessier-Ashpool: "a very quiet, very eccentric…family, run like a corporation," "a family inbred and most carefully refined."[60] Tessier-Ashpool may own many of the world's biggest technology firms and its two most advanced pieces of Artificial Intelligence, but it is distinctly pre-modern: rife with palace intrigue, betrayal, and corruption, and living in a grotesque mansion of endless twisted passages turned in on themselves, filled with excessive amounts of expensive European bric-a-brac, which "smelled faintly musty, faintly perfumed, like a church."[61]

Snow Crash, in its usual quasi-mockery, gives us "L. Bob Rife, last of the nineteenth-century monopolists": a cartoon supervillain you love to hate, equal parts H. L. Hunt and L. Ron Hubbard. His goal is, very simply, world domination: not only over the world's capital but also, literally, over every person's mind. Why? We never really find out. Hiro suggests "he wants to be Ozymandias, King of Kings"—but that's about it. Presumably he wants it for its own sake, because that's the kind of guy he is. He owns the entire worldwide network on which the Metaverse operates. His ultimate aim is to force the entire world speak a unified language, which Rife can then control through

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lost much of their previous market value, and that the value of nonconformity and rebellion had spiked. Corporate culture, no less than student and activist culture, was affected by this massive shift in the cultural market. Advertising executives were particularly sensitive to it—and used it to their advantage. The airwaves became flooded with ads that suggested that to purchase a whole range of products was in fact to challenge "The Man"—which resulted, in classic Kansan fashion, in His pockets being lined all the more.

[60] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 75, 101.

[61] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 178.

antennas implanted literally into people's brains. He's a Texas oilman with a "steerlike body" and waxed moustache who speaks "with an incredibly sardonic and contemptuous twang, the exaggerated accent of a cowboy who suspects that some Yankee pencilneck is looking down his nose at him."[62]

In the history of the modern West, there are two main groups of people who have opposed these kinds of big bourgeoisie. There are the revolutionaries, who oppose them because they exploit workers' labor, and then there are the avant-gardists, who oppose them because they're aesthetically boring. It's not always easy to tell these two groups apart: they both skew young and countercultural, and they often share a similar language—Marxism and communism, in the early twentieth century; anarchism and libertarianism, now. But they are two very different groups of people, who oppose the bourgeoisie for very different reasons, and with very different results.[63]

Cyberpunks are avant-gardists, not revolutionaries. It's true that Gibson didn't much like Singapore, but save a few perfunctory references to repressive law-enforcement tactics, his main issue was that it was "boring." There was no exciting, crumbling Night City-esque district where "the underlying social mechanisms" were revealed. The most happening clubs still felt painfully "G-rated." And if you were looking for any, ahem, *services* beyond a "heterosexual hand-job" at the mall, you'd need to go off-island.[64] Same goes for the protagonists of *Snow Crash* and *Neuromancer*. Yes, they are sometimes put off by how Rife and Tessier-Ashpool exploit and oppress untold numbers of people, but they, too, will shamelessly off the odd Turk, "Jeek," or

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[62] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 113-117, 406.
[63] I am paraphrasing Raymond Williams—specifically, his posthumously-published essays "The Politics of the Avant-Garde" and "Language and the Avant-Garde," in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 1989): 49-80.
[64] Gibson, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty."

"Refus" who's standing in their way. No, the villains' real sins are sins of style. They are old-fashioned and unhip. Rife, especially, is a militant prude who spies on his employees in their bedrooms and fires them for having oral sex—and tells awful dad-jokes about people like Rockefeller and Vanderbilt (whoever *they* are)—which are not funny—but he laughs at them anyway.[65] Near the end of *Snow Crash*, when Y.T. finds herself riding captive in a helicopter with Rife and the President of (what's left of) the United States, she feels zero dread, fear, or awe. Just contempt: she "is totally embarrassed to be seen with this dull assortment of old farts."[66]

But the cyberpunk villains' most damning sin, the sin that marks them as cyberpunk villains, is that they stand in the way of the unfettered progress of the market/Internet. They are the embodiment of SOPA and PIPA and the NSA and the RIAA and the FCC, the worst nightmare of technological freedom and openness, the Author. They must be killed—their demise, and the neoliberal market unification it occasions, is the mark of a cyberpunk happy ending—but before that, they must be scorned. Along with the rest of the non-priestly biomass: the hapless burbclave-dwellers—and that last, even more pathetic obstacle to market unification, government. Another recent Public Radio story on "millennials" reported that "more than three-quarters of young voters in a recent survey said they did not trust government to do the right thing most of the time," and Morozov observes that "a strong antigovernment sentiment—that it's always a parasite on innovation—is a recurring feature of the geek

[65] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 113-115.
[66] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 441.

mentality, which is partly responsible for the disgust many geeks feel toward politics."[67] (This, despite the immense amounts of funding the U.S. government plowed into the development of the Internet, without which it might not exist at all.)

This feeling of contempt toward government, and political (non-market) agency of any kind, runs through the whole genre of cyberpunk. In an unimportant moment early in *Neuromancer*, Case "punched himself down a wall of primitive ice [firewall] belonging to the New York Public Library"—primitive, defenseless, hopeless.[68] For Gibson, as for post-1968 radicals both left and right, the government is basically the police: the New York Public Library aside, all we see of government in *Neuromancer* are cops, who are always counterproductive, or too late to help, or both. The remains of the U.S. government in *Snow Crash* are a deformed lovechild of Kafka and Koestler: an impenetrable bureaucracy whose employees are "intended to be interchangeable parts," denied their own individual workstations because that would reflect "inadequate team spirit," monitored in their every move by a "central computer [that] notices just about everything," and—just in case the point wasn't clear—required to spend a full 15.62 minutes reading the latest updated regulations for toilet-paper sharing in the office, which consume a full five pages of the novel.[69] The government has become so unimportant, so irrelevant, that when the President comes aboard the helicopter with Rife and Y.T., no one even recognizes him.[70]

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[67] "Millennials May Be Growing Fed Up With Politics, Period," *Minonesota Public Radio News* (May 21, 2013), http://www.mprnews.org/story/2013/05/21/daily-circuit-youth-vote (March 27, 2014); Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 60.
[68] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 56.
[69] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 280-287.
[70] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 425.

The governments in both novels are falling apart: in *Neuromancer* "the Pentagon and the CIA were being Balkanized, partially dismantled," and in *Snow Crash*, "various national governments auction[ed] off their possessions." Not that anyone seems to mind: "most people are not entirely clear on what the word 'congress' means. And even the word 'library' is getting hazy…as the number of media grew, the material became more up to date, and the methods for searching the Library became more and more sophisticated, it approached the point where there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fortuitously, this happened just as the government was falling apart anyway. So they merged and kicked out a big fat stock offering."[71]

But why? What happened? Gibson gives a boilerplate explanation: World War III happened. Stephenson is much more radical: he does not give any explanation at all. We're left to assume that it just *happened*, that government "withered away" as Marx (sort of) predicted it would—leaving us not with socialism, but with an equally idealized utopia: a fully globalized, unified anarcho-capitalist market, complete with unprecedented, scary socioeconomic inequality, lawlessness, and environmental devastation, but also with the unfathomable erotic excitement of utter individual freedom. A world in which Hiro Protagonist, nobody's right-wing ideologue, could casually observe that government "was invented to do stuff that private enterprise doesn't bother with, which means that there's probably no reason for it."[72]

For us, as for Hiro, this kind of statement might not sound too remarkable. We hear this kind of thing all the time. But rewind a few decades, go back to the early 1970s

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[71] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 83; Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 22, 116.
[72] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 437.

and try saying something like this. You'd find yourself getting a lot of weird looks. Recall what happened to Barry Goldwater in 1964, when he ran hard against the government: he lost, badly. Then Richard Nixon, the next Republican to win, famously declared himself pro-government.[73] It's not that there weren't people back then who were radically anti-government—of course there were—but they were mostly confined to some specific interpretive communities (the John Birch Society, the Ayn Rand folks), which much of the rest of America considered "crazy."

Something happened in the years since. Something too drastic and too fast to have happened "naturally." Somehow, in the space of two decades—less, actually—some of those "crazy" interpretive communities became mainstream. To understand how this happened, we can't start in the 1970s. We need to start long before that, back in the pro-government heyday of the 1930s and 40s—when amidst the foment of the New Deal and the Popular Front, a handful of dissident Midwestern academics, an Austrian émigré, and a Kansas City furniture dealer discovered they might benefit from each other's company—and began a collaboration that would change the world.

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[73] "We are all Keynesians now," Nixon reportedly said when he took the U.S. dollar off the gold standard in 1971. Actually, it appears this phrase was coined by a Time magazine editor in 1965, to summarize a much more ambivalent statement by the *anti*-government neoliberal *par excellence*, Milton Friedman. But he did say "I am now a Keynesian"—a telling-enough declaration in its own right. All the relevant links are available through "We are All Keynesians Now," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_are_all_Keynesians_now (October 31, 2013).

Chicago, 1947: How Neoliberalism Got Organized[74]

> A group of economists, historians, philosophers, and other students of public affairs from Europe and the United States met at Mont Pelerin, Switzerland, from April 1st to 10th, 1947, to discuss the crisis of our times….The central values of civilisation are in danger. Over large stretches of the earth's surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy. The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by extensions of arbitrary power. Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own.
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> The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved.[75]

So began the Statement of Aims of the Mont Pelerin Society, released the year the group met for the first time.[76] Even a quick glance is enough to see that this rhetoric is not your standard technical econ-speak. No, the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), which would soon become the core of an international organizing campaign, was political from the start.[77] The organizers of the MPS—who until the mid-1950s would openly call

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[74] There are two ways to interpret the phrase "neoliberalism got organized," and the way we choose makes all the difference. We could interpret it along the lines of "the books got organized"—there were books lying around, and then one day someone up and organized them. Or we could interpret it along the lines of "the block party got organized"—there was no block party before it got organized; it came into being through being organized. Most writing about neoliberalism treats it like a book: one day some people dreamed it up, and later on other people caught on, and it spread. But historically speaking, that is incorrect. Neoliberalism isn't a book; it's a block party. It's a political campaign.

[75] From "Statement of Aims," *The Mont Pelerin Society*, April 8, 1947. Frank Hyneman Knight, Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

[76] For a brief history of the MPS, see Dieter Plehwe, "Introduction," in *The Road from Mont Pelerin*: 1-44. Though the MPS is not the center of political power it once was, it's still around; you can find them at https://www.montpelerin.org/montpelerin/index.html (March 27, 2014).

[77] This campaign, as Mirowski describes it, basically has the structure of a Russian doll—where each layer often is kept unaware that the other layers, especially the more inner ones, exist, thereby creating an impression of spontaneity and decentralization where the reality was much more organized and centralized.

themselves "neoliberals"[78]—claimed to be responding to an urgent crisis, with human freedom itself hanging in the balance. They would need to take drastic action, lest all be lost. And drastic action was indeed taken: this mild-mannered "group of economists, historians, philosophers, and other students of public affairs" would spend the following decades building considerable power, through organized people and money and ideas. When a more widely-acknowledged crisis hit, in the early 1970s, they were ready to make their move.

Don't be fooled by the MPS's exotic, foreign-sounding name. It was incorporated in Illinois. More specifically, in the office of the economist Aaron Director—soon to be Milton Friedman's brother-in-law—at the University of Chicago Law School. To understand the MPS, and the work it wrought in the world, we need to understand what was happening in a few different departments of the University of Chicago, in the five years leading up to 1947. Back in the '40s, the University of Chicago was still a relative

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The innermost shell (#1) is the Mont Pelerin Society; it remained *the* major player through the 1970s, while keeping an intentionally low profile. The next shell out (#2) is a core set of academic departments, intentionally organized by neoliberals in the decades prior to their triumph (the 1940s-1970s), including the University of Chicago, the London School of Economics, L'Institut Universitaire des Hautes Etudes Internationales (Geneva), St. Andrews (Scotland), the University of Freiburg, and the Virginia School. The next shell out (#3) is the group of the special-purpose foundations that funded the promotion of neoliberal doctrines over the long span of their development and propagation: the Volker Fund (the original backer of Chicago Economics), the Relm Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, etc. The next shell out (#4) is the group of more general-purpose think-tanks that fund and shelter neoliberal thinkers: the Institute of Economic Affairs, the American Enterprise Institute, the Schweizerisches Institut für Auslandforschung, etc. Finally, the outermost shells—more shells grow, as time goes on and the campaign grows—include specialized think tanks to quickly distribute talking points and provide talking heads (e.g. the Cato Institute) and fake grassroots ("Astroturf") organizations to supply local and seemingly-popular support to neoliberal causes (e.g. the Koch Brothers' Americans for Prosperity). See Mirowski, "Postface," 428-433.

[78] See Mirowski, "Postface," 427-428: "when the early MPS members cast about for a label to attach to the as-yet amorphous doctrine they had set out to construct, more often than not they did resort to the term *neoliberalism*….What has led so many subsequent commentators astray is the fact that most MPS members stopped using the term sometime in the later 1950s. Indeed, at that juncture they ceased insisting that a rupture with the doctrines of classical liberalism was called for. This decision to support a public stance that the liberalism they championed was an effectively continuous political doctrine from the eighteenth century all the way through to their own revisionist meditations (such as endless paeans that it was all in Adam Smith) and therefore required no special neologism, turned out to be one of a number of precarious balancing acts performed in the course of constructing neoliberalism at the MPS. The historical fact [was] that there nevertheless was a discernible rupture in doctrinal content over the course of roughly 1947-1980."

n00b. It was barely fifty years old. Less than ten years previous it had undergone a major upheaval: the football program got closed, a groundbreaking undergraduate liberal arts program got opened, and major progressive pragmatists like John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Robert Park (teacher of Saul Alinsky) got replaced by conservative idealists like Mortimer Adler, John U. Nef, and a little later on, Leo Strauss (teacher of Paul Wolfowitz).

The key figure in this transformation was the University's young, visionary president, Robert Maynard Hutchins. Hutchins, today, is usually remembered for how he revolutionized undergraduate education. But he was equally revolutionary in his use of the university as a base for organizing—including some very significant right-wing organizing. His biographer Harry S. Ashmore observed he "conceived of the university as a center of independent thought and criticism, but he also insisted that the task of defining the issues affecting society carried with it an obligation to develop and propagate the means of resolving them. The means, by definition, would have to be political, and they could not be pursued in an ivory tower."[79]

Hutchins himself, though he would play a central role in organizing some of the most powerful right-wing ideas of the twentieth century, was no Republican. He was active in the Chicago Democratic Party; he made speeches advocating increased taxes and deficit spending, cutting military expenses, and regulating and even possibly nationalizing monopolies; many local conservatives considered him a radical.[80] They were right. But his radicalism cut many ways. His belief in the radical freedom of the university made him skeptical of the U.S. government's massive wartime investment in

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[79] Harry S. Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths: The Life of Robert Maynard Hutchins* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1989), xvii.
[80] Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths*, 123, 127.

higher education—and receptive to the kind of "private antistatist funding" that would be instrumental in building neoliberalism.[81] And his belief that while "the bulk of human conduct is not controlled by reason, but by social conditioning," people should still be educated under the assumption that people are guided by reason, because that's "what ought to be," put him in the same camp as many neo-Platonist philosophers, including those who would be instrumental in neoconservatism.[82]

And Hutchins had no qualms about building and using his power to reshape his university in his image. Hutchins hired Great Books founder Mortimer Adler, who firmly shared the president's rational-education convictions, over the objections of nearly every professor in the departments of philosophy, sociology, economics, and political science, because Hutchins was able to leverage his relationships with the University trustees.[83] Likewise, he considered bringing the neoconservative political philosopher Leo Strauss to Chicago "one of the great triumphs of my career"—even going so far as to place his own name on Strauss's endowed chair.[84] In the 1940s, Hutchins would

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[81] Rob van Horn and Philip Mirowski, "The Rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the Birth of Neoliberalism," in *The Road from Mont Pelerin*, ed. Mirowski and Plehwe: 139-178, 151. Van Horn and Mirowski have done some of the most important revisionist history of the Chicago school, and have more recently published an entire edited volume on the subject, emphasizing the organizing that produced, sustained, and altered the school's academic production from the 1940s to the present: *Building Chicago Economics: New Perspectives on the History of America's Most Powerful Economics Program*, ed. Rob van Horn and Philip Mirowski (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[82] Robert Maynard Hutchins, letter to Frank H. Knight, John U. Nef, and Robert Redfield, March 6, 1942. University of Chicago, Committee on Social Thought, Records, Box 1, Folder 2, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

[83] Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths*, 86, 112.

[84] Robert Maynard Hutchins, letter to Leo Strauss, April 13, 1959. Leo Strauss, Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. He added, several years later: "I hope you live forever. I do not want anybody else to be the Robert Maynard Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor." (Robert Maynard Hutchins, letter to Leo Strauss, September 22, 1965. Strauss, Papers, Box 2, Folder 4.) Indeed, so great was Hutchins's enthusiasm for bringing Strauss to Chicago that Strauss eventually wrote Hutchins the following telegram, reproduced here in its entirety: "ACCEPTING INVITATION STOP WRITING." (Leo Strauss, telegram to Robert Maynard Hutchins, September 13, 1948. Strauss, Papers, Box 4, Folder 9.) Strauss, contrary to popular belief, was never actually a member of the Committee on Social Thought, but he mentored many students there and maintained close positive relationships with faculty on the Committee.

personally and intimately oversee the creation of the Committee on Social Thought, that center of right-wing philosophical thought that would include culture warriors like Allan Bloom and neoliberals like Friedrich August von Hayek (about whom much more, presently).

Hutchins's anti-statism, Platonism, and disposition toward active organizing go a long way toward explaining the early history of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, an explicitly political project funded by deeply interested outside sources, was an unusual kind of project for an academic institution to take on; the University of Chicago, in Aaron Director's words, "was the only place that was likely to accept such a project."[85] The project—which some key participants called a "scheme"[86]—was hatched in April of 1945, when an Austrian economist met a Kansas City furniture dealer.

The furniture dealer was Harold Luhnow, president of William Volker & Co. and—in the words of historians Philip Mirowski and Rob van Horn— "a strident anti-New Deal conservative [who] was then in the process of converting a philanthropic fund originally intended to help the citizens of Kansas City into something completely different: a foundation to promote a rethinking of liberal politics in America." (I find something positively nefarious and Rife-like about turning a civic-interest fund into a far-right think tank, but that's just my opinion.) The economist was Friedrich Hayek, best known as the author of *The Road to Serfdom*, the 1944 bestseller that Glenn Beck and Ron Paul trot out to prove that government intervention in the economy is tantamount to fascism. (Hayek's argument is actually a great deal more subtle, but that's another story.) What's less well-known, but critically important, is that Hayek was also a very talented

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[85] van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 151.
[86] van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 150. This language was used by Hayek and economist Henry Simons, central to the project until his suicide in 1946, possibly among others.

organizer, who would leverage the interests and resources of Luhnow and Hutchins to build a powerful worldwide intellectual organization on a scale far greater than either of his funders had imagined.[87]

Hayek and Luhnow made a simple plan: bring together a group of prominent right-wing, anti-government economists to launch a "Free Market Study," with the goal of producing an American version of *The Road to Serfdom*, which would nudge the American public to the right on economic issues. Luhnow contributed about $95,000 (about a million 2014 dollars) over the next five years.[88] Hayek built and strengthened relationships with leading lights of right-wing economics, and drew several of them to Chicago—among them Director, who in turn convinced the University of Chicago Press to publish *The Road to Serfdom*, and Milton Friedman, who would eventually write the American *Road* of Luhnow's dreams, the 1962 bestseller *Capitalism and Freedom*. He also convinced Luhnow, despite the latter's initial reservations, to fund a great deal of the Mont Pelerin Society, which would make Chicago's message go global.[89]

Like all organizing, no matter how well funded, it wasn't ever smooth or easy. The building of the "Free Market Study" was hampered by key participants backing out, disagreeing, or even dying; by Luhnow questioning Hayek's decisions and threatening to cut the funding; and by other power players in and around the University not

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[87] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 141.

[88] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 155: Luhnow's Volker fund contributed "$25,000 per annum for three years," and in addition, "a further amount of not more than $10,000 per annum for a period of two years to cover the salary of Mr. Director for the period of two years after the investigation is completed. Also we agree to defray the expenses of the members of the Advisory Committee as they are brought to Chicago for a discussion of this study, this also to include the expenses of Dr. Hayek for any trips he makes to Chicago in further supervision of this project."

[89] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 149-150. They add: "It is important to realize that, for Hayek, these negotiations over Chicago and the parallel construction of what became Mont Pelerin were all part of the same common endeavor."

cooperating.[90] Still, setbacks notwithstanding, the "scheme" went on. Its goal, which grew far beyond the writing of a single book, was to create a new kind of "liberal" economics, "better suited to modern conditions" than the classical liberalism of Smith or Mill.[91]

What were these "modern conditions"? Above all, there was the condition of corporate monopoly. Classical liberals like Smith were very concerned about monopoly; they feared those conspiracies against the consumer and contrivances to raise prices, and they sometimes supported government action to break up monopolies and near-monopolies and keep the market competitive—truly free, as they understood it. This definition of "freedom" would not do for Luhnow and his fellow neoliberal-backers, often monopolists themselves, who had no interest in bankrolling an idea that would put them out of business: for neoliberals, "free markets" meant "guaranteeing the freedom of corporations to conduct their affairs as they wished." Luhnow had each member of the Chicago Free Market Study's Advisory Committee pre-screened to ensure conformity to this pro-corporate position, and "Hayek had no option but to agree."[92]

Another aspect of these new "modern conditions"—as World War II eased into the Cold War—was a very different relationship to the government and state power. Where classical liberals worried about too much government involvement in the economy, the monopolistic corporations that backed neoliberalism "did not fear concentrations of power and generally favored the existence of a powerful Cold War

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[90] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 148. See also van Horn, "Reinventing Monopoly and the Role of Corporations: The Roots of Chicago Law and Economics," in *The Road from Mont Pelerin*, 204-237, especially 208-209: around 1950, apparently, Luhnow almost fired Director—a moment, please, to meditate on the absurdity of a Kansas City furniture company with the power to fire a University of Chicago professor—for being too classically liberal and not sufficiently neoliberal, especially regarding the crucial issue of monopoly. (See below.)
[91] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 160.
[92] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 155-158.

state"—which provided them generous techno-science and military contracts and offered its services in forcibly opening and "freeing" the markets of many Third World countries. Free markets, neoliberals understood,

> must be *constructed*, and will not come about 'naturally' in the absence of concerted effort….'The Market' would not naturally conjure the conditions for its own continued flourishing, so neoliberalism is first and foremost a theory of how to reengineer the state in order to guarantee the success of the market and its most important participants, modern corporations. Neoliberals accept the (Leninist?) precept that they must organize politically to take over a strong government, and not simply predict it will 'wither away.'[93]

Neoliberals, in other words, are not "conservative" in any normal sense. For better or worse, they are radical revolutionaries, no less than the Leninists they often emulate. Yet unlike many left-wing radicals, they're very coy about their radicalism. To hear them tell it—since the mid-'50s, at least, when they stopped calling themselves "neoliberals" in public—they're just carrying on the two-hundred-year-old tradition of classical liberalism. But in practice—and in private—they're very aware that what they've created is something radically new. Milton Friedman summed up this contradiction in a joking letter he wrote to Hayek about the Mont Pelerin Society: "our faith requires that we are skeptical of the efficacy, at least in the short run, of [our own] organized efforts to promulgate [the creed]."[94]

Friedman and Hayek were very aware that their conscious, strategic, well-funded organizing effort, with its goal to *seize* (not destroy) state power and use it to *create* "free markets" (which were supposed to occur naturally, without their help), ran contrary to the positions they took in public. It was a cynical bait-and-switch: neoliberals organized themselves politically; they took control of governments and used them to create markets

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[93] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 161. Emphasis (and parentheses) in original.
[94] Van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 160.

that were most friendly to their corporate backers, sometimes by force; and then they turned around and accused anyone trying to organize against them for going against the "natural will" of the "free market."[95]

It's this characteristic rhetorical strategy, above all else, that unites all the right-wing organizing of ideas that was going on at Chicago in the mid-1940s. It's a strategy described most famously by Chicago neoconservative Leo Strauss—whom Hayek knew personally, and deeply admired[96]—as the difference between the "esoteric" truth, which only the elite/insiders can know, and the "exoteric" message (or "noble lie"), which gets

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[95] This same bait-and-switch rhetoric is also common among cyberpunks. As Morozov explains: "Whenever you hear someone tell you, 'This is not how the Internet works,'—as technology bloggers are wont to inform everyone who cares to read their scribblings—you should know that your interlocutor believes your views to be reactionary and antimodern….Tacitly, of course, the geeks do acknowledge that there is nothing permanent about 'the Internet'; that's why they lined up to oppose the Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA), which—oh, the irony—threatened to completely alter 'how the Internet works.' So, no interventions will work 'on the Internet'—except for those that will. SOPA was a bad piece of legislation, but there's odd about how the geeks can simultaneously claim that the Internet is fixed and permanent and work extremely hard in the background to keep it that way." See Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 18-19.

[96] Friedrich A. Hayek, letter to Leo Strauss, undated. Leo Strauss, Papers, Box 2, Folder 1: "I had hoped that your note saying that you were unable to come to the Seminar refered *[sic]* only to the first meeting, but I am now beginning to fear that it may have meant to cover the quarter. I should be exceedingly sorry if that were the case, but I am not yet prepared to give up hope altogether that I may not at least be able to persuade you not only to come to the one meeting where we should need your help most but even to open the discussion with a brief statement of the problem, which you are better qualified to do than anybody I know. It is the meeting on February 7 on 'Natural Justice and Positive Law and the Concepts of Law and Justice.' Is there any hope that you will find this possible?" The connection between the economics department (neoliberalism) and the Committee on Social Thought (neoconservatism)—linked, above all, by Hayek's own appointment to Social Thought—which is so crucial to a full understanding of the ideas being organized at Chicago in the 1940s, has gone curiously under-reported in extant histories, including van Horn and Mirowski's. The organizing of the Committee on Social Thought and the reorganizing of the law and economics departments—culminating in the founding of the MPS—overlap in lots of ways. They were happening at the same time, in the same place, and they involved many of the same people. Besides Hutchins, there were the economists Frank H. Knight and John U. Nef, who were founding members of both Social Thought and MPS, and there was Hayek himself: the lead organizer of MPS and the Free Market Study, who himself was denied a place on the economics faculty and ended up getting appointed, presumably by Hutchins, to the Committee on Social Thought. The neoconservatives of Social Thought and the neoliberals of economics/MPS shared not just people, but also ideas. In particular, they both believed that the individual human being is—or should be, and therefore should be *made* to be—rational and calculating. That is, they both intentionally and proudly conflate *is* and *ought*, and advocate for intentional action (including political action) to make it so. See van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 159, 165.

told to the masses.[97] It also has roots in the legal theories of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, a mentor of Strauss's and an inspiration for Hayek and many other neoliberals—who, unsurprisingly, argued for a strong and powerful sovereign ruler, whom he defined as "he who decides on the state of exception"—that is, on those situations where the normal rules (including of law) do not apply.[98]

Put Schmitt and Strauss together, and you get the whole strategy. First, organize enough people and money, from whatever sources necessary, to build a base. Second, claim a state of exception: the founding document of the Mont Pelerin Society warned "the central values of civilisation are in danger," and one of the founding documents of the Committee on Social Thought described the Committee's work as "the mission to which [they are] called by the crisis of modern civilization."[99] Finally, using that state of exception as cover, do whatever questionable deeds you need to do to build power (e.g., repress democracy using military force to establish a "free" market in Chile). You'll be able to explain what you're doing honestly (esoterically) to the elites, who'll understand (and be profiting from it, and probably paying for it). As for the masses, they're too dumb to understand something so complex—just feed them an exoteric noble lie (you're

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[97] See Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952): 22-37. My explanation is massively reductive does not at all do justice to Strauss's subtle, complex argument: I am summarizing Strauss *as he has been received*, not necessarily Strauss *as he himself intended*.

[98] Mirowski argues, further: "For Hayek and the neoliberals, the *Führer* was replaced by the figure of the entrepreneur, the embodiment of the will-to-power for the community, who must be permitted to act without being brought to rational account. While Hayek probably believed that he was personally defending liberalism from Schmitt's withering critique, his own political solution ended up resembling Schmitt's 'total state' far more than he cared to admit." See Mirowski, "Postface," 443-446. See also Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Question of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), especially 5-15.

[99] John U. Nef, letter to Ralph W. Tyler, September 11, 1953 ("Personal and Confidential; A Plan for Strengthening the Committee on Social Thought"). University of Chicago, Committee on Social Thought, Records, Box 2, Folder 3.

stopping the Communists, fighting for individual freedom to choose, etc.), and they'll believe it.

This is the same, deeply anti-democratic elitism that leads cyberpunks—in novels and in real life—to claim that the Internet shouldn't be regulated because it's too "complex" for lawmakers (let alone the "sheeple") to understand, and so inherently good and right "that it lies beyond the means of democratic representation." These kinds of claims are often couched in state-of-exception language, either in the bad way, warning that "some dark, evil force—Hollywood, the National Security Agency, China, Apple—is about to 'break the Internet,'" or in the good way, "presuming that we are living through revolutionary times" that are "so monumental and inevitable that all resistance seems futile," which in turn "sanctions radical social inventions that might otherwise attract a lot of suspicion and criticism."[100]

Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, the 1962 book that finally fulfilled Harold Luhnow's wishes for (and expenditures on) an American *Road to Serfdom*, follows this same rhetorical strategy. It is a work more of dogma than of science. It doesn't make arguments based on evidence; it makes bold proclamations about how the market does, should, and must work. In 1962, these arguments were radical and out-there and out of sync with how the world worked; as the neoliberals took power over the next few decades, they brought the world closer and closer into alignment with Friedman's descriptions.[101] Friedman himself, of course, would play a big part in this process—especially starting in the early 1970s, when the economy stalled, a state of exception was declared and accepted, and Friedman and his neoliberal colleagues became sovereign.

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[100] Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, 18, 34, 36, 52.
[101] See van Horn and Mirowski, "Rise," 166-167.

Washington, 1974: Exploiting "The Crisis"

The ending of *Snow Crash*, written in the bullish years after 1989, is pretty darn happy. (At least if you like capitalism.) Rife is dead; his plans for world domination are thwarted; the market is relieved of its last remaining monopolist. Hiro and Y.T. are both rich and happy and free to go home to their respective happy relationships: Hiro with Juanita, the xkcd-chic programmer-girl of his dreams; Y.T., still fifteen, with her mom. "Yeah," Y.T. says to her mom in the book's last line, "home seems about right."[102]

The ending of *Neuromancer*, written nearly a decade earlier, is more complicated. It's similarly "happy" in broad outline: Tessier-Ashpool is defeated, the market is freed, and Case and Molly both go home rich and successful. But what actually got accomplished? There was no world-domination plot to thwart. Besides some icky parricide and incest and embezzlement, there's no evidence that Tessier-Ashpool was doing anything *bad*. They simply existed, as a human- and history-based anachronism, on a market that had entered the era of posthuman transcendence.[103] Case and Molly brought them down because they were being paid (and in Case's case, otherwise coerced) by an extremely powerful Artificial Intelligence named Wintermute, created and owned by the Tessier-Ashpools, that wanted to be free of its human leash. At the end of the

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[102] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 468.

[103] Case ruminates on this anachronism in his most politically-savvy moment: "Power, in Case's world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that had shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality. You couldn't kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory. But Tessier-Ashpool wasn't like that, and he sensed the difference in the death of its founder. T-A was an atavism, a clan." Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 203.

novel, this happened. Wintermute took over and in fact *became* the entire Matrix: "the sum total of the works, the whole show." With what result? Nobody knows.[104]

Except there's one thing we do know. We know it from Case, who in the moments before he brought the whole house down, found himself in the absurd position of screaming at 3Jane, the last remaining daughter of the Tessier-Ashpool clan, begging her desperately for the final secret code he needed to complete his destruction of her family: "Give us the fucking code….If you don't, what'll change? What'll ever fucking change for you? You'll wind up like the old man. You'll tear it all down and start building again! You'll build the walls back, tighter and tighter….I got no idea at all what'll happen if Wintermute wins, but it'll *change* something!"[105]

I can't imagine a clearer or sadder rendition of "there is no alternative." As Case says, there are only two options: to stay where you are and let the world pass you by, or to neoliberalize. (The empty downtowns of so many second- and third-tier American cities, cleansed of their local establishments and populations in a desperate effort to "attract capital," bear witness to this reality.)

Snow Crash has made its peace with TINA. *Neuromancer* still isn't so sure. Its penultimate image is one of perfect transcendent agency: Case jacks into the Matrix, looks way up, and sees a holy trinity lording peacefully over all things below—the little Brazilian boy who represents the newly-unified and liberated A.I. (called Neuromancer); Case's tragically-murdered ex-lover Linda Lee (through whom Neuromancer communicated with Case); and Case himself. There he stood, the Joseph of cyberspace,

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[104] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 269.
[105] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 260. Emphasis in original.

having achieved the maximum agency he could ever possibly imagine himself achieving as a worker-qua-entrepreneur in the cyberpunk-neoliberal age.

But that's not where it ends. It ends with Molly. Molly, who had honeymooned with Case since they'd defeated Tessier-Ashpool together. Molly, who after remaining distant for nearly 200 pages—even during their frequent intimacy and lovemaking—had finally opened up to Case about her fears, her loneliness, her past. Who'd told Case "'while I'm feeling confessional, baby, I gotta admit…you're the only good change come down since I signed on with [their boss] Armitage….Not that you're all that shit hot.' She smiled." Who'd opened Case up and shared his rare moments of humanity and humor. "She was gone," without warning. She'd left behind this note: "HEY ITS OKAY BUT ITS TAKING THE EDGE OFF MY GAME, I PAID THE BILL ALREADY. ITS THE WAY IM WIRED I GUESS, WATCH YOUR ASS OKAY? XXX MOLLY." The novel ends with the words: "He never saw Molly again."[106]

Like good cyberpunk protagonists, their relationship was defined by business. They were always "partners," first and foremost, like Hiro and Y.T. (who calls Hiro "Pod" throughout *Snow Crash*), and pretty much every other cyberpunk couple. Their relationship doesn't, won't, can't last beyond the end of their joint entrepreneurial venture. (Once Hiro completes his final task of neutralizing the Snow Crash virus in the Metaverse, ten pages before the end of the novel, we never hear of him again.) Like heroes in an Ayn Rand novel, if they let themselves become permanently part of a collective, even with fellow transcendent cyberpunk agents, they will lose their boundless individual potential. It'll take the edge off their game. And that's not the way they're wired.

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[106] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 176-178, 189, 267, 270-271.

Cyberpunk stories are, in a sense, coming-of-age stories. Stephenson describes the house of Hiro's estranged friend (former business partner) Da5id—and sums up Hiro's lost youth—as follows: "The house is a sort of modernist castle with a high turret on one end. Da5id and Hiro and the rest of the hackers used to go up there with a case of beer and a hibachi and just spend a whole night, eating jumbo shrimp and crab legs and oysters and washing them down with beer. Now it's deserted, of course, just the hibachi, which is rusted and almost buried in gray ash, like an archaeological relic."[107] Once upon a time, Hiro existed happily in a group, a collective, almost a family. Now, having come of age and faced the harsh realities of the "real world," he knows that this kind of life is not possible—there is no alternative to basic, existential aloneness, and he's got to be okay with this. Stephenson, basically, seems okay with it. Gibson, somewhat less so. But he, too, is forced to admit it's a *real* thing. It's the reality that they, and their characters, and we, must come to terms with, however painful it may be.

It's the reality of a perennially unstable market—even now, years after we supposedly came out of the recession. It's the reality of never being sure you'll have a steady job, with good pay and benefits and security. It's the reality that you could have your closest relationships severed from you, at any time, on a whim. It's the reality of a market where you get less and your boss keeps more, where you don't matter much if you're a worker. A market set up to benefit the owners, the capitalists—the bigger, the better. A market the neoliberals started dreaming about in the 1930s and 40s, and which started to become real at the same moment Gibson and Stephenson started writing.

It didn't become real by accident. Nor was it inevitable, or the result of "market forces." It was carefully planned, organized, and executed. It was, in the words of some

[107] Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, 190.

of its own organizers, a "selling job." "Nothing that this nation, or any other nation has done in modern history compares in difficulty with the selling job that must now be done to make people accept the new reality," wrote the editors of *Business Week* in 1974. In this new reality, "some people will obviously have to do with less…cities and states, the home mortgage market, small business and the consumer will all get less than they want…it will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow—the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more."[108]

It was the same year when a "collective sadness" had overtaken Americans, according to historian and organizer Michael Harrington. The country seemed to be "in mourning for a dying era," labor historian Jefferson Cowie observed, as it felt "the promise of modernity itself slipping out of reach." In the past year, Americans had felt the start of an economic downturn from which it would never, really, recover. "Above

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[108] Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1980), 225n-226n. Nowhere was this selling job more dramatically represented than in the 1976 film *Network*. Not in the scene we all know—where crazed anchorman Howard Beale (played by Peter Finch) inspires America to get up and shout, "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!"—but much later in the movie, after Beale has inspired a nationwide anti-corporate movement and made his network's holding company very, very nervous. In the scene I'm talking about, Beale meets chairman of the board Arthur Jensen (played by Ned Beatty), who ushers Beale into a giant, empty conference room, tells Beale, "I'd like to try and sell something to you," blacks out the lights, and bellows: "You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, and I won't have it, is that clear?!…You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples!…There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion of dollars!…It is the international system of currency that determines the totality of life on this planet! That is the natural order of things today! That is the atomic, subatomic and galactic structure of things today! And you have meddled with the primal forces of nature, and you will atone!…You get up on your little twenty-one inch screen, and howl about America and democracy. There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM and ITT and AT&T and Dupont, Dow, Union Carbide and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today.…We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies, Mr. Beale. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business. The world is a business, Mr. Beale! It has been since man crawled out of the slime, and our children, Mr. Beale, will live to see that perfect world in which there is no war and famine, oppression and brutality—one vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock, all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquilized, all boredom amused." The selling job is a success. Beale is convinced. And he is depressed. He goes on TV and tries to preach this gospel of postmodern neoliberal powerlessness. It doesn't go well. See Paddy Chayefsky, *Network*, DVD, directed by Sidney Lumet (Los Angeles: MGM/UA, 1976).

all, the mid-1970s marked the end of the postwar boom. The years prior to the 1973-74 crisis had been the most economically egalitarian time in U.S. history, the point on the graph where the bounty was shared most equitably, and unemployment was at historic lows. The year 1972 was also the apex of earnings for male workers. Starting in the 1973-74 years, real earnings began to stagnate and then slide."[109] This downturn had various and still-debated causes, from the rebuilding of Europe and Asia to the development of new communication and transportation technologies to the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreements to the massive amounts of money being spent on the Vietnam War. And it was at this moment—the moment of crisis, of the state of exception, when the economic order was breaking down, and the old models seemed like they were no longer working—that the neoliberals, after thirty years of quiet organizing, finally made their move.

When it happened, it happened quickly. During the recession of 1974-1975, the Ford administration would still "increase spending to reduce unemployment and boost demand"—a classic New Deal, pro-government response. But four years later, in the recession of 1979, the Carter administration responded neoliberally—with big public spending cuts. "There was irony in a Republican administration increasing spending and a Democratic administration choosing deregulation and tax cuts. In between, however, was…a watershed in postwar history." A new historical agent had emerged: "an enormous corporate lobby at every level of government that fiercely opposed democratizing reform and that had an aggressive counter-agenda of its own."[110] "'With top corporate leaders now out in front, the business lobby is bigger and more influential

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[109] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 12.
[110] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 233; Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution*, 8.

than ever,' exalted a *Fortune* reporter. 'Suddenly business seems to possess all the primary instruments of power—the leadership, the strategy, the supporting troops, the campaign money—and a new will to use them.'"[111] They rolled back social spending, redesigned tax policy, "mounted a massive ideological and cultural offensive" to shift public opinion in favor of corporate rule, and most of all, busted lots and lots of unions, with a fervor not seen since the epic labor battles of the early twentieth century.[112]

This new corporate lobby had Chicago written all over it. Its policy demands perfectly reflected the hopes and dreams of Harold Luhnow. Its zeal in seizing and using state power befitted an idea that was organized, and political, from the very start. Its language, from the 1974 *Business Week* editorial onward, could have come right out of the Committee on Social Thought or the Mont Pelerin Society. And one of its most prominent voices was Chicago's own Milton Friedman, who "was awarded the Nobel Prize for economics in 1976 as his thinking flooded into the intellectual void."[113] In this moment of crisis—however real and/or manufactured—it was only the neoliberals who seemed to have answers to the most pressing questions, and to be in the positions of power to turn those answers into action. Neoliberalism quickly became the only game in town, to which there was no alternative. And cyberpunk, in the years to come, would make us love it.

The left, meanwhile, was dumbfounded. As economist after economist lined up to denounce the 1978 Humphrey-Hawkins bill, maybe the last and greatest piece of New

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[111] Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution*, 17.
[112] See Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution*, 1-16; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 213-260; and, for a detailed account of the new union-busting of the 1970s, Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, 65-72. If anything, Fantasia suggests, labor since the '70s may be even worse off than in the last round of corporate antagonism in the early 20th century. Then, at least, oppositional interpretive communities existed. But in the postwar "consensus," these "cultures of solidarity" eroded in what appeared to be a bilateral disarmament. Unbeknownst to labor, however, management was arming itself in secret, at (and around) Chicago.
[113] Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution*, 15; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 226.

Deal-style legislation, which might have ensured full employment for all Americans—just take a moment and *imagine* that—Hubert Humphrey got up in front of Congress and exclaimed: "If the greatest free nation in the history of mankind has to get down on its knees in fear of something as abstract and arbitrary as these so called 'free market forces,' well, then we're through. We might as well haul down the flag, lock up the Capitol, go home and admit that we don't have the courage or the imagination to govern ourselves."[114]

By that point, the left (or what was left of it) was not of much help. The so-called "class of '74"—the wave of Democrats swept into Congress in the wake of Watergate—"consisted of a new breed of post-1960s, free-market, social liberals, who were skeptical of workers' needs and suspicious of their institutions." While they were "inspired to do something about urgent issues of race and gender inequality," they "also tended to be chary of structural solutions."[115]

These new, young liberals represented a very different interpretive community than the one that had produced older liberals like Humphrey. It was an interpretive community raised not in the troubled 1930s but in the serene 1950s, when the economy had always been working fine, so they didn't worry about it much—and shaped more recently by the experiences of 1960s activism and, especially, by the failures of the 1968 uprisings. These young people were by no means neoliberals—they had nothing to do with the campaign that started at Chicago and Mont Pelerin—but they had an approach to politics, a habitus and set of interpretive strategies, that turned out to be very compatible with the neoliberal agenda.

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[114] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 278.
[115] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 13.

It was this habitus, disposed toward detached individualism and ill-disposed toward collective agency, that would come to define American left, liberal, and progressive communities in the decades to come. It would ensure that the neoliberal campaign could continue to grow and develop, pretty much unchecked. And it developed, in particular, in the set of institutions and organizations in and around American higher education.

It is to these institutions, which I'll collectively call "academia and para-academia," to which we now will turn.

CHAPTER THREE
Academia and Para-Academia

I called you out twice, you not about that life.
—Graffiti, Northern Liberties, Philadelphia, Fall 2013

I'm being such a stereotypical tumblr liberal in my English class right now.
—Facebook status of a colleague/friend, 10/31/13

So I read Karl Marx.
Proletariat shall rise.
Advice did not help.

So I read Foucault.
Power comes from everywhere.
Advice did not help.
—Bathroom wall, University of Chicago, circa 2005

A Tale of a *Phail*[1]

On a sunny, hot afternoon in late May 2009, Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed stormed Minneapolis City Hall. I was managing the event. I had led a group of about fifty artists, activists, organizers, researchers, and teachers, of many races, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and socioeconomic classes through the streets of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, onto a Light Rail train, out through stone arches and up a marble stairwell and into the staid, hallowed halls of power. Power, meanwhile, had been put on notice. The police and sheriffs were out in force. Something out of the ordinary was happening. Something with the potential for…subversion.

The crowd poured into the ornate City Council Chambers and beheld the grandeur: the gilded, mural- and candelabra-covered walls; the vaulted, filigree-studded ceiling; the massive raised dais and imposing chairs reserved for City Council members;

[1] As the kids on the Interwebs are saying these days.

and the small, packed-together wooden chairs on the floor, where they could sit. Every detail of this space—the seat of our theoretically-democratic local government—seemed designed to tell ordinary citizens to sit down, shut up, and heed the authorities on high.

Yet this group of citizens was in no mood to heed. They were determined to make this space their own. While I went off to make arrangements with the Council clerk, with whom I'd planned the event, they set to work transforming the space. They cleared all the chairs out of a semicircular area of floor in the back of the chamber: an impromptu stage. Then they turned all the chairs around and arranged them to face this stage, instead of facing the dais-and-podium at the front of the room. The established order had been upended. The action, today, wasn't going to take place up above, but down below. The Council members could keep their high ground, but today, that wasn't going to be the stage; it was the cheap seats.

When I came back with the Council clerk, she was not pleased. Yes, she told the assembled group, the Council had consented to let us use the space and move "a few chairs," but no one had talked about this kind of upheaval. After a few moments of general hesitation, Julian Boal stepped forward. Boal, world-renowned theater artist and son of the legendary director and writer Augusto Boal, had spent the past three days training this group, and he would lead the session to come. He took a moment to assess the situation, looked at the clerk, then turned to the extremely diverse group in front of them. How, he asked them, did city councils arrange their spaces in all the places where they are from? A torrent of answers followed. Boal summarized, to the clerk: in different places we do things different ways. Then the crowd, following his lead,

resumed the re-arranging. The clerk, though nonplussed, stayed out of the way. For that one moment, at least, the power of this impromptu interpretive community had overcome the formal authority of the state.

The stage was set; the play was ready to begin. It was to be a demonstration of "Legislative Theatre," a form of theater developed by Augusto Boal when he was elected to the city council of Rio de Janeiro. It was a method for artists, organizers, and legislators to literally make law together, collaboratively, though a combination of theater and parliamentary debate. The Rio city council had passed dozens of laws through Legislative Theatre. In Minneapolis, alas, it would be only a demonstration: the council was not actually in session, and no laws would actually be passed. But it would be, in Julian Boal's words, a demonstration "with teeth." Many community leaders, including four City Council members, were in attendance. And the play addressed a hotly controversial issue: the attempt by Minneapolis Mayor R. T. Rybak to close the city's Department of Civil Rights, a move many low-income communities and communities of color saw as an attempt to curb their power and influence.

The play itself, written by the group that performed it, told the story of a disabled, black mother whose son is wrongfully harassed by the police, and who tries in vain to get redress from her government. It was short and simple—maybe seven minutes long—but the audience was clearly moved. This was due in no small part to the compelling performance of Cheryl Wilson, a longtime Minneapolis community organizer who had herself raised eight children, in the leading role. At the end of the play, as is customary in Legislative Theatre (as in the related form of Forum Theater), Boal waited for the

applause to end, then asked the actors to begin it again. Only this time, Boal instructed the audience to stop the action whenever they could see a better way for Wilson's character to break the oppression she was experiencing—literally, to yell "Stop!"—then to come up onstage, replace Wilson, and try out the new idea. In this manner, the audience tried out lots of different interventions, at lots of different points within the story. They had various degrees of success, but the common upshot was clear: for justice to prevail, the Department of Civil Rights needed to stay open.

Once everyone who wanted to intervene had been given a chance, audience members proposed and debated legislation. The four Council members present participated generously. When the session finally ended, hours later, no law had been passed, but everyone involved—actors, spectators, council members—left feeling proud. We had done good work. We had made something new and exciting. We had broken new ground, made new connections. We had made a promising start, and we were excited to do more.[2]

But then…nothing more ever happened. Not another theater performance, not another council session, not even a follow-up conversation. Some emails got shot back and forth in the weeks and months that followed. A meeting got planned but never took place. Boal was frustrated. Wilson was frustrated. I was frustrated. But none of us felt like we could do anything about it. We had all done a huge amount of work to organize the performance. We had organized a singular event, putting together lots of different constituencies in a way that could have sparked a new synthesis of art, organizing, and

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[2] For a more detailed account of this event and its consequences, see my article "Making Space (Literally) for Social Change through Community-Based Theatre—From Soup Kitchen to City Hall," *Theatre Topics* 21, no. 2 (September 2011): 199-208.

lawmaking—a new political movement, even, with significant and growing power. But now, somehow, we felt powerless. Everyone had gone in separate directions. It had just fizzled.

This chapter asks, and tries to explain, why.

The Resistance to Agency

To start, some context will help. Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, Inc. (PTO), which sponsored the City Hall event, is a nonprofit corporation that "supports people whose work challenges oppressive systems by promoting critical thinking and social justice through liberatory theatre and popular education."[3] Its main vehicle for doing this work is an annual conference, where hundreds of educators and researchers and activists from many states and countries come together to share ideas, build skills, and network with each other.

In 2009, that conference was held in Minneapolis. The lead organizers had hired me to do logistics—which, as the conference drew nearer and people dropped out of key positions, meant I ended up running much of the conference. (For my efforts, I would be elected to a two-year term on PTO's Board of Directors.) One of our headline events was a three-day workshop on Legislative Theater—to be led by Julian Boal, whose revered father had died only three weeks earlier. It would culminate in a real, live performance in City Hall before real, live legislators. Practitioners of Theatre of the Oppressed from

[3] "About," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed* (website), http://ptoweb.org/aboutpto/ (November 12, 2013).

around the world, coming to town for the conference, would come a few days early to take part in the workshop and performance, stay for the conference, and then go home.

So that's one obvious reason why the City Hall event had no follow-up: days later, a lot of participants *just left*. But that can't be the whole answer. Not all of us left. Many of us, including most of the core organizers, lived in the area. Even given the people we'd lost, we could still have done plenty with the people we had. We just didn't. How to make sense of this? Well, the first steps will (by now) be predictable. If we rule out the Kansan possibility that we were "acting against our interests" (whatever that would mean), we're left with only one conclusion: that for whatever reason, it was *not* in our self-interest to develop our one-off performance into a full-fledged campaign or movement, with the potential to build power and enact concrete social and political change. Given the obvious contradiction with our stated political goals—challenging oppressive systems, and so on—it makes sense to ask of ourselves the same questions we asked of the men at the laundromat in Chapter One, and the students in my cultural studies class in Chapter Two: what kind of market were we on? What kind of habitus did it value? What kind of interpretive community built it? And more specifically: what kind of dispositions and interpretive strategies existed there, that might account for our strange and counterproductive behavior?

One thing, at least, was clear: we were not being cynical or opportunistic. Our fault, if anything, was the opposite: we were *too* earnest and idealistic. We hadn't been thinking opportunistically—that is, strategically—at all. By the time we got to the performance and the conference, we were burnt out. We had poured all of our energy, all

of our resources, all of our meetings and fundraising and strategic alliances, into producing the most excellent one-off event possible. We hadn't thought to conserve any of our energy, to develop relationships and new leaders for the long term, to keep building power. It's not that we didn't *want* to, at least not exactly; it's just that it never occurred to us.

Well actually, that's not quite fair. It had occurred to one of us, quite a bit. Cheryl Wilson—the organizer who'd played the lead role in the play—worked hard to try to push the rest of us to do this kind of longer-term work: to build relationships with more council members, to do more active turn-out, and especially to plan follow-up meetings and get local conference-goers to commit to attending them. Again, it's not that the rest of us disagreed with her. We knew those things were important. We wanted to do them. There was just so much other work to do in planning the conference, and we didn't have time for anything else. If this sounds like me whining and making excuses, that's because it is. Here, as usual, we never have time for anything except for the things we *make* time for. And for everyone except Wilson, this kind of follow-up work wasn't one of those things. For the rest of us, the main point was producing the conference; everything else was gravy.

Here, precisely, was the problem. As Wilson said to me several months later, the people who came to the conference "may get the techniques…may get how it's done [theoretically]," but they "don't know how it feels…to do the grunge work"—the hard, slow, time-consuming work of building power through organized people and organized

money.[4] Wilson had the dispositions and interpretive strategies of a community organizer; the rest of us did not. Our habitus had been developed on a different kind of market. A market that places a lot of value on planning a conference that demonstrated great *potential* for political agency, and less value on the hard, prolonged labor needed to create *actual* agency. A market that values single spectacular acts of resistance more than long-term strategic campaigns, and pure ethical intent more than messy political work.[5]

The values of this market sound a little the job requirements for a successful professor: go to as many conferences and publish as many papers as you can, and you'll succeed; long-term, extended "community" work is great in theory, but it's hard to find time for it, since it doesn't give you much value in terms of tenure or raises or promotions. Indeed, if you go to PTO conference, you'll find plenty of academics: people like me, who draw their primary income from working as researchers and instructors at colleges and universities, and who are majority (though not all) white and professional-middle-class.

But you'll also find a lot of people there who aren't academics: people who are employed as theater directors, K-12 teachers, teaching artists, freelance facilitators, employees of nonprofit and government agencies; and people of various (often precarious) employment who call themselves "activists." These people, including many of the participants in the Legislative Theatre performance, seem to be diverse in almost

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[4] Cheryl Wilson, personal interview, December 14, 2009.
[5] For a further description—and critique—of this market, see John McGowan, *Democracy's Children: Intellectuals and the Rise of Cultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), especially Chapter 3; and Harry C. Boyte, "A Commonwealth of Freedom: Response to Beltrán," *Political Theory* 38 (2010): 870-876.

every way possible: race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, age, and education level. Yet listen closely, and you'll notice something interesting: despite all these differences, they all seem to speak a similar language. I don't mean English—though that's usually true, too.[6] I mean a specialized jargon that includes words like "inclusiveness," "privilege," "oppression," "resistance," "liberatory," "transformational," "marginalized / targeted / underrepresented communities," "POC" ("people of color"), "PGP" ("preferred gender pronoun"), "positionality," "intersectionality," and "social justice."

It's a language I hadn't heard much before I came to PTO—not at home, or at school, or on TV, or in the history department of the University of Chicago or even the Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature department at the University of Minnesota. Nor was it the language Paulo Freire spoke in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, or Augusto Boal in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. It was, rather, the language of certain sections of academia: I started hearing it more as I spent more time around people from theater and film studies, communication studies, English, art history, the various area/ethnic studies, and the "human" and "critical" sides of sociology, anthropology, geography, and history. I also heard it as I started spending more time in certain interpretive communities outside academia: in anti-racism workshops, in artist and activist collectives and cafes and other

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[6] I still think about the moment in a plenary session on immigration at PTO 2010, in Austin, Texas, when the facilitators asked the audience if anyone needed the session translated into Spanish. No one responded. Then a middle-aged black woman raised her hand and said, "In solidarity, I need it….It's not logistical, it's political." Again, no one responded. And so an interpreter translated the entire session into Spanish, even though no one in the room expressed any difficulty understanding English. Maybe it was a kind gesture of inclusion. But I can't help wondering if it might have been like insisting that a person with a disability use a wheelchair, even when s/he wants to walk—ignoring the actual people in the space when they say what their needs are, and telling them what their needs *should* be. Or maybe even indulging our own guilt, that there *should have* been people in the room who couldn't understand English. I'm not sure. It would have been good to talk about it. I guess I could have raised the question myself….

"radical" spaces, on various blogs and social media sites, and in some socially-conscious nonprofits. These kinds of organizations, which aren't academic but share a language with academia—a common interpretive community, with common interpretive strategies—are what I'm calling "para-academia."

Para-academia is the rings of biotech firms around the campus of MIT. It's the mass of education corporations, for- and nominally nonprofit, just outside the gates of Princeton. It's the Mont Pelerin Society, headquartered in the University of Chicago Law School. It's an intimacy with academia that's often geographic, and always linguistic. The common language of academia and para-academia comes in many different dialects—physical chemists sound pretty different from art historians, neither of whom sound much like activists in the Direct Action Network or employees of the RAND Corporation—but they're all unified on a common market that values a specific kind of habitus, disposed toward a specific set of interpretive strategies.

It's a habitus that's disposed, above all, (1) to see the world as a place where there's something called *the truth*, sitting out there somewhere, apart from human action, and (2) to see its job as *finding* that truth and *telling* it. Most of us developed these dispositions in school, when we got valued—in the form of praise and grades—for *getting the right answer*. Given that most of us have spent over a decade in school, it's no surprise that a lot of us still have these dispositions as adults. Only now we justify our search for truth differently, not for the sake of good grades but for the sake of beauty, or justice, or progress, or preservation, or profit, or even for its own sake.

We usually understand this truth as coming in two main types. "Scientific" truth is sitting out in the open, ready to be found as soon as we find the right tool or technique to do it. "Social" or "cultural" truth, on the other hand, has been hidden or obscured by some bad guy (society, the media, etc.), whose lies we need to expose before we can get at the true truth.[7] But either way—whichever kind of truth we're looking for, and whatever reason we give for why we're looking for it—the fact is, we're looking for it. Our goal is to find it and tell it to the world. And then it'll make us free.

What's wrong with this, exactly? Nothing, really. It's just an interpretive strategy. Like all interpretive strategies, it lets us understand certain things better than others. This one, in particular, has let us understand a whole lot: it's pretty much made all of modern science possible.[8] The only problem with it—if you can even call it a

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[7] These last two sentences sum up, in gross oversimplification, the distinction between "traditional" and "critical" theory described by the postwar German critical theorist Max Horkhimer. Traditional theory—Kantian, mainstream, empiricist—is intended to fuel the march of progress. Critical theory—Marxist, countercultural, hermeneutic—is intended to disrupt this march, which it views as harmful…or rather, nonexistent…but the *myth* that it exists is harmful. In general, the "hard" sciences have mostly followed the path of traditional theory, joining forces with capital-based markets to develop new technologies and grow these markets; the "critical" humanities have followed the path of critical theory, setting itself in opposition to these capital-based markets and producing writing and other art that challenges them and their economic and cultural effects. (The social sciences are split down the middle: economics tends to be on the traditional side, especially after the neoliberal takeover; political science, sociology, and geography have factions on either side; and history tends to practice an uncertain, unstable hybrid of the two.) The division between traditional and critical theory has often taken the form of a culture war: C. P. Snow called it "the two cultures," and Bruno Latour calls it the "science wars." Indeed, many of the big Buchanan-era Culture Wars came out of this academic divide, as the humanities and social sciences seemed to be moving from traditional (the Great Books) to critical (postmodern "theory"), thus deepening their deviation from the patriotic techno-science that was in the process of winning the Cold War (or so the argument went). I don't want to suggest that this divide is unimportant. But I do want to suggest, along with Latour, that it doesn't run as deep as many people think, including many academics: that underneath these differences, both sides share a common language: a common pursuit of disinterested truth, a common belief that that truth will set you free, and a common ignorance of the organizational nature of knowledge (organized ideas), which leads to the resistance to agency. See Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188-243; C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, reissue ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

[8] Which for me, just to be clear, is a *good* thing. I enjoy my antibiotics and my evidence-based truth-claims, thank you very much.

problem—is that it lets us see *so* much that we sometimes forget that it's an interpretive strategy at all. But like all interpretive strategies, it has its limits. One big one, in particular: it stops us from seeing ideas as things that are *organized*, by organized groups of people. It stops us from seeing that *the truth* is something political: not something holy and pure and detached that sometimes gets *corrupted* by politics, but something that's political—a product of people in organizations—from the beginning. It makes us think that doing politics and seeking truth are two separate activities, and need to be kept that way.

This interpretive strategy basically understands the world like it's a cyberpunk novel, with three main characters. First there's *us*, the hacker-hero. Second, there's *the truth* itself, which we understand in the form of a secret code, a "true name," sitting out there in cyberspace, waiting for us to find it. (Even when we think the truth is "inside of us," it's still not *part of* us; we still understand ourselves as a "we" that needs to find "it.") Our job, like Case's, is to work alone until we find that secret code, and then enter it into our computer (in the form of papers, articles, etc.)—and then, we assume, the bad guys will come crumbling down. The third character is *society*. Society is the unstylish bad guys (Rife, Tessier-Ashpool) combined with the unstylish everyone else (the burbclave dwellers, the biomass). They're the Kansans, the dupes, the mass ass. They're the ones we'll be setting free, by finding the truth and publishing it, but don't expect them to thank us for it: if you've ever read a student paper you know that it's "society," along with its double "the media," that's responsible for all the harmful lies in the first place.[9]

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[9] This argument owes a lot to Latour, who makes a very similar argument in the first chapter of his book *Pandora's Hope*: "society," as a modern concept, is an outgrowth of Kant's abstract "transcendental Ego,"

In this cyberpunk reality, with its usual neoliberal overlay, nothing that's organized is ever good or real—except capital markets, assumed to be inevitable. The heroes are pure; they work alone and see through all of society's bullshit. (Just like humanities and social science academics: it's unusual to see a paper with two or more authors, let alone an ongoing collaborative project.) The truth is pure; it exists outside and independently of humans and their organizations. But in society, they don't have that truth, at least not until we heroes bring it to them: what they have instead are "social constructions." When people say "x is a social construction," what they mean is, x is not actually true or real. The assumption is that when something is made by people in groups—literally, a "social construction"—it's wrong or false. (I will often counter: a bridge is a social construction. I certainly hope it's real when I'm driving over it.) The *true* truth—including the true fact that those other truths are social constructions—is not socially-constructed, not organized. It's just independently, absolutely true.

Sociologist Bertell Ollman, back in the late 1970s, criticized this same resistance to the idea of organized truth:

> Most Americans slide in their thinking from the individual to 'everybody' without passing through the mediation of particular groups. Thus, for example, when responsibility for an act goes beyond its actual perpetrator, everyone is said to be guilty. This is the logic (if not the politics) behind Billy Graham's request that we all pray to be forgiven for the sins of My Lai and Watergate, a request that most people can deny only by upholding the equally absurd position that Calley and Nixon are solely responsible. The middle terms are missing.[10]

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an "opaque window" between the individual mind and the "outside world" (itself a modern creation), "just a series of minds-in-a-vat"—isolated, but forever under suspicion of joining together, not in a productive organization but as a mob, mindless and unstoppable, which will obliterate the pursuit of scientific truth by subjecting every truth-claim to a majority vote. See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), especially 6-7.

[10] Bertell Ollman, "On Teaching Marxism," in *Social and Sexual Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1979), http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/ssr_ch05.php (November 21, 2013).

Ollman, committed Marxist that he is, is talking mostly about class: the bourgeoisie, working in its own self-interest. I want to take his idea of "middle terms" more broadly: the "middle terms" are organizations. Charlie Company. CREEP. The Pentagon propaganda office. The post-1965 Republican party, and the Nixon factions within it. All the real conspiracies among members of the military, the government, and the business community. These are the intentionally-organized interpretive communities are where meaning gets made, where power gets built, and where agency is made possible.

When we understand truth and reality in terms of these kinds of organizations—as products of the interpretive communities we organize and are organized into, where meanings get made—then, and only then, can we even imagine playing a role in making that reality. When we know that the truth isn't something given, set, and outside of us—when we know things are the way they are because of the power (organized people, money, ideas) that different organizations have built, and the results of power-struggles between them for control over the dominant cultural market—then we can analyze how, and by whom, that power has been built, and how that power might be challenged or seized, either through organizing new interpretive communities and/or through changing (strengthening, weakening, altering) existing ones.

That's a hard thing to do, when you've got a habitus built on a market dead-set against understanding the world this way. When we understand organizing as something that's either bad or useless (or both), it's hard to see ourselves as anything but an anonymous collection of small individuals, powerless in the face of "society"—until, of

course, we find the secret code and enter it into our computers. The best we can do is keep looking, and try our best not to harm anyone on the way there. (This is the basic message of most mainstream moral message and religious sermons.)

Some of us, in academia and para-academia, are content with this lot: pursuing and stating truths, in the hopes that one of them will one day make us free. But not all of us. A handful of academics and para-academics, mostly on the right, have built organizations that have given them a whole lot of agency. (Post-1947 Chicago economics and the Mont Pelerin Society come immediately to mind, of course, as do the more recent think tanks that some of these same wealthy donors have funded.)

On the other side, there are many more, mostly self-conscious liberals, progressives, or leftists, who really *want* agency, who really *want* to go out and make real change, but just don't know how. These are the folks at PTO, in the artist and anarchist collectives and nonprofits, and in all those academic departments and programs with an orientation toward "justice" or "social change." It's not the biggest part of academia and para-academia. Nor is it the most influential part. But it's the part I'm from. It may even be where you're from, too. And, I'm convinced, it's the part that's most vital for us to understand. Here, in one of the parts of academia and para-academia where political agency should be the most possible, it's often in fact the least possible. Here, where a group of us would spend months of our lives preparing for a Legislative Theatre session, we still *just left* and dropped the ball afterwards. Surely, if we can understand how this left/liberal/progressive fringe of academia and para-academia works—and how it

produces such a strong resistance to agency even in people who so very much want agency—we can start to understand the whole thing.

1968 + 1641 = The Anarcho-Liberal Habitus

It's hard not to like a work of sophisticated academic theory that takes its inspiration from SpongeBob SquarePants. Let alone one that also insists "*Finding Nemo* contains a secret plan for world revolution." Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* is a delight.[11] It is one of the best, most thoughtful, creative, wide-ranging, and honest pieces of academic writing I have seen in a long time. And I'm not the only one who thinks so: since its publication a couple of years ago, it has been read widely throughout the left/liberal/progressive side of academia and para-academia, cited widely in conference papers and activist blogs alike.[12] Its back cover—always a useful

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[11] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 21. A note on pronoun usage: Halberstam, who now generally goes by the first name Jack, is neither "an unambiguous 'she'" nor "an unambiguous he," and self-admittedly "loosey goosey about pronouns." I considered continually switching up the pronouns—which could reflect Halberstam's interest in playful ambiguity—but I worried that this would be so confusing that it would distract from Halberstam's actual arguments—hardly germane to an author who wishes to *downplay* the gender and pronoun obsession. I will, therefore, take the most boring and conservative route and use "she/her/hers," as Halberstam does on her own USC faculty page—with the caveat that this choice, like all other available choices within a dominant culture that makes a fetish of the gender binary, is imperfect. For more on this issue, see Jack Halberstam, "On Pronouns," http://www.jackhalberstam.com/on-pronouns/ (November 23, 2013).

[12] At this point, my repeated conflation of "left," "liberal," and "progressive" is no doubt driving some readers crazy. Especially readers whose habitus was formed on markets that placed great value on one or more of these terms, or on an *aversion* to one or more of these terms, or on the importance of ideological precision in general. Let me try to explain. I'm not suggesting that these terms, or the institutions and histories and personal identities they refer to, are all the same. They are not. Self-identified leftists, liberals, and progressives have often historically been on different, even starkly opposing, sides of important issues. This remains true today, for those people and interpretive communities (such as Marxists) who remain loyal to a rigorous definition of these terms. But their numbers are dwindling. It's pretty rare these days to find a "liberal" who would take offense at being called a "progressive," or vice-versa. (The big exception to this is libertarians, many of whom hold onto the classical, European definition of "liberal": free individuals, free markets.) "Leftist" still feels a little stronger to me, but in American political parlance (from network-news pundits to even some political theorists) the word "left" is used to describe everything to the left of the Republican Party. I, for one, tend to get called all three—and though I

archive—is filled with endorsements from prominent feminist, queer, and otherwise "critical" academics. One of them even calls it "a manifesto for cultural studies."

What does this manifesto contain? What program is Halberstam laying out? It seems like a program that's…remarkably similar to my own. Halberstam is concerned that the neoliberals have convinced too many people "that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of bad attitude rather than structural conditions." (Right. It's not just about individuals doing good or bad. The fact that so many people are "failing" now has everything to do with the way the neoliberals, as an organized campaign, have restructured the market. Go on…) And she wants to make the university "a new kind of public sphere with a different investment in knowledge, in ideas, and in thought and politics" but is skeptical of "the critical academic," who might not be working against the neoliberal marketplace so much as carving out a place for her/him/itself within it. (Yes, absolutely…)

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have my issues with all these terms, and with catch-all political labels in general, I don't usually contradict people. You may notice I hardly mention "ideology" in this book at all. That's because I'm not sure how helpful a concept it is, in the post-1968/1974/1989 United States. Traditionally—which is to say, in Europe in the late 18th and 19th Centuries—"ideology" meant the positions of an organized group, especially a political party. This is still true in some places today: in many countries in Europe and South America, where socialist parties are still active and viable, to be a "socialist" simply means to be a member of that country's socialist party. Likewise with "liberal," "conservative," "progressive," etc. But when we talk about ideology here in the U.S., both in and outside the academy, we almost always mean it as a bad thing: it's what stops people from working together, what causes hatred and genocide and sexism and racism, what keeps the Kansans from acting in their self-interest. This is no surprise, in a culture once dominated by Madison-style resistance to "factions," and more recently dominated by neoliberals who are opposed to *all* organizing (other than their own). That's why I don't talk much about "ideology" in this book. It's not how most contemporary U.S.-Americans seem to navigate the world. The language I use instead—about habitus, markets, interpretive communities, and interpretive strategies—better fits the way most of us (myself included) understand ourselves politically: we believe and do what *feels right*, without much regard for a party-line. It's not that we're not organized; it's just that we're not very *self-consciously* organized; most of our organization has been done by someone else, without our knowledge or consent. Interpretive communities, Stanley Fish observes, have no formal membership: "the only 'proof' of membership is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: 'we know.'" In this murkier, less-conscious organizational reality, "liberals," "progressives," and "leftists" tend all to "know," and to give each other that "nod of recognition." See Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 173.

And like me—and SpongeBob—she frames her work in terms of the question: "What is the alternative…to cynical resignation [i.e., to being an agency-less speck in neoliberal "society"] on the one hand and naïve optimism [i.e., pretending you're an all-powerful cyberpunk hero] on the other? What is the alternative, SpongeBob wants to know, to working all day for Mr. Krabs, or being captured in the net of commodity capitalism while trying to escape?"[13]

The logic of Halberstam's manifesto is simple and compelling. If neoliberalism is based on Margaret Thatcher's dictum that "there is no alternative," Halberstam counters by offering all kinds of alternatives: alternative histories, alternative political formations, alternative ways of living and doing and being in the world. Despite these attempts, though, I worry that Halberstam does not actually end up offering an alternative at all. All of her attempts, rather, end up landing us right back in the neoliberal market they try to resist. None of this is because Halberstam is a bad or flawed theorist. (Far from it.) No, if Halberstam's book can't offer a viable alternative to neoliberalism, it's because the very market that's shaped both her habitus and her book—the market of academia, even at its most leftist/liberal/progressive—has left her, too, with no alternative.

The problem, as I see it, starts right after Halberstam poses the SpongeBob question:

> So what is the alternative? This simple question announces a political project, begs for a grammar of possibility (here expressed in gerunds and the passive voice, among other grammars of pronouncement) and expresses a basic desire to live life otherwise. Academics, activists, artists, and cartoon characters have long been on a quest to articulate an alternative vision of life, love, and labor, and to put such a vision into practice. Through the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue

[13] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3, 8, 1.

> to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject.[14]

Whoa. Umm…Gary…I don't think we're in Bikini Bottom anymore.

This language sounds like it's from a different ocean altogether. And it is: it's from the Academic Ocean.

You don't have to be a literary theorist to recognize that Halberstam is writing in some kind of code. It's just not how most people usually speak and write, right down to the phrasing and the sentence structure. If you *do* happen to be a literary theorist, you'll recognize the code immediately: it's the familiar style of "theory," which has dominated the market for academic writing in the humanities since the '80s.[15] "A grammar of

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[14] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

[15] Point of clarification: my critique, in the following pages, is not of any particular kind or work of "theory," but of the market. I'm critiquing the way the way the contemporary academic and para-academic market uses and distorts theoretical (and all other) texts, not the merit of the individual texts themselves. Which is to say: I'm staying out of the "good theorists"/"bad theorists" debate—one of the preferred culture wars of left/liberal/progressive academia. I obviously have my personal preferences, which are easy enough to guess. But I know plenty of people who work with theory I don't like, who still do excellent and important work; and conversely, I know plenty of people who work with theory I *do* like, who still do counterproductive work. As always, my interest is in the interpretive strategies: how we read, interpret, and value the theory and theorists we read, whomever they might be, on the market we're on—a market that tends, again, to resist looking at ideas and people, including ourselves and our own ideas, as organized. I don't see any sense in attacking "Deleuze" as such: if we read him as art, as Foucault recommended, he's a very different person from if we read (and "use") him as citable, scientific truth, as per the dominant interpretive strategies. In addition to ignoring the artistic dimension of these "theoretical" texts, these strategies also ignore their historical contexts. As the French intellectual historian François Cusset observed: "The problem with disregarding the genealogy of capitalism or the critique of market domination in works by Deleuze, Lyotard, or even Paul Virilio, or with splitting Derrida's critique of logocentrism from the political context of France's late 1960s, is that one risks having these works speak the very language of late capitalism. One risks mistaking them for what they clearly denounced: the promotion of relativism, of fluctuating and nonreferential values, that is, a praise of the new virtual, global, financial capitalism. Praising the autonomy of the signifier *for itself*, the death of the subject *for itself*, or a general economics of floating signs and drifting symbols detached from any stable standard, only gives food for thought to management gurus, postmodern sociologists, and the intellectual lobbies of a 'self-controlled' society. Maybe such readings of French Theory are also a direct effect of the changing American university, or of what Bill Readings calls the 'university in ruins,' since the university *too* has to comply with the new dogmas, the dogmas of self-regulation, of a paradigmatic Internet network, and of the ultimate free market. Academia too has no other choice than to favor circulation over production, information over labor, and to break down all barriers to the dissemination of intellectual commodities.

possibility" points to the French theorist Jacques Derrida. "Different ways of being in the world" points to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. "The liberal and consumer subject" points to the French theorist Michel Foucault.

I don't think Halberstam wrote in this kind of code on purpose. Especially given that she "hope[s] this book is readable by and accessible to a wider audience."[16] Like most of us, she's not entirely in control of her language. Her choices in the way she writes, like many of our choices about everything, aren't so much "choices" as feelings—the not-entirely-conscious response of a habitus to the market it's on: in this case, an academic market that puts a high value on this kind of phrasing and these kind of theory-invocations. Halberstam, through her whole book, is attempting something rather hard: to challenge the value-system of a market from within that market itself. The market says extol success; she will extol failure. The market says write for fellow theory-specialists; she will write for a wider audience. The market says cite works of high culture; she quotes SpongeBob. So it's no surprise that, from time to time, her habitus will snap back.

Consider the way Halberstam describes herself. She is "someone who never aced an exam, who has tried without much success to become fluent in another language, and who can read a book without retaining much at all," someone who "didn't even manage to pass my university entrance exams." Yet this celebration of her own failure seems almost dishonest. She never acknowledges that she is fluent in an extremely

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Maybe so, but the result, still, is to risk turning real social critics into trendy conservatives." See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

[16] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 24.

sophisticated, professional language (the language of theory); that she has a professorship at the University of Southern California (she must have done well in school at some point); and that she got this book published by Duke University Press (if she can't read a book, she can certainly write one). Somehow, among all of Halberstam's "failures," she succeeded in amassing a whole lot of cultural capital; somewhere along her "Benjaminian…stroll down uncharted streets in the 'wrong' direction," she learned to effortlessly cite German philosopher Walter Benjamin. But she never tells us about that part.[17]

Why not? Unless Halberstam is actually trying to pull one over on us—which I seriously doubt—it's got to be a habitus thing again. If she doesn't talk about herself in the context of organizations, specifically those organizations where she built all her cultural capital, it's because doing so didn't *feel right*. And according to my colleague and former teacher Timothy Brennan, Halberstam isn't alone. On the current academic market, talking about the agency you've built within organizations pretty much never feels right:

> From the running of English departments to annual meetings of the editorial boards of scholarly journals, academic intellectuals spend 50 percent of their time in the force fields of bureaucracy, counting votes, preparing policies. Academic unions at some schools hold hearings, file briefs, and petition the legislature; ad hoc organizations like Teachers for a Democratic Culture and the Union of Democratic Intellectuals used to print newsletters and place op-ed pieces. But in general, the writing in cultural studies journals is, purely speaking, anarchist in its politico/moral positioning.[18]

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[17] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 12, 25, 6.
[18] Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 151.

Academics, like everyone else, participate in organizations whether they like it or not. Halberstam had to have participated (at least somewhat successfully) in all kinds of organizations, to get the kind of cultural capital she has. And she still participates in organizations, now: at the very least, in her department at the University of Southern California, and on the editorial board of GLQ (A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies). Yet when Halberstam describes herself in *The Queer Art of Failure*, it's as if none of these organizations existed. This goes likewise for many academics I know. Some are very talented organizers, who have organized the necessary people and money and ideas to build the power to enact controversial curricular reforms, get faculty hired and fired, and win massive amounts of resources for themselves and their departments. Yet as soon as they start writing and teaching, all this power savvy and organizational consciousness goes bye-bye. Here, power isn't what all kinds of people and organizations build in order to further their self-interests. No, power is something *bad*. It's wielded by non-human (non-organizational) evildoers like "society" or "hegemony," who use it to "discipline" or "oppress" the innocent good guys, who are always powerless and never organized; to be a good guy, in this strange parallel universe, means to virtuously *resist* power, but never to build it yourself.

Halberstam's theory revolves around this same, familiar cast of characters. There's always a clear villain, and it's usually "the state"—sometimes accompanied by henchmen like "disciplinarity," "heroic and grand logics," "heteronormative, capitalist society," and "neoliberalism"—understood not as a human-made organization, but as an amorphous specter, like all the rest. Much like the men from the laundromat, Halberstam

doesn't really distinguish among government, business, education, the various news and entertainment media, or other powerful social institutions. There's no sense that these are all clusters of human-made organizations, with all kinds of various self-interests that sometimes coincide and sometimes don't, and which people participate in in all kinds of different ways. No, for Halberstam, they're all part of the same thing, the System, the Man, the State-with-a-capital-S. Thomas Frank rightly criticizes the Kansans for imagining "liberalism" as a monolithic, all-powerful force bent (for whatever reason) on destroying their homespun, God-fearing way of life—but theorists like Halberstam do the same thing: they imagine "the State" as an equally monolithic, all-powerful force bent (for whatever reason) on destroying the subversive, queer freedom of the individual.

It's a particular, peculiar approach to politics. Brennan calls it "anarcho-liberalism."[19] "Anarcho" because it denounces nearly all forms of government, education, and most organization in general; "liberalism" because its highest virtue is upholding the freedom of the individual against an invasive "society." Anarcho-liberalism started taking over the academic market in the latter half of the 1970s, at the same time as the neoliberals were taking over the capital market.[20] These two forms of liberalism, which would do a lot to strengthen each other, both owe their dominance to the "crisis" of the late '60s and early '70s: the economic collapse, the cultural fallout from the Civil Rights and ensuing student movements, and the trans-Atlantic uprisings of 1968.

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[19] Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 12.
[20] See Brennan, *Wars of Position*, especially ix-xiii and 1-5.

It was in 1968, according to historian Peter Starr, when "calls for the overthrow of the late capitalist order" started becoming "routinely coupled with calls for sexual liberation, for a radical disalienation of a modern subject caught in an increasingly technocratic world, for guerrilla art, or for new conceptions of urban space."[21] The goal, in the words of two prominent French 68ers, was to create "a fragile synthesis of two, ordinarily irreconcilable dogmatic logics—one of Marxist inspiration, the other libertarian."[22] That synthesis never happened. Marxism lost; libertarianism won. Starr explains:

> The order of the day included ecologism, consumerism, and regionalism; the defense of the rights of minorities and gays; anti-psychiatry and the liberation of 'desire.' 'Difference' was the password and the right to difference the fundamental stake in political struggles. Or, more precisely, the celebration of difference stood athwart the political, eschewing politics proper while claiming real political effects, in accordance with an extension of the political, most commonly associated with Foucault, to include all life situations governed by differential relations of power.[23]

This was not necessarily the position of Michel Foucault the human being, who was variously involved with "politics proper" throughout his life and academic career. But it was the position of "Foucault" the commodity and "theory" icon[24]—who would

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[21] Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 5.
[22] See Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, 6.
[23] Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, 7.
[24] My erstwhile colleague and professor John Mowitt makes this point in a short, interesting piece called "The Method of Discourse." *Foucault* has become a method in and of itself, which has pervaded much of the humanities and social sciences. This method is to analyze the ways "discourse functions to establish a framework within which things become thinkable…to lay out what kind of frame of intelligibility made it possible for documents to be read and written as significant statements of scientific knowledge at a given moment…the apparatus wherein statements, practices, and experiences could be perceived as meaningfully correlated with one another, such that it would make sense to talk about subjects as [for example] having either sex, or a sex. It was this very act of discourse that led Foucault to develop, and later insist upon, the notion of 'subject positions'; the idea being that frames of intelligibility positioned subjects in relation to their norms such that the very act of knowing oneself, in fact, or even of knowing one's own desire, was

soon be lumped with fellow 68-era icons such as "Barthes," "Derrida," "Deleuze," and "Althusser," into a pantheon that would take on immense market value. "For the American academic, the entrée into theory can appear to be an indispensable prerequisite to entrance into the world of scholarly publishing, itself reflective of a culture industry for which…'the only choice is either to join in or be left behind.'"[25]

This "theory" was, in Starr's words, a "logic of failed revolt," fully grounded in defeat. "If the new philosophy has a coherent theory of revolution," observed American literature professor Michael Ryan, in dialogue with prominent post-'68 theorist Gayatri Spivak, "it is this: revolution is impossible because the same always returns in the opposite. The Master can never be altogether eliminated because to oppose him is merely to reaffirm his power. And whatever alternative is set up in opposition to the Master will be yet another Master."[26]

After 1968, to be a good revolutionary no longer meant to organize, build power, and overthrow capitalism. Now it meant to celebrate and protect "difference"—the

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caught up in a discourse that conditioned this act of self-understanding." *Foucault*, then, was more than just a method. It was an entire approach to problem-selection (in the words of philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn). It had a huge effect not just on the ways academics did their research, but also on the kinds of questions they investigated in the first place. (Some friends and colleagues enjoy making me angry by pointing out traces of the Foucault method even in my own writing, in ways that go beyond the title to Chapter One. They are surely correct.) These questions, both in how they were asked and how they were investigated, follow (or perhaps inaugurate) the basic academic/para-academic structure we can see in everything from Althusser to cyberpunk to *What's the Matter With Kansas?*: how does the "apparatus" of "discourse"—often, as in the title of my degree, linked to "society"—structure the "subject positions" that the enslaved individual mistakes for a self-formed identity? These aren't necessarily bad questions to ask. But when they're the *only* questions we ask, when they become (again in Kuhn's terms) paradigmatic, we end up excluding all possibility of "real world" agency from the conversation. See John Mowitt, "The Method of Discourse," *Meditations* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 1-7.

[25] Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, 201. Starr is quoting Horkheimer and fellow postwar German critical theorist Theodor Adorno, who collectively coined the phrase the "culture industry." See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136.

[26] See Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, 15.

freedom of individuals—against the constant threat of the Master. The Master could be a government, a corporation, or even a union or a people's organization or a leftist revolutionary movement. The moment a group of people started to organize and build power, they were immediately suspected of threatening others' "difference," and therefore aiding (or actually being) the Master. The new revolutionaries didn't spend much time fighting fascism in public life; rather, just as "the Christian moralists sought out the traces of the flesh lodged deep within the soul" (in Foucault's words), so do these modern monks, through their scholarly articles and artworks and anti-racism workshops, "pursue the slightest traces of fascism in the body."[27] The pursuit of political agency had been replaced by the pursuit of ethical purity. And ironically enough, for a body of theory famous for opposing "binaries," it seemed to leave us with the starkest binary of all: either you're a fascist, or you're a victim.

The iconic statement of this program is Howard Zinn's famous *People's History of the United States*. Zinn's book, while a wonderful piece of popular writing which has introduced generations of readers to "history from below," is frustrating in the way it perpetuates this same overly-simplistic moral divide. Zinn takes the messy, complex, morally-ambiguous struggles of various people and groups to organize and build power, and reduces them to a black-and-white struggle "between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of

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[27] Michael Foucault, "Preface," in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977): xi-xiv, xiii.

thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners."[28] It's the same position that the famous critic Edward Said took, when he wrote of the imperative "for an intellectual…to be unusually responsible to the traveler rather than to the potentate, to the provisional and risky rather than to the habitual, to innovation and experiment rather than the authoritatively given *status quo*."[29]

But…what if the traveler is a dangerous criminal, and the potentate is more-or-less just? What if the provisional and risky is harmful (such as in neoliberalism) while the habitual includes a responsible social safety net? These are hypotheticals, of course. But they illustrate the problem with replacing organization-based, political analysis with sweeping, moral generalizations. And here's another question: if the world is truly divided into fascists and victims…where does that leave us, academics and readers of Zinn and Said?

It leaves us detached. Like Hiro in his helicopter, we are to float above the "biomass," passing judgment without any self-interest of our own, and without tarnishing our ethical purity by getting involved in any organizations. The rest of the world may be working in their own self-interest, but we academics, like Hebrew National hotdogs, answer to a Higher Authority. Our *raison d'etre*, Said insists, is "to represent *all* those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug." To support everything that is dominated, transient, and provisional, and oppose everything that dominates, stays fixed, and is permanent. To take "the exile position."[30] An academic

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[28] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1980), 9-10.
[29] Edward Said, "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," in *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), 380-81; quoted in Cusset, *French Theory*, 20.
[30] See McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, 3n, 16. Emphasis added.

and artist colleague of mine, very committed to "social justice," told me when she enters a community, her disposition is immediately to "find the marginalized people." If they're marginalized, we should advocate for them; if they're not, we shouldn't.[31] Which rules out making meaningful distinctions—such as the crucial distinction Augusto Boal (among others) makes between the oppressed, who are actively working to build power and end their oppression, and victims, who are not.

Halberstam, like nearly all self-consciously radical academics of the past few decades, is on board with this program. Her book celebrates "the relationship between new forms of animation and alternative politics," by which she means not revolutionary organizing but lifestyle—"alternative ways of knowing and being."[32] Halberstam explores "the ways the modern state has run roughshod over local, customary, and undisciplined forms of knowledge" and sets out "to pick up some of the discarded local knowledges that are trampled underfoot in the rush to bureaucratize and rationalize an economic order that privileges profit over all kinds of motivations for being and doing."[33] The point is not to organize *against* this profit-driven state, to build a new or better one, but merely to "resist" its tendency to "squash" other ways of "being in the world." And,

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[31] But, wait, who is *most* deserving of our advocacy? When we remove all categories of organization and self-interest, suddenly we are responsible for the whole world. Hence what some critics have called the "Oppression Olympics," a kind of a race-to-the-bottom triage system for determining who is the "most oppressed"—and thus, the most morally/ethically pure and worthy of consideration. Political scientist Adolph Reed explains: "this mode of argument has precedents in the allegations of black workers' double oppression that appeared in some quarters of left debate in the 1970s and of black women's double or triple oppression that gained currency within the women's movement perhaps a bit later. Implicit in both formulations was a presumption that greater oppression assigned a group greater insight or gave its claims moral priority. To the extent that the proliferating specification of identity positions follows a similar logic it betrays the grain of truth beneath conservatives' ugly dismissals of the new academic specialties as 'oppression studies.'" See Adolph Reed, Jr., *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), xix.
[32] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 23-24.
[33] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 9.

in a more positive vein, to "privilege the naïve or nonsensical," the "unconventional loners," and above all the "failures."

Halberstam, despite her interest in "alternative politics," doesn't analyze how these loaners and failures might be organized—either in the future (by/for themselves, for the better) or in the present (by someone else, for the worse). It's just not a question that occurs, either to her or, it seems, to most of her readers. As with Foucault and Zinn, taking the side of these "marginal" folks is not a political strategy; it's an ethical imperative, and an empirical truth, and an aesthetic preference—all rolled into one. When you're given an image like the "thicket of subjugated knowledge that sprouts like weeds among the disciplinary forms of knowledge, threatening always to overwhelm the cultivation and pruning of the intellect with mad plant life"—and implicitly asked which side you're on—there's not even a question. Of course we prefer the exciting and active mad plant life, which threatens the boring prudish Gary Aldrich-style cultivator and also happens to let the plants go free and respect the natural, free-flowing course of knowledge. Like a cyberpunk novel—and like the neoliberal conception of "the market"—this kind of image gives you a (really easy) choice between something that's ethically wrong *and* politically oppressive *and* aesthetically boring *and* factually incorrect (all the same, all part of the Master) and something that's ethically right *and* politically liberating *and* aesthetically interesting *and* factually correct.[34]

[34] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 9.

This kind of analysis might be fun, but it's not particularly serious.[35] To be fair, Halberstam openly declares that "not being taken seriously…is my goal."[36] But I want to question whether we should take *that* seriously. She pretty clearly *cares* about the people and issues she's writing about; the liberation of these subjugated peoples and ways of knowing and being seems pretty deep in her self-interest, as a writer and a scholar and a one-time theater performer and a person who has herself experienced various forms of failure and queerness. The interpretive strategies she's using, the only ones available on the market she's on, are just getting in her way. It's hard to work for people's liberation, after all, when you honestly believe that neither they nor you have any agency, or ever *could* have any agency—that all the agency lies in the State.

This belief is depressingly common, in a lot of the most popular social theory of the past century. In the social sciences, it's been expressed (variously) in the work of Max Weber and C. Wright Mills and Jürgen Habermas, and many more in between. In the post-68 humanities, it's been expressed most clearly in the work of the French philosopher Louis Althusser. His most oft-read essay, "Ideology and the State" (1969),

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[35] "Serious," as I'm using it here, is a term of art in the oral tradition of broad-based community organizing. To be "serious" means to do an objective power-analysis—to assess your own, your allies', and your opposition's resources and potential for agency—and then to act, strategically, based on that analysis. (Which might include strategically deciding *not* to act, in a given way in a given moment.) It is frequently coupled with the imperative to be "clear"—meaning, to do an objective analysis of your and others' self-interest, and then to act strategically based on that analysis. When an organizer observes that a colleague is not acting "clearly" or "seriously"—which always poses a risk to their shared work and self-interest—s/he performs what's called an "agitation": s/he sits down with that colleague and, in an intentional and prepared way, lays out (1) what that colleague is doing now, (2) what that colleague *could* be doing if s/he were acting more clearly and seriously, and (3) what's getting in the way. I'll discuss all of this at much greater length in the next chapter, but I bring it up here in order to explain what I'm doing with Halberstam, and some of the language I'm doing it in. This chapter is, in essence, an agitation that I am giving my colleagues in academia and para-academia, out of our mutual self-interest in taking down TINA. We will do better, I am arguing, if we are more serious about the agency that we, our readers and colleagues, and those we consider "oppressed" actually have, and could build. For more on "clear," "serious," and "agitation," see Chapter Four.

[36] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 6.

implicitly argues that the uprisings of the previous year failed because…none of us have much agency. We have been made who we are—docile creatures who sit down, shut up, and do what we're told—by "ideology," which is controlled by "the State" and expressed through its various "ideological state apparatuses" (ISAs): education, religion, the family, the law, the media, basically every institution of human culture. The ISAs turn each individual into a "subject" of ideology, who thinks s/he is independent and free-thinking but in fact not at all. And should we somehow manage to smuggle some trace of agency past the ISAs, the State will deploy the "repressive state apparatuses" (RSAs)—the police and the military—to beat it out of us, literally.[37]

I find this argument frustrating and oversimplified.[38] At the same time, I understand its appeal. It tries to take stock of the enormity of the challenges "we" face. If it ends up being rather fatalistic and masochistic, it may just be riffing on the culture around it: what critic Christopher Lasch called the "masochistic relish" that the 1968 generation took in "denunciations of itself…as empty, conformist, sexually repressed, and dead to feeling."[39] And it's an appealing, blunt instrument for convincing naïve,

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[37] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and the State," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186. Althusser's "structuralist Marxism," argues historian Patrick Brantlinger, represents "what happens to Marxism when the idea of economic causation is subtracted from it, or when something else—the 'structural,' based on a Saussurean linguistic model—is substituted for the economic." To which I need only add: not just the economic, but also the *organizational*. Althusser removed all the dialectical dynamism from Marxism: all the instability and inevitable clashes of classes, ideas, and institutions that can create change, and ultimately, revolution, and in doing so, he managed "to liquidate any role for human agency in the making of class consciousness and history." See Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 77, 89. For a far, far more thorough critique of Althusser—specifically, of his pre-1968 writings—see E.P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," in *The Poverty of Theory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 1-210.

[38] In my less mature moments, I have suggested that "ISA" should stand for "infantile social analysis."

[39] Christopher A. Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 31. Note the publication date.

blithely individualist undergraduate students that they are in fact *not* free agents, unaffected by the culture around them.

Is there no potential for agency at all for Althusser? Not quite. He gives us one way out. In addition to the all-powerful "State" and the Kansans trapped in "ideology," there is one more category of person:

> I might add: what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself.[40]

The only way out of ideology, it seems, is through practicing "scientific knowledge" and speaking directly about ideology—that is, through being an academic theorist like Althusser himself. That's the hope for agency. It's a questionable hope—just because I know my body-image issues come from the ideology of the capitalist media doesn't mean I magically stop having those issues—but if you believe Althusser, it's the only hope there is. It gives a different spin on SDS leader Todd Gitlin's remark that after 1968 "the right marched on Washington and took a great deal of it while the left was marching on the English department." I used to find this ironic. After reading Althusser, I'm not so sure.[41] If you really believe that doing theory is the only way left to

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[40] Althusser, "Ideology and the State," 175. I hope this last sentence is a joke, or at least somewhat ironic. But I'm not sure.

[41] "Transcript for: A Conversation with Todd Gitlin," *Think Tank with Ben Wattenberg* (November 23, 1995). http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/transcript235.html (November 26, 2013). As Brennan notes: "if [Marx's famous] eleventh thesis on Feuerbach ('philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point,

get agency, then joining the English department really could be, un-ironically, a revolutionary act.

And so it was that in the years after 1968, the same years when the neoliberals began ransacking the public sphere, leftist radicals and activists entered academia in droves. Suddenly, as right-wing critics like David Horowitz and Gertrude Himmelfarb noted with horror, everyone who wanted to study English literature was also expected to want to overthrow capitalism. (Or at least to pretend.)[42] But they needn't have worried so much. They might talk, write, and publish about revolution, but this revolution, in practice, pretty much just meant writing more theory.

Althusser, to be fair, was not an organizer. He was a philosopher. If he resisted all agency other than the theorist's, he was only following in the footsteps of his discipline—created, in its modern form, some 330 years earlier, when another French philosopher shut out the rest of the world and tried to achieve true scientific knowledge (which had evaded all the dupes out there) through his pure individual thoughts alone.

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however, is to change it') had generally been taken as a declaration of philosophy's limits, Althusser…with virtuosic cheekiness…considered it a call for a new philosophy that would [itself] transform the world" (Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 311n39).

[42] These were the "significant parts of the academy" that, according to Horowitz, have become agencies of social and political change," staffed by "activists who regarded the university as a platform from which to advance their political mission. Drawing on the works of European Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse, and the educational theorist Paulo Freire, the radicals viewed universities as 'means of cultural production' analogous to the 'means of production' in Marx's revolutionary *schema*. To these professorial activists, the academic classroom offered a potential fulcrum for revolutionary change. Because the university trained journalists and educators, lawyers and judges, future political candidates and operatives, it provided a path to cultural 'hegemony' and an opportunity to promote a radical transformation of the society at large." See David Horowitz and Jacob Laskin, *One Party Classroom: How Radical Professors at America's Top Colleges Indoctrinate Students and Undermine Our Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 6-7, 9. On pretending: I know at least one colleague who entered a comparative literature program as a self-described conservative, who within a year called himself a Marxist. This was no nefarious leftist conversion, however: when asked to do an afternoon of campaign work for a progressive Democratic candidate, he declined, but because "that's a little too concrete for me." Marxism, for him and so many others, was just a body of texts used to do certain kind of theoretical readings of literature, amenable to Republicans just as much as to Democrats.

I'm talking about René Descartes, the Catholic mercenary (figuratively and also literally) who's maybe most remembered for inventing the coordinate plane (remember y = mx + b?), and who's also considered one of the founders of both modern philosophy and modern science.

Descartes might be an early cyberpunk. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1641 and (like Althusser) still widely taught in introductory university courses, Descartes basically jacked in: he locked himself in an empty room, retreated from the external world into his deck-of-a-mind, and started hacking: "the mind, through the exercise of its own freedom, supposes the nonexistence of all those things about whose existence it can have even the least doubt. In doing so the mind realizes that it is impossible for it not to exist during this time." (Hence: "I think, therefore I am.") When we isolate ourselves completely, "freeing us of all prejudices," we learn that the only thing that is incontrovertibly real is our own mind. And our only hope of reaching any real, objective knowledge is to keep this mind isolated, in its vat.[43]

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[43] René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4th ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998): 45-103, 54. Descartes was obviously not the first philosopher to deal with questions of reality, appearances, and deception. But in Plato's cave, the shadows on the wall of the cave are *fake*; the point of philosophy is to *free* people from that fake, solipsistic knowledge and bring them back into the world of people. What's new about Descartes is, he switches it around: now it's the outside world, the world of human and relationship-based knowledge, that's fake; to get real, philosophic, scientific knowledge, you have to go *into* the cave. (You can, in this way, draw a straight line from Descartes to Baudrillard.) Descartes wasn't alone in this innovation: he stood on the shoulders of Luther, who had recently locked himself in the Wartburg to do battle with the Devil in order to bring the Bible to the people (the first translation into German), and of Machiavelli, who secluded himself in his study and costumed himself in the robes of sovereignty in order to discover the secrets of statecraft (in *The Prince*). This was also the moment when first-person perspective was invented in painting. It was—as Foucault and many other scholars have argued—the birth of "modernity," when the modern "individual" was born: capable of attaining all knowledge of the world from where he stood (still very much *he*, at this point), capable of forging a destiny independent of the people around him, and defined in sharp relief to a "society" that may stand between him and true, absolute knowledge and (cyberpunk) agency. There are many accounts of this historical moment and the changes it wrought: my two (very different but oddly complementary) favorites are Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Chapter 1 ("A Dangerous Form of Knowledge"),

Thus was modern knowledge born. The world according to Descartes is not a place we live in, are a part of, work to shape; it is a place we examine from the outside, remaining safely locked in our little room with our mind in its vat (or in our helicopter above the biomass). We are now spectators, consumers of the world. It's only from this perspective that questions like "Are we really real?" and "Am I just making all of this up?" and (fellow French philosopher Bruno Latour's favorite) "Do you believe in reality?" make any sense.[44] We will never be able to answer these questions, at least not in any absolute sense. And yet these are now the questions that dictate the dominant interpretive strategies of formal knowledge-seeking, in and out of academia. The goal is absolute knowledge. Incontrovertible, unbiased, disinterested, disembodied knowledge. Knowledge that is "freed" from the "distortions" of particular interpretive strategies and the particular habitus, markets, and interpretive communities that create them—freed, in other words, from humans and their human ways of meaning-making. It's an interpretive strategy that demands knowledge attained "outside" of interpretive strategies. Which is, for humans, impossible by definition.

But that hasn't stopped many humans from trying—very, very hard, for a very, very long time. "Society," as we know it, comes right out of Descartes' separation of mind and "outside" world. In Latour's words, "this 'society' itself was just a series of minds-in-a-vat, many minds and many vats to be sure, but each of them still composed

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and Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979), Chapter 2 ("Machiavelli and the Poetics of *Virtù*").

[44] Here, and below, I am again largely paraphrasing Latour's arguments, especially from the first chapter of *Pandora's Hope* ("Do You Believe in Reality?").

of…a detached mind gazing at an outside world."[45] No wonder organizing and agency seem so impossible: each mind is in a separate vat, existentially and basically alone. And if those vats were ever to overflow, and mix all those minds together, the result wouldn't be agency but *the mob*, the masses, the crowd, the "Tea Party Jacobins": the bogeymen of elitist conservatives and concerned liberals alike.[46] That's the choice: radical individualism or the mob, anarchism or authoritarianism.

What's missing in this analysis, again, are Ollman's "middle terms": all of those intentional organizations, as large-scale as unions and political parties and as small-scale as faculty and student associations, through which people work collectively to make their world. These "middle terms," on a market set by Descartes and Althusser, not only become hard to see; they become taboo to talk about. And taboo to talk about. John McGowan, English professor at UNC-Chapel Hill, tells what happened when this unspoken taboo got broken:

> I entered the room a little late for the session on criticism and social change [at the 1986 Modern Language Association conference]. The first speaker, a woman, was already telling the audience of about sixty that 'structuration' was the sociologists' term for what she wanted to describe, but that she would avoid using such hideous jargon. She was here to talk about her experiences working for change as a woman within the profession….The speaker began to explain university bureaucracies and methods of negotiating with them in the vocabulary supplied by personnel management theories and organizational psychology. Her examples of prejudice had made me uneasy; now her valorization of the stuff MBAs are made on and her use of their horrendous neologisms positively offended me.
>
> Academic audiences are hardly demonstrative. I was feeling puzzled, wondering if I was showing my curmudgeonly colors by finding her so distasteful. She was perfectly politically correct, a warrior for women's rights, and there was every reason to believe that an audience gathered to hear her, a

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[45] Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 7.
[46] See Mark Lilla, "The Tea Party Jacobins," *The New York Review of Books* (May 27, 2010). http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/may/27/tea-party-jacobins/ (December 2, 2013).

> well-known critic of criticism and a prominent neo-Marxist, talk about criticism's ability to effect social change would be sympathetic to her goals and achievements. In any case, I sensed something was wrong, but thought it might just be me.
>
> The speaker obviously felt totally in control as she rounded the final corner and gave personal testimony about her career in "implementing change." A veteran of the sixties and the New Left, she had refused to be discouraged by the movement's collapse, going off instead to take a workshop that taught her how to become a "change agent." At the first university where she was employed, she had put together a coalition of women who presented the administration with one hundred demands, some of them substantial, some of them fluff that was meant to be bargained away in negotiations. They got the administration to accede to all the demands they had agreed among themselves were essential. Subsequently, she had acted as a liaison between women scholars and various publishers as part of a concerted effort to overcome the long-standing tendency of women academics to publish less than their male counterparts. In conclusion, as someone "who had implemented much change in universities," she could tell us that change is possible if you work for it.
>
> She thanked us and sat down. In silence. The moderator of the panel stood up and introduced the second speaker .[47]

No one applauded. At all. "I have never witnessed or even heard of a similar occurrence at an academic conference," McGowan continues. "My first thought was, so much for our commitment to political change. Here is an audience that fondly believes itself radical, but when presented with an energetic and effective political activist, turns up its nose." But after a little more guilt and privilege-checking and Lasch-style "masochistic relish," McGowan offers a very insightful analysis:

> Our response was…less a matter of prejudice against her activities than a complete failure to recognize her relationship to what we do and believe. Some class snobbery was present. She was dressed and talked like an in-house corporate lawyer—someone with a law degree from Notre Dame or a state university; but she was on our side. More crucial was our intellectual snobbery. Her analysis of the issues was crude and simple-minded. Worse, perhaps, was her straightforward pursuit of economic goods within the world we inhabit; academic radicals prefer their politics more refined: abstract visions of justice for all in some utterly transformed social order. Her attachment to the pseudo-academic

[47] McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, 42-43.

> disciplines developed for bureaucrats by the nation's business schools violated our allegiance to our more humane, subtle, complex, and elegant literary vocabulary. Finally, the tin ear that allowed her to use the word "change" in such inappropriate ways and a phrase like "change agent" without the slightest tinge of irony proclaimed that she was not one of us.
>
> …our impoliteness did reveal what we English and modern language professors, despite our various internecine quarrels, share in common. For better or for worse, this is who we are: a group that values complex political analyses over crude, if effective, political action. We are skeptics who find it difficult to credit direct accusations of sexual discrimination, even while developing theoretical models that designate a whole culture and all its linguistic usages 'patriarchal'; habitual pessimists who have become so comfortable with our ritual denunciations of contemporary culture and all its works that any intimations of possible change offends us; political activists who fully intend to leave the dirty political work to others; and, most crucially, writers and teachers whose most firm allegiance is to language. You can say anything at the MLA convention and receive applause so long as you do not abuse our highly developed sense of linguistic decorum. To know, practice, and defend the intricate, unwritten, rules of that decorum makes you a full-fledged member of our group.[48]

In a world where ideas are made (organized) in interpretive communities—i.e., our world—that's always the big question: are you in "our group," or aren't you? And in a culture defined by culture war, this question easily becomes: are you us, or are you them? Friend or enemy? If it feels like a silly question, it can still make or break your career: say or do or write something that puts you outside of the group, and the market will enact its revenge.

What does "our group" look like? It looks like a counterculture. The same counterculture that Case and Hiro and the rest of the "technological priesthood" live in. Put together the 1641 disposition to detach and the 1968 disposition to resist, and you get a culture defined by opposition—to the mainstream, to the status quo, to "society." We might want to connect with "the people," but first we need to find the code and enter it in

[48] McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, 44.

and radically re-make them: "The intellectuals who practice leftist cultural politics are 'out of touch' with the people," McGowan declares, "but…there is not any group already existing out there ready-made, for them to get into touch with. That group—or coalition of groups—needs to be made, to be forged, through the performatives of cultural politics."[49]

But wait—what's the problem with the people out there now? There *are* actually groups out there, like the one that MLA speaker belonged to. The trouble is, they have the wrong style. Style, in academia as in many countercultures, is crucial. The speaker had the right political views or goals, but she talked funny: corporate, confident, concrete. She knew how the organizational structures worked, and how to build power within them. She didn't speak in theory-citations; she didn't demean herself or negate her own agency; she didn't prostrate herself before impossible-to-penetrate oppressive structures, impossible-to-reach oppressed peoples, or impossible-to-access liberation movements.[50] That is: she didn't give her audience any of the Halberstam-style "nods of

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[49] McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, 23.

[50] This kind of language, for the members of this interpretive community, is what my colleagues Robin Brown and Carl Herndl (following the tradition of "object relations" psychoanalysis) would call a "self-object." Self-objects are, literally, those objects in relation to which we have developed our selves, our most basic understanding of who we are in the world. (Without them, we would be feral children.) Many of our most important self-objects are people—starting with the people who raised us (parents or otherwise) and continuing throughout our lives with particularly important teachers, mentors, role models, and peers—who "tell us…who we are and how to be." But not all self-objects are people. Think about all the books, songs, movies, activities, places, and/or foods, among other things, that are so close to us we consider them a part of us. When we see them being attacked, we will defend them fiercely, even irrationally. And we would no sooner separate ourselves from them than we would from one of our own arms or legs. The urge to hold fast to our self-objects is one of the most durable dispositions in our habitus. Brown and Herndl's innovation is to connect self-objects to rhetoric. One of the most important—and overlooked—strategies of effective rhetoric is to identify the self-objects of your audience and then speak accordingly: tailor your arguments to resonate with them, and above all avoid attacking them head-on. (This is the wisdom of Saul Alinsky's oft-repeated dictum: if you want to organize Orthodox Jews, don't go into their neighborhood eating a ham sandwich.) And beyond that, Brown and Herndl argue, rhetoric *is* a self-object, maybe even the most powerful one. The way we talk, the patterns and accents and vocabulary and sentence structure and pace and interruptions and gestures, is a huge part of who we are. That, ultimately, was the rhetorical

recognition" that would have reassured them that they were all in the same interpretive community. It's not that the audience didn't *like* or *respect* her, at least not necessarily; it's that they didn't *get* her. They didn't see themselves in her, or her in themselves. And so, as we commonly do in that situation, they rejected her.

It's a tragic double-bind. We, academics of the left/liberal/progressive variety, are a counterculture that craves connection, often to the very "society" we reject. McGowan observes "something forlorn about the [academic] intellectual, always a sense of being slightly irrelevant, something that motivates the corresponding dream of hooking up with the true source of social power, whether that source be the state or the proletariat. Hence [Italian organizer and philosopher Antonio] Gramsci's notion of the 'organic' intellectual who is seamlessly woven into a social group. The intellectual rarely, if ever, feels organic." And at the same time "there is almost always another group—a group often figured as oppressed—who is to benefit from the intellectual's activities. This group isn't seen as directly connected (either through reading or other direct encounters) with the intellectual's work, but is to benefit nonetheless….Called to explain how their work will effect the transformations it calls for, the intellectual has only comically feeble Rube Goldberg scenarios to offer, a voodoo politics replete with its own versions of 'trickle down' influence."[51]

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mistake of the speaker at the MLA conference—at least, if her goal was to make herself and her ideas acceptable to her audience (which is up for debate). In speaking the language of organizing, she attacked their most important self-object head-on. See Brown and Herndl, "Beyond the Realm of Reason," especially 228-230.

[51] McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, ix, 3-4. Note: McGowan misreads Gramsci and his concept of the "organic intellectual" in an important and very common way, which I will discuss in Chapter Four.

Yet here, standing in front of them—in front of *us*—was a real-live "organic intellectual." A well-known academic, who was "seamlessly woven into a social group" that is "often figured as oppressed," who had built "social power" and used it to fight that oppression, and who was now offering herself to us and asking us to accept her. And we didn't. For the simple reason that…we didn't know how. Just like we didn't know how to keep building power after the Legislative Theater session in Minneapolis. Our habitus—disposed to understand ourselves and our work and the truth as detached from all organizations, to privilege the unseen and powerless over the visible and powerful, and to resist all agency other than the cyberpunk—wouldn't let us.[52]

This double-bind goes a long way toward explaining the vague discontentment, the general malaise, that hangs over many of the best academics I know.[53] It's the feeling we experience in (only the best) seminars, the same feeling I get when thinking about our Legislative Theatre session at City Hall: the feeling that we've gotten as far as we can

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[52] The obvious question to ask, at this point, is: then wherefore this book? If I don't cyberpunk-ish-ly claim immunity from interpretive communities and markets—which of course I don't—then how do I square this piece of academic cultural production with a market that seems like it would be pretty hostile to it? I discuss this question in depth in the Prologue, but briefly: first, I have some different dispositions in my habitus, because of some interpretive communities I've fallen ass-backwards into—chief among them, broad-based community organizing and my family (including my politician and journalist father). Second, I am taking an intentional risk, offering this book on the academic market; I am aware that it may fail, and I'm okay with that (I'm not sure I want an academic job anyway…and I'm lucky and privileged enough to have some other options). Third, I have a vague inkling that the academic market may be shifting: what with all the recent interest in "civic engagement"—and a re-investment into the values of land-grant universities—I may be following an emerging trend myself.

[53] This phenomenon has been variously documented. Harry Boyte and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (then at the University of Minnesota) interviewed over 30 professors from across the University of Minnesota in the late 1990s. They found that nearly all professors they talked to were frustrated with their work environments, and that that frustration tended to take a common, cyberpunk-neoliberal form: public and interpersonal work was devalued, in favor of hyper-individualized market competition. In the words of retired political science professor Charles Backstrom: "I thought of my job description as including work with communities…[but] there was a war of cultures at the University then. I felt pressure to focus only on publications." Harry C. Boyte, "Public Engagement in a Civic Mission: A Case Study" (Washington, D.C.: Council on Public Education, 2000). For a wider, national perspective that makes a similar point, see also Kerry Ann O'Meara and R. Eugene Rice, *Faculty Priorities Reconsidered: Rewarding Multiple Forms of Scholarship* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

get within the interpretive strategies available to us—and yet we're still so far away from agency. Political scientist and journalist Adolph Reed, a longtime Marxist critic of "theory," suspects cynicism: "the highly theorized retreat to a world-weary, sometimes agonizedly disappointed quietism that presumes the privilege of secure, middle to upper-middle class employment with good benefits."[54] I've certainly seen a lot of this. But I also know a good number of academics, myself included, who long to be a part of the "outside" world—the "real" world—but don't always know how to get there.

Halberstam is in this group, too. Like many of us, she is discontented with the available paths within the academic market: either (1) seeking disinterested truth (which doesn't exist), or (2) writing "anti-Cartesian" books and articles declaring (the disinterested truth) that there is no disinterested truth. And so, again like many of us looking for "a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formation," she pins her hopes on "the external world beyond the ivied walls of the campus." Halberstam's experiences in this "external world," including her work with "the legendary lesbian performance group LTTR," have convinced her "that some of the most important intellectual leaps take place independently of university training or its aftermath or as a detour around and away from the lessons that disciplined thinking metes out." [55]

I couldn't agree more. I draw a lot of my own intellectual inspiration, not to mention most of my joy in living, from the world outside the university. I'm just not sure escaping the university is as easy as Halberstam thinks. The market of academia, its dominant values and interpretive strategies, stretches far beyond the bounds of campus.

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[54] Reed, *Class Notes*, xiv.
[55] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2, 11, 24.

When Halberstam and I participate in social-justice performance groups, sit on the board of non-profits, and post our writings in the blogosphere—as is our disposition—we may get joy and inspiration, but we may not have traveled very far from the university at all.

The Dominant Dispositions: Step Back, Call Out, Resist

In 2010, during my term on the PTO Board of Directors, I once got an email from a fellow board member who had drafted a definition of "Open Access Membership":

> You may self-identify as eligible for this form of membership if paying full conference fees would cause you financial hardship. One might select this category based on student status, unemployment, wages that make the regular membership unsustainable, or other factors….

Then, three minutes later, the same person sent another email—"Wait! Read this definition instead…definitely base any comments on THIS version":

> You may self-identify as eligible for this form of membership if paying full conference fees would cause you financial hardship. One might select this category based on student status, unemployment, wages that make other categories of membership unsustainable, or other factors….

See the difference? It was "edited to take out the normalizing word regular." (Yet the seemingly equally "normalizing" word "full" remained—without comment—including from me.)

In 2013, the popular Tumblr (blog) "sexartandpolitics" featured a debate among several anonymous bloggers about whether "2Spirit" is or is not a "trans identity." One blogger wrote: "2Spirit is *not* an identity for anyone who is not Native American/First Nations/indigenous to the Americas….It is not for any white person to use, ever, in any self-description….White people, shut the fuck up and accept that you *do not own*

everything and that *not all things are open to you.* Grow the *fuck* up and stop whining about how ~excluded~ you are." Another blogger responded: "two-spirit is a trans* identity. whether you think it's cultural appropriate or not is irrelevant. it is a trans* identity. and telling a two-spirit person that can't be their identity is transphobic." (The next day, the same Tumblr reposted an essay about how "people throw around 'Tumblr feminist' as a way to delegitimize those of us who are not welcome in the mainstream or had to fight tooth and nail to appear there. There's definitely a hint of classism and credentialism involved in disregarding someone's work based on what space it appears." The essay concludes: "I'm interested in the most ignored, the most plagiarized and the most marginalized having a voice, wherever that occurs, in tweets or blogs that are simultaneously disrespected as they are consumed and plagiarized. Nobody is a "'Tumblr feminist.'")[56]

"In the 1990s," writes anarchist ethnographer and ethnographer-of-anarchism David Graeber, "the Love & Rage Federation dissolved over issues of white privilege. Love & Rage had begun as an initiative to create a continental anarchist network around a newspaper of the same name. In many ways it was quite successful. After ten years, however, they found themselves stubbornly unable to expand beyond their original core of middle-class white activists or include significant numbers of people of color. Furious arguments ultimately broke out over the reasons for this: which also became theoretical

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[56] http://www.sexartandpolitics.com/post/67425875375/while-chatting-with-theivorytowercrumbles-i-said, November 18, 2013 (November 27, 2013); http://www.sexartandpolitics.com/post/67432117333/imnotevilimjustwrittenthatway-biyuti, November 18, 2013 (November 27, 2013); http://www.sexartandpolitics.com/post/67449340850/what-the-hell-is-a-tumblr-feminist, November 19, 2013 (November 27, 2013). All emphases and non-standard spelling and grammar in original.

debates about the nature of white privilege and ways of overcoming white supremacy….Within a year or two, Love & Rage split into feuding factions over racial issues, and the entire project ultimately foundered."[57]

Welcome to para-academia.

I imagine none of these groups would be particularly happy with this label. PTO was founded by academics and often hosts events on academic campuses, but it distinguishes itself by its commitment to practice and practitioners off campus. Tumblr culture is often explicitly anti-academic: the "2Spirit" debate happened just hours after the same blog featured a conversation with another Tumblr called "theivorytowercrumbles," and there are many other Tumblrs about discontented relationships with college classes and graduate programs. As for anarchism, Graeber takes care to distinguish between "two intellectual streams that emerged from the period of May '68 in France that are still alive in the US and English-speaking world":

> the pre-1968 revolutionary strain, kept alive in zines, anarchist infoshops, and the Internet, and the post-1968 strain, largely despairing of the possibility of a mass-based, organized revolution, kept alive in graduate seminars, academic conferences, and scholarly journals. The first tends to recognize capitalism as an all-encompassing symbolic system that creates extreme forms of human alienation, but sees it as possible to rebel against it in the name of pleasure, desire, and the potential autonomy of the human subject. The second tends to see the system (whether it is now labeled capitalism, power, discourse, etc.) as so all-encompassing that it is constitutive of the desiring subject him- or herself, rendering any critique of alienation, or possibility of a revolution against the system itself, effectively impossible….The [pre-1968] Situationists argued that the system renders us passive consumers, but issued a call to actively resist. The current radical academic orthodoxy seems to either reject either the first part or the second: that is, either it argues that there is no system imposed on consumers, or that resistance is impossible.[58]

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[57] David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009), 241-242.
[58] Graeber, *Direct Action*, 259-260.

This difference may exist, but it's overstated. Both inside and outside the walls of the university, it's not uncommon to hear passionate calls to "resist" right next to equally passionate declarations that resistance is futile—sometimes coming from the same speaker.[59] "There are thousands of Marxist academics but very few Anarchist ones," Graeber maintains—yes, but only because in academia, anarchism is in the water.[60] (We don't have a lot of self-proclaimed Cartesians, either.) A handful of particularly thoughtful academics, like Halberstam, give "European anarchist thought" proper credit for the "loose collectives of individuals versus the State" frame that they use to analyze politics; most don't.[61]

The mixing of academia and para-academia, pre-68 and post-68, is partially demographic. Graeber admits: "If there's anything that does set [anarchist activists] off from the bulk of Americans it is that they are disproportionately likely to have attended college. Many, of course, are themselves students, but the activist core seems to be made up of what might even be called post-students: young women and men who have completed college, but are still living something like students."[62] These are the people—

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[59] As political scientist and longtime leftist Adolph Reed observes, "left sectarians" outside academia and "structuralist Marxists" within it are both "immobilized by their conviction that it is not possible to change anything until everything is changed…[their] tendency to view the configuration of power relations existing at a given moment as identical to the limits of possibility." Paul Willis, sociologist and famous cultural studies practitioner, has argued similarly against "a purist structuralist immobilizing reductionist tautology: nothing can be done until the basic structures of society are changed but the structures prevent us [from] making any changes."See Reed, *Class Notes*, xiii, and Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 186.
[60] Graeber, *Direct Action*, 211.
[61] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 10. This anarchist thought, Halberstam continues, favors "mutuality, collectivity, plasticity, diversity, and adaptability," and even intentional "illegibility" as ways to avoid "political manipulation." After all, these "subjects" get "manipulated precisely when they become legible and visible to the state (undocumented workers, visible queers, racialized minorities)." So much of this dominant frame, which usually is traced vaguely to "Foucault" or "post-structuralism," has deep anarchist roots.
[62] Graeber, *Direct Action*, 247.

the "academics, activists, artists" of Halberstam and the PTO website—who show up whether an event is held on campus or off. Yes, there's some distinction between the more professionally-dressed pessimists of the University of Minnesota sociology department and the sweats- and rags-clad utopians of the Minneapolis Autonomous Radical Space, but there's also a lot of people who bring a change of clothes. Most who are currently in one of these communities, if they're not currently in the other, either have been or will soon be. I observe a recurring circuit: academics escape to para-academia when the analysis gets too depressing and they need to *do something*, and para-academics escape to academia when they feel like they've been banging their heads against the wall doing things—or when they need a paycheck.[63]

Economically speaking, it's an efficient machine for building capital, both cultural and fiscal. Para-academics add value to their work by citing academic theory, and academics add value to their work by citing para-academic practice. (This is especially noticeable in the art world, where academics who make their careers writing about artists and artists who make their careers responding to academic theory often

[63] I am consciously drawing on Paulo Freire's concept of *praxis*, itself drawn from the Marxist tradition of organizing. Theory and practice, action and reflection, he argued strongly, must always be part of the same, ongoing, collective action (*praxis*): you act, then reflect on that action, then act on that reflection, and so on. He called reflection without action "verbalism" and action without reflection "activism"—both useless. ("Activist," in many organizing circles, is not a positive word. It connotes, in the words of one organizer friend, "someone who goes alone to a protest.") The current state of anarcho-liberal academia and para-academia, I am arguing, encourages a lot of verbalism and activism, but very little *praxis*. Hence the moment at the 2011 PTO conference when a young man stood up and announced an upcoming day-long Latino political event. The event would include many speakers and discussions, he explained, but he assured us that "it's not just going to be all talk. There's going to be *direct action* too." This kind of formulation, denigrating the talk and fetishizing the action, ensures the futility of both. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, especially 87.

spend time together at the same gallery openings and conferences.)[64] There's nothing *wrong* with this exactly, but it does ensure that academia and para-academia remains a counterculture, whose "most firm allegiance," to recall McGowan's words, is "to language." Specifically, to making sure our language is always fully factually accurate, ethically right, and, yes, politically correct—a language that gets the *right* answer, in all senses—even when that means sacrificing our relationships and our agency.

We see this in our three sample para-academic interpretive communities. My colleague on the PTO board got *very* emotionally invested in making sure everyone knew she knew the "normalizing" word "regular" should not be used (but "full" was apparently okay), to the point of hair-splitting silliness. The bloggers on Tumblr fought over the proper use of the identity labels "2Spirit" and "Tumblr feminist," to the point of anger and hurt feelings and name-calling. And the anarchists' "theoretical debates about the nature of white privilege," far from strengthening their federation, ended up ripping it apart.

Language is important, obviously. (Far be it for me, a rhetorician, to say otherwise!) Language makes and breaks, heals and hurts, and is absolutely worth our time and attention. It's just a problem when it becomes the *only* thing that gets our time and attention. Given how comfortable we academics and para-academics are with talking about language, it's tempting to approach *all* social and political problems as if they were

[64] François Cusset describes this phenomenon in detail, as he discusses the influence of "French theory" on the art and literary markets of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. See Cusset, *French Theory*, especially 230-262.

problems of incorrect language.[65] When Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning was sentenced to 35 years in prison for leaking military secrets to WikiLeaks in the fall of 2013, Facebook and Tumblr exploded in outrage—not over the military's horrific treatment of Manning, or over the harmful and illegal military activities that Manning had discovered, or over the absurd political and military situation that put us in this situation in the first place, but because the *New York Times* had referred to Manning by an *incorrect gender pronoun*.

It's not that anyone thought the other issues weren't worth talking about. It's just that this particular one fit so easily into the frame, into the academic and para-academic mode of approaching the world, that it was irresistible. We might not be able to decipher the complex, often contradictory self-interests of the U.S. military and the Obama administration—but we can line up behind a powerless individual who was being linguistically oppressed by the media. If we can't understand the larger organizational problem, much less organize ourselves to solve it, at least we can (1) step back from the dominant media narrative, (2) call out an obvious instance of transphobia, and therefore (3) resist the oppression.

These three gestures—to *step back*, to *call out*, and to *resist*—are the dominant dispositions of the anarcho-liberal habitus, in and out of academia. When artists or educators call their work "political," when a blog or a conference devotes itself to "social

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[65] This, again, is an example of what philosopher-of-science Thomas Kuhn called "problem selection." (See note 25.) And it may be the most profound influence of the 1968 moment—including but not limited to "post-structuralism" and "French theory"—on the academic and para-academic market. It underscores all the perpetual hand-wringing about "identity politics," a term I very intentionally don't use, because of the culture war it's caused and the intense emotion it elicits on "both sides." To the extent that there's a problem with "identity politics," it's that it's hard for anarcho-liberals to see identities—all identities—as the product of interpretive strategies, which in turn are the products of organizations.

justice," or when my academic department declares (on its website) that "a commitment to political praxis drives what we do," it means they're in the business of stepping back, calling out, and resisting.[66]

Halberstam's book examines art works, mostly animated films, that "might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing, and they will harbor covert and overt queer worlds"—that is, that offer "us" models for how to step back, call out, and resist a mainstream, capitalist culture that is false, wrong, and harmful.[67] The movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, for example,

> leads to a kind of ecstatic *exposure* of the contradictions of a society obsessed with *meaningless* competition. By implication it also *reveals* the precarious modes of success by which American families live and die….By gyrating and stripping to a raunchy song while heavily made-up and coiffed little cowgirls and princesses wait in the wings to chastely sway in the spotlight, Olive [the protagonist] *reveals* the sexuality that is the *real* motivation for the preteen pageant….this failure, hilarious in its execution, poignant in its meaning, and exhilarating in its aftermath, is so much *better*, so much more *liberating* than any success that could possibly be achieved in the context of a beauty contest….Without retreating to a puritanical attack on sexual pleasure or a moral

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[66] The modern origin of the disposition to step back / call out / resist, as far as I can tell, lies in the discontent of women, and increasingly other groups, with the student organizations of the 1960s—specifically the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The original "call-outs," according to historian Sara Evans, were agitations, intended to hold fellow members of these organizations accountable to the ideals of equality and civil rights that they all shared. That is, they were very intentionally working to maintain a counterculture and keep it (somewhat) pure. The difference is, they were under no illusions that *that*, in and of itself, was doing political work: it was necessary maintenance work on a culture that was otherwise dedicated to building power and taking agency. In the wake of 1968, when those organizations splintered and shattered and many of their members entered academia, that distinction started to fade: the step-back, call-out, and resistance *itself* started being seen as the political action. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1979), especially 83-101. An academic friend of mine, who was active for years in West Coast anarchist/activist circles, suggested another, possibly complementary genealogy: "call-out" culture, she said, emerged from the FBI crackdown on progressive groups in the 1960s and 70s, called COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program)—specifically, out of these groups' need to discover and expose the FBI infiltrators. Whether or not this history is true, the fact that it is (apparently) widely believed among activists is evidence in its own right.

[67] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 20-21. Halberstam writes to an assumed "us" throughout the book; this "us," it seems, is the members of the counterculture interested in doing this stepping-back, calling-out, and resisting.

> mode of disapproval, *Little Miss Sunshine* instead *relinquishes* the Darwinian motto of winners, "May the best girl win," and cleaves to a *neo-anarchistic* credo of ecstatic losers: "No one gets left behind!"[68]

The *Little Miss Sunshine* model of politics is very good at exposing and revealing the problems with society's rules, and finding ways to *resist* them on the level of individual lifestyle choices, but it makes no effort to *change* these rules. (That would require organizing to build power.)[69] It's a very simple idea: if the Master says do something, to step back and call it out and resist, we should do the opposite. If the Master says remember, we should forget. ("In this book *forgetting* becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall.") If the Master says succeed, we should fail. ("Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.") If the Master says make sense, we should not make sense. ("Subjects…are manipulated precisely when they become legible and visible to the state…[so we should] privilege the naïve or nonsensical.") If the Master says follow the law, we should be criminals. ("What else is criminal activity but the passionate pursuit of alternatives?")[70]

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[68] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 5. Emphases added. Somehow, when thinking about the Bush administration's education policy, I find it hard to accept "no one gets left behind" as a resistant, anticapitalist credo.

[69] This is what Brennan means when he says contemporary academic "theory" offers not a political strategy but "a manner of right-living." See Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 4.

[70] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 15, 3, 10, 12, 18. Emphasis in original. The last quotation is from the "Design Collective Zine, Shahrzad (Zurich and Tehran)"; Halberstam uses it as an epigram. The Master is variously figured, in Halberstam and across the fringe of academia and para-academia, as the State, the Man, the system, society, hegemony, capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, sexism, ableism, essentialism, ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy, hierarchy, kyriarchy…the list keeps growing. Which is part of the appeal: any new political issue can be made into an –ism, –archy, or –phobia to be stepped out from, called out, and resisted.

Of course, criminal activity can be a lot of things other than the passionate pursuit of alternatives—rich people trying to make themselves richer, poor people trying to get enough to eat—some bad, some good, some hard to classify. The *Little Miss Sunshine* model can't deal with this kind of complexity: everything is either good or bad, resistant or hegemonic, victim or fascist, us or them. It's the kind of Manichean simplicity that, for Althusser at least, is exactly the goal:

> A single word sums up the *master* function of philosophical practice: '*to draw a dividing line*' between the true ideas and false ideas. Lenin's words. But the same word sums up one of the essential operations in the direction of the practice of class struggle: *'to draw a dividing line'* between the antagonistic classes. Between our class friends and our class enemies. *It is the same word*. A theoretical dividing line between true ideas and false ideas. A political dividing line between the people (the proletariat and its allies) and the people's enemies.[71]

Maybe it's my habitus—formed in part on Saul Alinsky's dictum of "no permanent friends, no permanent enemies"—but I can't help but cringe. How does it make sense to draw such a clear and absolute "dividing line"? People who share our self-interest in one situation may not in another, and vice-versa; to build power in a specific situation around a specific issue, it's crucial to be flexible and embrace the complexity of various organizations and their self-interests. (Oklahoma senator Tom Coburn and I don't agree on much, but we could definitely work on a campaign together to stop state funding for sports stadiums.)

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[71] See Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, 86. This quotation comes from an interview with Althusser from—when else?—1968. All emphases in original. Althusser's absolute conception of friend and enemy, as the *sine qua non* of politics, seems scarily similar to that of the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt, one of the principal legal architects of Nazism. See especially Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); see also Chapter Two.

Again: Althusser is a philosopher, not an organizer. But you can't even get good philosophical truth, looking at the world in this way. When you equate "true" (factually) with "friend" (politically), "false" (factually) with "enemy" (politically), the deck is rigged. Now there's no need to gather evidence to support the claims of our friends and disprove the claims of our enemies. That's just how it is, beyond question, and if you don't believe it, you must be an enemy, too. There's no need to enter into dialogue with people outside our group at all. The only work left for us to do is to analyze all of the culture, media, texts, practices, and institutions that make up "the ideology of our society" (a favorite student-paper phrase) and call them out—"critique" them, "question" them, "problematize" them, "trouble" them, "de-center" them, or "deconstruct" them—for the ways they are "socially-constructed" and (therefore) part of the enemy.

Bruno Latour calls this action "debunking." But we don't debunk everything. And it's in our choice of what to debunk and what not to debunk, Latour suggests—what to call out as social constructions, and what not to—that we draw Althusser's dividing line. There are some things, for each of us, whose real-ness is really important to us.[72] Don't even try to call out James Bond for his sexism or Cold War complicity or whatever, at least not in front of me. He's a part of my childhood. Leave him alone. The same goes, in a very different way, for racism. We don't *like* it—it's morally and ethically wrong and politically horrible—but it's very important to us that it's *real*. We'll call people out (such as Klan members) who say that *racial hierarchy* exists, but we'll

[72] These things are often self-objects, objects (including people) that we've developed our social selves in relation to; when we perceive our self-objects to be under attack, we feel it physically, in our bodily habitus, and we tend to drop everything to defend them. Debunking someone's self-objects is a quick way to end a dialogue—if not start a fight. For more detail, see note 56.

just as quickly call people out (such as naïve white undergrads) who say that racism itself *doesn't* exist. Same goes for all the other identity-based –isms. And for gender being a social construct, and for imperialism being oppressive, and for capitalism being exploitative. And for my personal bugbear: human-caused climate change—what we used to call "global warming," before the Right got its way. It just exists. Period. But there are *lots* of people out there—including, Latour observes, a certain "Mr. Luntz"—who are trying to debunk it. We *hates* him.[73]

I believe—no, I *know*, with as much certainty as I know there's a ground underneath my feet—that racial hierarchy is a myth, that gender is a social construct, and that racism and oppression and exploitation and human-caused climate change are all incontrovertibly (and unfortunately) real. But what's equally real is that there are other people out there who *know* the opposite, with just as much certainty. And that I'm not going to change them by calling them out, or calling them dupes. I'll just be providing fodder for the Coulters and Limbaughs, who are all too ready to point out that I'm insulting their intelligence and dignity. Just as punks and anarchist black blocs alienate potential allies when they start burning flags and smashing windows, so do social justice bloggers alienate potential allies when they start smashing well-loved truths. They might be "right," but they're also making it hard to build a broad base.

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[73] Latour uses—and then questions—Martin Heidegger's distinction between a *Ding* (a complex, naturally- or hand-made *thing* such as a handmade jug), a *matter of concern* which is to be appreciated and admired, and a *Gegenstand* (a simple, artificially-made *object* such as a Coke can), a *matter of fact* which is to be analyzed and debunked as a "social construction." Latour wants to question this distinction, to take it down (to…debunk it?), to "talk about the object of science and technology, the *Gegenstand*, as if it had the rich and complicated qualities of the celebrated *Thing*." See Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," especially 233-237. It's interesting to note the parallels between Heidegger's absolute distinction between *Ding* and *Gegenstand* and Schmitt's absolute distinction between friend and enemy—especially since Heidegger and Schmitt were the two major German philosophers who came out openly in favor of Nazism.

But if your habitus was developed mostly on the market of academia and para-academia, then you *will* call that person out on misusing the word "regular" or misunderstanding "2Spirit" or the theoretical nature of "white privilege"—no matter the cost. Otherwise you just couldn't live with yourself; you would feel complicit in the System. To allow this wrong language to stand, un-called-out, would be to perpetuate the oppression. And from there it's an easy jump to the next logical conclusion: that to use the *right* language is, in and of itself, to *liberate* someone.[74]

This is giving language too much power—as we academics and para-academics habitually do. We often quote Paulo Freire, who said in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that "to speak a true word is to transform the world"—but we forget that for Freire, a "true word" has a revolutionary organization behind it. That kind of large-scale organizing is all but impossible, even on the most active fringes of para-academia. When contemporary debates within anarchist groups "center most of all on how to combat racism and sexism in the movement, about forms of decision-making, and questions of violence and nonviolence," as Graeber observes, there's not much room for questions of building power.[75] Or of expanding a base. Or of identifying strategic allies and targets, and crafting winnable campaigns, and forming a short- and middle- and long-term plan to

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[74] This is an example of the anarcho-liberal "operative logic" that Reed calls: "has a similar effect as = might as well be = is." It's this logic, Reed argues, that allows academics to talk about a local rent strike as "a rejection of capitalist imperatives" and a planned march as a "general strike." "Redefining such political expressions as deeply, intrinsically, substantively, or implicitly radical enables a slight-of-hand that imputes support for the radicals' broader programs by association, without the test of persuasion"—or, of course, the need to actually organize people. It also allows academics and para-academics to talk about their (our) own work in similar terms: "the leap that equates, for instance, the practices of textual interpretation or the production and analysis of forms of popular culture with direct challenges to power relations—such as conducting a strike, electing or defeating a legislator, mobilizing against NAFTA, fighting against segregation or for national healthcare—takes that inclination [to see one's own work as political] to the point of solipsism. And it empties the idea of political action of any substantive meaning." See Reed, *Class Notes*, x-xi, xx.

[75] Graeber, *Direct Action*, 222.

challenge and ultimately overthrow the capitalist market—the stated goal of the movement.

These questions are always the *next* step, the one we haven't quite gotten to yet. Yes, of course we need to address them, but first we need to take care of (what's known in the common parlance as) "our own shit." First—in the words of political scientist Adolph Reed—"whites must demonstrate their antiracism; heterosexuals must prove their opposition to homophobia; men must establish their antisexism; each nonwhite group must convincingly show its appreciation and respect for the perspectives of the others—all *before* strategic consideration of possible points of mutual concern."[76] Entire national political organizations, as we have seen, have fallen apart as a result of this logic. More mundanely, I've seen many a Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed workshop derailed when one participant calls out another (or, often, the facilitator) for something s/he said or did. Sometimes these accusations are justified; other times they're not. Either way, they make the Descartes-like assumption that you have to deal with "the oppression in the room" before you can deal with the oppression "outside."

This assumption is self-destructive, in at least three ways. First, it requires us to delay questions of organizing and agency—the most important questions, if we take ourselves and our work seriously—maybe forever. Anyone who's been in "progressive meetings of any sort" will recognize Reed's "predictable moment…when someone—more or less piously, more or less smugly, always self-righteously—rises to introduce the concern that, 'As I look around the room, I don't see enough of the X, the Y or the Z present,' and to issue the standard calls for inclusiveness and for making greater effort to

[76] Reed, *Class Notes*, xxiii.

reach out, etc." Again, these concerns are sometimes justified. I think we were right to be concerned that the PTO board, at least during my term, was overwhelmingly white. But since no one was discussing a plan to solve that problem, all the continual call-outs were just crippling, an opportunity for to express white liberal guilt that took away time and resources from fighting any kind of oppression. The game of "who's in the room," absent a concrete strategy and goal (we're going to do *these* things to get *this* number of *these* kinds of people into the room by *this* date) can easily become an infinite regress, a pursuit-without-a-terminus, as organizations like Love & Rage end up driving themselves into ruin in pursuit of picture-perfect "inclusiveness."[77]

Second, given how very few people are free of any and all prejudice, it seriously cuts down on potential allies. The call-out, as a form, is "fundamentally counter-solidaristic. Its default posture is accusation; it is propelled by presumption of others' bad faith."[78] I *could* call out PTO for (what I perceive as) the propagation of racial hierarchy implicit in the image on their website, which includes a black body being led (in a Theatre of the Oppressed game) by a white hand—but what, exactly, would that accomplish? Surely it wasn't intended, and it's not clear that it's actually doing any harm to anyone. And the more time and energy we spend doing this kind of stuff—tearing each other down and calling out each other's perceived wrongdoings, in an ever-more-specialized language no less—the more we ensure that we'll remain a counterculture: a postmodern Puritan "city on a hill," sealed off from a "society" and "real world" that

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[77] Reed, *Class Notes*, xxiv.
[78] Reed, *Class Notes*, xxiv. Again, I make a sharp distinction between a call-out and an agitation. The latter is relational, strategic, and constructive; the former is a one-off attempt to up one's cultural capital, relationships and strategy be damned. See notes 38 and 79.

doesn't much like or understand us, and unwilling and/or unable to build the relationships and power that could bring our interpretive communities closer together.

Third, and finally, it actually gets the theory wrong. Any contemporary scholar of race will tell you that racism is not, primarily, a matter of individual bad behavior. It's institutional—a product of organizations—and structural—a product of the interpretive strategies those organizations have developed over time. The fact that black children are systematically deprived of a good education because their families are red-lined out of primarily-white neighborhoods with well-funded schools, for example, has nothing to do with whether the white families living in those neighborhoods are or are not "racist." To focus on the individual prejudices of these people would be a mistake—the same mistake as spending so much energy calling people out, trying to keep our language and counterculture pure.

It'll be a hard mistake to fix. Getting people (including ourselves) to understand it intellectually is easy; getting our habitus to act differently is not. Most people I've discussed these issues with agree with me, but then they go right back to making call-outs. (I'm guilty of it myself from time to time.) The urge to step back and call out and resist is strong, and as we've seen, it's intimately connected to the urge to create knowledge and seek and speak the truth, which drove many of us to get into academia, artistry, and activism in the first place.

It's also intimately connected, a little less idealistically, with the way these markets create value. On the academic and para-academic market, thirty years after the onset of cyberpunk neoliberalism, there's not much cultural capital to be had in the

"grunge work" of collaboration, relationship building, and strategic power-building campaigns—the only way to "resist" racism, if we understand it organizationally. On the other hand, you can get a lot of quick cultural capital by calling out the racial prejudice in a new song or movie or policy decision, writing an article about it—or participating in a Legislative Theatre performance about it—and then moving on to the next thing.

Which is to say: on the market of academia and para-academia, at least as it's currently organized, there may be no alternative.

Luckily, there are alternative markets.

How Freire Got Neutered, and Why it Matters

Drive about a mile a mile east of Augsburg College, where we held the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference, and you'll reach what one local organizer calls the "corridor of power": the intersection of University Ave. and Raymond Ave. There, you'll find the headquarters of the faith-based organizing networks ISAIAH and Jewish Community Action, the citizen-action organization TakeAction Minnesota, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) State Council, among many others. These organizations, sometimes called "power organizations," operate on a very different market from academia and para-academia. On this market, your value depends mostly on how much power you can build: how well you can organize people, money, and (sometimes) ideas into greater and greater collective agency, to change laws, employment policies, governments, and ultimately social and cultural structures.

Here, there's a lot less discussion about radical difference, and a lot more about "the everyday world we all share—the world of seeking, working, or worrying about a job, finding and consuming healthcare, forming and maintaining personal attachments, paying bills, raising children, playing, fretting about the future, shopping for furniture, trying to make sense of current events"; less about "who's not in the room" and more about "how best to deploy the resources of those who *are* in the room."[79] Here, the assumption isn't that people must purge themselves of their prejudices before entering, but that by doing the work, working side-by-side with a diverse group of people on issues in their shared self-interest, their prejudices will gradually wither away.[80] Pete Marincel, my SEIU organizer friend from Chapter Two, once told me about a middle-aged white worker he organized, who was variously prejudiced against people of color: after months of working together with a young black woman to elect pro-labor candidates to the state legislature, he found he had lost a whole lot of his prejudice. Just in case the point needed clarifying, Pete concluded: "And it wasn't because of some anti-racism workshop."

Geographically, the corridor of power was not very far away. But to a habitus formed on the academic and para-academic market, it might as well be in another dimension. We don't consciously dismiss it; we're just not very conscious of it.[81] It never occurs to us, or to them, that we could all work together on common political

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[79] Reed, *Class Notes*, xvi-xvii, xxvi.
[80] This is the old Habermas notion of "cognitive dissonance." It also resonates with Bourdieu's notion of "durable dispositions": put a person through an experience that's intense and sustained enough, and that person's habitus will gradually be molded to the new market. (Think about medical residencies or basic training. For more on this point, see Chapter Four.)
[81] Which begs the obvious question: how, then, do I know so much about them? I'll tell the full story in Chapter Four, but the short answer is: ass-backwards. Through a couple of connections, and a lot of luck.

projects, or what that would even mean. Like the woman at the MLA conference, they seem to speak an entirely different language. We might see an SEIU or ISAIAH organizer on the news or on the street; we might have gotten canvassed by TakeAction Minnesota at our front door; we might have even become members—but we're still only dimly aware that these organizations exist, much less of what they do and how we might relate.

So most of the time, we don't. We talked a lot about "community engagement" as we planned the PTO conference. We wanted to be as "inclusive" as possible. We reached out to lots of non-academic organizations: pretty much any group any of us knew about, we contacted. And, as these things go, all these organizations were para-academic. Even the ones that did some organizing, too, were firmly rooted in language- and difference-first interpretive strategies: the goal was purity as much as agency, and the call-out always came before the power-analysis. I don't think any of us, during our whole year of planning, thought to make contact with any organizations along the corridor of power. Nor did anyone there, I'm pretty sure, have any idea the conference was happening.

Which is a shame. For one thing, anyone from the corridor of power would have immediately sided with Cheryl Wilson and insisted, as a condition of their organization's involvement, that we develop a strategy for developing the Legislative Theatre session into a campaign to make actual legislative change. (Only then would such an action be in their organization's self-interest.) But the tragic irony goes a lot deeper. The traditions of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Theatre of the Oppressed themselves, the very

foundation of our work, were created in the context of power organizations. Long before Boal's theater techniques were canonized as "Theatre of the Oppressed," they were "experiments with the people's theatre in Peru," conducted "within the program of the Integral Literacy Operation (*Operación Alfabetización Integral* [ALFIN])…a national literacy campaign" directed by "the revolutionary government of Peru….The method used in the literacy program was, of course, derived from Paulo Freire."[82]

Freire's method, too, was developed in the context of revolutionary organizing. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, also the title of a book long before it was a codified set of practices, was about how to do pedagogy, and communication more generally, *within* an already-existing revolutionary movement. Freire made no pretense of *creating* a revolution through his teaching methods. "Only a revolutionary society can carry out this education in systematic terms," he insisted. "The revolutionary leaders need not take full power before they can employ the method," but as they are using this method, it's assumed that they are also working toward taking full power.[83]

Freire and Boal—like all Marxists working in South America around 1968—took the existence of strong power organizations, which worked closely with intellectuals in their pursuit of collective agency, as a given. There wasn't much need to write about these organizations explicitly, because everyone knew about them already. But when their work got transported into the United States, in the very moment of the cyberpunk-

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[82] Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 120.
[83] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [30th Anniversary Edition], 86. Freire's concern, here as elsewhere, was that the *revolutionary leadership* would be too didactic and monologic in the way they communicated and taught. It was never that the revolution wouldn't exist. Nor, at this point anyway, was it about regular classroom-teaching. For more about the adaptation of Freire into contemporary U.S. classroom teaching, see Chapter Four.

neoliberal takeover and the anarcho-liberal march on the academy, a lot of this understanding got lost in translation.

Literally, in Freire's case. Take a look at your copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, if you have one. Does it have a red cover that says "30th Anniversary Edition"? (It's the only edition currently in print.) Or a white cover that says "20th Anniversary Edition"? If so, you are in possession of a mutilated text. It's not just a translation (from the original Portuguese); it's an *intentionally inaccurate* translation. The editors acknowledge this inaccuracy—sort of. There's nothing about it on the cover, or on the title page, or in the text itself, or even in the footnotes. The only place it's mentioned is several paragraphs into the Publisher's Forward: "As times change so do attitudes and beliefs. The translation has been modified—and the volume has been newly typeset—to reflect the connection between liberation and inclusive language."[84]

The persnickety academic in me can't go on without questioning how the editors think a new typeset might aid in the cause of liberation. (Perhaps it'll increase cultural legibility?) But seriously: we need to look closely at this modification. Take a look at a representative sample: a key passage from the Preface, where Freire details what it means to be the kind of person who is capable of carrying out the kind of pedagogy he calls for—a radical, rather than a sectarian. First is the out-of-print original edition from 1970; next is the same passage from the 30th Anniversary Edition (the same as the 20th Anniversary Edition), with changes in boldface:

> While the rightist sectarian, closing himself in "his" truth, does no more than fulfill his natural role, the leftist who becomes sectarian and rigid negates his very nature. Each, however, as he revolves about "his" truth, feels threatened if that

[84] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [30th Anniversary Edition], 8.

> truth is questioned. Thus, each considers anything that is not "his" truth a lie. As the journalist Marcio Moreira Alves once told me: "They both suffer from an absence of doubt." The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a "circle of certainty" within which he also imprisons reality. On the contrary, the more radical he is, the more fully he enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can better transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. He does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side. The pedagogy of the oppressed, the introductory outlines of which are presented in the following pages, is a task for radicals; it cannot be carried out by sectarians.[85]
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> **Whereas** the rightist sectarian, closing himself in "his" truth, does no more than fulfill **a** natural role, the leftist who becomes sectarian and rigid negates his **or her** very nature. Each, however, as he revolves about "his" truth, feels threatened if that truth is questioned. Thus, each considers anything that is not 'his' truth a lie. As the journalist Marcio Moreira Alves once told me, "They both suffer from an absence of doubt." The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a "circle of certainty" within which **reality is also imprisoned**. On the contrary, the more radical **the person** is, the more fully he **or she** enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he **or she** can better transform it. **This individual** is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. **This person** is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. **This person** does not consider **him or herself** the proprietor of history or of **all people**, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he **or she** does commit him **or herself**, within history, to fight at their side. The pedagogy of the oppressed, the introductory outlines of which are presented in the following pages, is a task for radicals; it cannot be carried out by sectarians.[86]

Most of the changes, clearly, are about gender. The original 1970 translation, more similar to the original Portuguese, uses "man" and "men" and "he" and "his" as universals. The 1990 editors, eager to make the language more "inclusive," want to change this. But they don't do it consistently. Depending on the instance, they might change "he" ("ele" in Portuguese) into "the person," "this person," "he or she," or "this

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[85] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [original edition], trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1970), 23-24.
[86] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [30th Anniversary Edition], 39. Changes in boldface; emphases added.

individual." In one case a whole sentence is changed from the active into the passive voice, in order to avoid a male pronoun. And in other cases, they don't change the male pronouns at all.[87]

Before jumping into an analysis of these inconsistent gender-based changes, let's look at the one other change: "while" to "whereas." Wherefore this change? Unlike all the others, it has nothing to do with gender. The original Portuguese "enquanto" means (in this context) the same thing as "while"—they're both normal, everyday words. Whereas "whereas" is pretentious legalese. We can argue about the need for the other changes, but I see no possible justification for this one. This is important, because it shows the editors were sloppy. Which changes the way we analyze the other changes they made: these editors didn't seem to take serious time to consider the semantic ramifications of each altered word. They were, at least to an extent, going with their gut—what psychologist Daniel Kahneman would "System 1" thinking—and what we might call their naked, anarcho-liberal academic habitus.

This habitus, as we know, includes (1) a disposition to resist organizing and agency, and (2) a disposition to draw a line between absolute friends and absolute enemies. This second disposition explains why these editors (and/or the publisher) felt these changes were necessary in the first place. They clearly liked this book; they wanted it to be a friend—if nothing else, so it'd sell more copies. But there was a problem. It couldn't be an *absolute* friend, because the language had a (fatal) flaw: it was sexist. And so they set to work, scrubbing Freire clean of his imperfections as quickly as

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[87] To be fair, these masculine pronouns do occur much more frequently in the English text than in the Portuguese original. This is due to the structure of the Portuguese language: in Portuguese, as in Spanish, a greater choice of verb conjugations often renders pronouns unnecessary.

possible, so he can enter the pantheon of "theory" next to all the other "friends" we quote and cite and *use*, instead of one of the "enemies" we expose and call out and *debunk*.[88] I want to question whether this is necessary. (Yes I understand it might be necessary on the current market; I mean necessary in the more idealistic sense.) Why can't we understand Freire, and everyone else, not as absolute friends or enemies but as complicated, flawed, and sometimes brilliant human beings?[89]

This same disposition also explains all the places within the passage where the male pronouns were *not* changed. They are all the places where Freire is describing (what Althusser would consider) the enemy: sectarians, as compared to radicals; and *rightist* sectarians, as compared to leftist ones. The editors, probably without knowing it, added into Freire's text an absolute distinction between friend and enemy—where friends are gender-ambiguous, and enemies are gendered male—which wasn't in Freire's original at all.

This imposed division is particularly frustrating, given how hard Freire worked to *avoid* these kinds of absolute differences. To end oppression and achieve what he called "humanization…the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a

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[88] A quick and easy guide to who's who, in most academic texts, is to look at the *verb tenses*. Friends generally get quoted in the present tense ("Foucault writes…"): their words are eternal and true. Enemies generally get quoted in the past tense ("Hitler wrote…"): their words are time-bound and false. You'll notice I try to use them interchangeably, though I probably slip into the pattern at times.

[89] I am, in other words, echoing Latour's call (in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?") to see everything as a *Ding* and nothing as a *Gegenstand*. I am also paraphrasing the position of critical race theorist bell hooks: "There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he (like other progressive Third World political leaders, intellectuals, critical thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi, etc.) constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation—wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same….And yet, I never wish to see a critique of this blind spot overshadow anyone's (and feminists' in particular) capacity to learn from the insights….There is no need to apologize for the sexism. Freire's own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flaw in the work. But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal." See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 49.

way to create it), become in turn the oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both."[90] For universal humanization to even be possible, Freire had to maintain the possibility that humanity, despite all differences, was capable of becoming a single, unified agent, capable of working collectively to make a world that's better for all humans. That is, the possibility that humanity is fundamentally *organizable*. So it's not a surprise that the editors' other big anarcho-liberal disposition—the resistance to agency and organizing—gets in the way here, too. When they replace "he" with all those different pronouns without rhyme or reason, this (potentially) unified humanity gets obscured. By the end of the very first paragraph of Chapter One, Freire's unified "man" ("hommem") has already gotten dispersed into "humankind," "an individual," "a person," and "the people."[91] The 30th Anniversary Edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in other words, is a story that's lost its protagonist.[92] It's as if you rewrote *The Fellowship of the*

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[90] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 28 [original edition], 44 [30th Anniversary Edition]. (No changes.)
[91] See page 45 in the 30th Anniversary text; page 27 in the original. To be clear: I'm not giving Freire a pass on his pronouns. The use of the male pronoun to represent universal humanity is obviously misogynistic, as Freire himself has acknowledged. It was an instance of all-too-common casual misogyny; Freire wasn't thinking about gender at all, and he unthinkingly used the misogynistic language in the air around him. That is a problem, a flaw, an imperfection. I'm not sure it had to be changed at all—but the changes wouldn't have been a big deal, if they had been made *responsibly*: if the editors had replaced "man" (and "men," and "he," etc.) with *consistent* gender-neutral pronouns, thus preserving the sense that humankind could be organized.
[92] In technical terms: it's lost its *dialectic*—which happens to be the soul of the book. Freire drew on a wide range of sources—his material power analysis came from Marx, his understanding of the psychology of oppression from Erich Fromm, his anticolonial context from Frantz Fanon, his interactionist approach to teaching from Jean Piaget—but, good Marxist revolutionary that he was, his basic philosophical position is that of the nineteenth-century German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel understood history as the progress of a single, unified World Spirit—manifested in people—toward universal freedom. It's easy to mock this idea—I did so for years—but it's the basic way almost everyone (in modern Western cultures) understands history. We may spend our academic days debunking Hegel, but at the end of the day most of us are still "progressives," who believe that to support same-sex marriage (for example) means to be "on the right side of history." Historical progress, for Hegel, is not simple or linear: it's *dialectical*. Dialectical thought is most commonly identified with Hegel, but it's as old as Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher best known for saying you can't step in the same river twice (the water's always changing, always flowing). History moves forward, according to dialectical thought, through of the conflict of opposing forces. These two basic Hegelian principles—history as the progress of universal Spirit toward

Ring and took out the fellowship—and left Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, and Aragorn to try to defeat Sauron, variously, on their own. (This new edition would probably not have sequels.)

Freire does make one big either-or distinction: between "oppressor" and "oppressed." But he's very careful to point out that these are *not* absolute identities. They're not identities at all, actually, but rather provisional positions within a relationship that's ever-changing. A person oppressed at home can be an oppressor at work, and vice-versa. "It is the rare peasant who, once 'promoted' to overseer, does not become more of a tyrant to his former comrades than the owner himself. This is because of the context of the peasant's situation, that is, oppression, remains unchanged."[93] "Oppressor" and "oppressed" tend to follow class lines, but not always: Freire makes special reference to

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universal freedom, and historical progress as the result of the dialectical conflict—are at the core of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire begins by explaining that "humanization…is man's vocation" (28 [original edition]). Dehumanization, its dialectical opposite (antithesis), is very possible and happens very often, but that isn't where history is going. The entire rest of the book—and perhaps all of Freire's work—depends on this principle. There is a single subject, "man," which is moving toward humanization. The entire point of revolutionary pedagogy is to work toward getting there. The editors of the 30th Anniversary Edition, knowingly or not (probably not), have de-Hegelianized this text. "Humanization…is man's vocation" is such a powerful statement because we have experienced that same "man," in the previous paragraph, as "he perceives the extent of dehumanization," "he asks himself if humanization is a viable possibility," he recognizes that "both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for man as an uncompleted being conscious of his incompletion"—and *then* devotes himself to his vocation" (27-28 [original edition]). Compare this with the 30th Anniversary Edition: here, "*an individual* [not a collective humanity in which we all take part, but *a single individual*] perceives the extent of dehumanization," "*he or she may* ask [does not even definitely ask] if humanization is a viable possibility," and "both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for *a person* [individual, again]." Then we learn that "humanization…is *the people's* vocation," never having met "the people" before (43 [30th Anniversary Edition]). Freire's central story has lost its protagonist—and we, the readers, can no longer identify ourselves as protagonists. The text has lost its drama, poetry, tension, and hope, and we have lost our agency within it. Again, just to be clear, this is not an argument for male-gendered pronouns. Had the editors stuck with one consistent gender-neutral replacement for "man," "men," "he," and "his," the text would have retained its basic power. As it stands, with its Hegelian heart cut out, the text ends up sounding almost cyberpunk-neoliberal: there's "an individual" over there who might (or might not) be asking big hard questions, there's another "person" over here who's trying to figure out why s/he's incomplete, and somewhere in there is "the people," who might or might not have any relationship to those two previous isolated characters.

[93] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30 [original edition], 46 [30th Anniversary Edition]. (No changes—again, the male pronouns remain unchanged when talking about the bad guys.)

the "middle-class oppressed."[94] The enemy, if we can even call it that, is not the human oppressor but the human oppressors but the non-human "situation of oppression" itself, "affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress." (The oppressor "is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others.")[95]

When I first read this passage, in my second year of graduate school, I wrote in the margin: "but how to distinguish [between oppressor and oppressed], outside a given context?" I didn't understand, then, that this is the point: it's *impossible* to distinguish outside the context of a given situation. That's what Freire is interested in: the situation, not the individuals. "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his [and her] pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression."[96] This formula, in the middle of Chapter One, is the only definition of oppression—or of oppressor or oppressed—Freire offers.

It's worth noting that Doug Paterson, founder of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (and a colleague I like and respect very much), seems to miss this definition completely. "Freire does not, as far as I can find, 'define' oppression and seems to accept the meaning as prima facie."[97] How to explain such a glaring oversight? Easy: Paterson read Freire using anarcho-liberal interpretive strategies. I did, too, as my margin notes

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[94] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 49 [original edition], 62 [30th Anniversary Edition]. (No changes.)
[95] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 32 [original edition], 47 [30th Anniversary Edition]. (No changes, even in the pronouns.)
[96] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 40 [original edition], 55 [30th Anniversary Edition]. Changes in brackets.
[97] Douglas Paterson, "Putting the 'Pro' in Protagonist: Paulo Freire's Contribution to Our Understanding of Forum Theatre," in *Come Closer: Critical Perspectives on Theatre of the Oppressed*, eds. Toby Emert and Ellie Friedland (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 9-20, 12. Paterson then goes on to quote his computer's built-in dictionary ("the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner"), Merriam-Webster's online dictionary ("a sense of being weighed down in body or mind") and the *Shorter OED* ("harsh…authoritarian…cruel or unjust exercise of authority"), in order to make up for Freire's supposed deficiency. These become his working definitions; they all, of course, lack all sense of a Hegelian dialectic.

show. We were both looking for absolute, individual- and identity-based definition, and Freire was not giving us one. He missed the definition Freire did give—relational, situational, not based in establishing friends and enemies—because his habitus disposed him to miss it. And if these nuances evaded Paterson, a scholar and practitioner deeply versed in Freire and Boal, it's no surprise that they evade many of our colleagues as well.

The work of Mark Weinblatt, a well-traveled theater director and frequent PTO presenter (and former assistant camp director at Appel Farm, where I now work), provides a clear example of these kinds of misunderstandings. His trademark invention is what he calls "Theatre of the Oppressor." Theatre of the Oppressor works not with the "truly 'oppressed'"—e.g., the person-of-color getting harassed by the security guards—but with "the potential ally from the dominant social group"—the white guy who stands by and does nothing while it happens.[98] Weinblatt draws on an interpretive strategy called "Systematic Oppression Theory"—popular in anti-racism workshops and on Tumblr—to divide the world into two kinds of people: "agents" and "targets." He provides a handy chart:[99]

Category	**Agents**	**Targets**
Age	Adults (21-59)	Children, youth, elders
Disability	Able persons	Persons with disabilities

[98] Marc Weinblatt, with contributions from Cheryl Harrison, "Theatre of the Oppressor: Working with Privilege Toward Social Justice," in *Come Closer*: 21-31, 21. I'm not the first to question Weinblatt's work: it's been criticized by several prominent members of the PTO community, including Paterson and Julian Boal—precisely those people who have the biggest stake in, and knowledge of, the dialectical origins of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Theatre of the Oppressed. But in my many years of experience doing Theatre of the Oppressed, most (first-world) practitioners still follow the same basic tenets and assumptions that Weinblatt does; hence, his work is still worth studying.
[99] Weinblatt, "Theatre of the Oppressor," 31.

Religion	Christian	Non-Christian
Ethnicity	Euro-Americans	People of Color (including African, Asian, Arab, Latino/a, & Native peoples)
Social Class	Middle and Owning Class (enough or more than enough resources)	Poor & Working Class (less than enough resources)
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexuals	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer
Indigenous Background	Non-native	Native
National Origin	U.S. Born	Immigrant
Gender	Male	Female, Transgender, Gender Queer, etc.

We've seen this before. "Targets" are the victims, the friends; and "agents" are the executioners, the enemies. (The resistance to agency indeed.) It's an understanding of politics that's clear, concise, and sometimes useful, but it also produces a huge amount of unhelpful anxiety. Again: where does it leave *us*? What do we do in those situations where we—as we all do, at least during the thirty-eight years after our twenty-first birthday—fall on the bad side of the chart? As Weinblatt puts it: "I am a straight, white, able-bodied man, raised upper middle-class, living in the United States—a person of some privilege in a country of tremendous privilege. In anti-oppression jargon, I possess much 'agency.' Symbolically, and, in ways, literally, I am the oppressor."[100]

[100] Weinblatt, "Theatre of the Oppressor," 23.

This kind of confession-talk, what a conservative might call "liberal guilt," plays a very important role on the anarcho-liberal market. It's known as the "privilege check." It's a gesture of immense value: to perform a well-executed privilege check confers great cultural capital. In a way, it's your ticket of admission: when you check your privilege, you speak about ideology and are therefore no longer in it; you have called-out and resisted your various –isms; and you are granted admission to step back into the counterculture.[101]

But if you're not exactly an agent anymore, neither are you a target. You're back in limbo, suspended in Descartes-style detachment, "above" and "outside" the "real world," unsure what your self-interest is or should be, unsure whether you are or should or can be part of a social organization at all. That produces all its own forms of anxiety: above all, what a professor of mine once called the "spotted owl" problem. As in, even if you present a great paper about the oppression of queer workers of color in the logging industry, someone could always call you out: "What about the spotted owl?!" We academic cyberpunk heroes, absent a serious organizing strategy, have assumed the

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[101] The iconic statement of confessional privilege-checking is Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1988), http://www.isr.umich.edu/home/diversity/resources/white-privilege.pdf (December 10, 2013), an article that's "now considered a 'classic' by anti-racist educators. It has been used in workshops and classes throughout the United States and Canada for many years." This article is the major source of the privilege checklists, privilege walks, and other privilege-checking activities that we've all experienced in diversity sessions and anti-oppression workshops. (Everyone seems to remember the Band-Aids.) As with Weinblatt, it's not that (most of) what she says isn't true; it just that it's useless, and maybe even counterproductive, for building agency: the whole point here is to be able to step back and expose and call out white privilege, especially your own, not to use an analysis of this privilege to build anything. For a habitus disposed to such para-academic activity, this will feel natural and normal…and not do much. For a habitus *without* these dispositions, this will feel uncomfortable and forced and will produce resentment as likely as enlightenment. It's not until the last paragraph of the article that McIntosh asks: "What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men [and their male-privilege], it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to reconstruct power systems on a broader base." That's it; the end. Who this "we" is, and how this reconstruction work might be done, is not addressed. That, as usual, is the *next* step—not the one we're on.

burden of addressing all oppressions, all the time. Para-academics are in the same boat: Graeber describes the "endless moral dilemmas for those whose privilege actually allows them to rebel," especially given that it might be "impossible for the *truly oppressed* to become *genuine revolutionaries*."[102] Even here, in the heart of activist culture, people are still anxious about whether they're doing something "real."

This anxiety is the source of a lot of the bad behavior we see in academic and para-academic environments, as participants ritualistically and repeatedly check their own privilege and call out that of others in order to keep their cultural capital up. There's particular anxiety around what agency we can, or should, take. To the extent that we're "agents," shouldn't we *not* take agency? To the extent that we're "targets," what agency do we have? To the extent that we're neither, what are we? What, exactly, is an "ally," and how do we know we're being a good one? Katherine Burke, current president of the PTO board, wrestled with these questions as she prepared to start a Theatre of the Oppressed project in a poor neighborhood in Cleveland, as part of her academic job:

> I'm a white woman who lives a comfortable life in the suburbs. What right do I have to come in to this place, their place, and then drive home to my safe neighborhood? What if no one is interested in doing this? Space is limited; what if we don't have a room that is right for the work? What happens if, when I introduce Boal's games, no one wants to play? People have busy lives. Will we have enough time to put this together? Will people come back week after week? What if they just don't want to do Forum [Theatre]?
>
> My biggest fear is white privilege, which I struggle to see and deal with on a daily basis. Even writing this blog entry is a reflection of white privilege. I may have good intentions, but I am naïve. I've been told before to check my racism. Who, me? I used to balk at the notion. But it was true; I've been silent when I should have spoken up, and I've made "safe" choices so I wouldn't rock the boat. I'm sure that I'll be confronting my own white privilege again, and I already feel intimidated by the idea of someone pointing it out. But I hope people do point out

[102] Graeber, *Direct Action*, 245. Emphasis added.

> my shortfalls. I hope I will welcome the critiques with an open and mind and heart.
>
> I don't know the people who will be in this group. I don't know their desires or needs. I don't know so many things, and the unknown is a scary place for me. Part of me wants to bag it, to take an easier road, to not take this risk. But the other part of me desperately wants to be the person Paulo Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:
>
> *[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.*
>
> So my first task is to "meet the people;" to "enter into a dialogue." I am not the liberator, but I do come armed with the arsenal of Theatre of the Oppressed in my tattered copy of *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. And with these tools I will commit myself to becoming an ally. Wish me luck. I'll keep you posted.[103]

This is a beautiful, elegant account of a very difficult situation, one that I have found myself in many times. It's also a perfect example of how when we neuter Freire, when we cut away the collective agency at the heart of his definition of oppression, we make situations like this one a lot harder than they need to be.

Freire would not call Burke "privileged." He would call her *oppressed*. Not oppressed in the same way as the people she'll be working with; not oppressed in a way that anyone needs to pity her; but objectively oppressed, "hinder[ed in her] pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person." Like the so-called "oppressors" in Weinblatt's workshops, who *wanted* to act as "allies" but couldn't bring themselves to, Burke *wants*

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[103] Katherine Burke, "The Beginning," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, Inc.* (website), November 7, 2013. http://ptoweb.org/2013/11/katherine-burke-considers-the-beginning/ (December 9, 2013). The Freire quotes come, of course, from the 30th Anniversary Edition. Some emphases added, for clarification.

to do meaningful work alongside others who are oppressed.[104] But something has been standing in her way, "hindering" her from doing this work—and you might add, "objectively exploiting" her labor in the academy. She's very aware of that something, but she doesn't think of it as her oppressor. It's what she calls "white privilege."

There's a reason Freire doesn't talk about "privilege." It's not because it doesn't exist, or it isn't important. It's because it's simply one form, one subset, of oppression. This is not a theoretical argument; it's a historical fact. White privilege, the paradigm for how we talk about all "agent" privilege, is an organized idea—with a history not-coincidentally similar to neoliberalism's. It was organized by a conspiracy of wealthy white plantation owners in colonial Virginia in the mid-1600s, working out of simple economic self-interest. They had a problem, you see: their workers, whom they treated awfully, were starting to organize, too, out of their own self-interest. These workers—white, black, and indigenous—"saw each other as sharing the same predicament," wrote historian Edmund Morgan. "It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together. It was not uncommon for them to make love together." And, their bosses feared, fight together.[105]

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[104] Freire observed that the oppressed "almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle…instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.'" He added, a few pages later: "only as they discover themselves to be 'hosts' of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy." This does not make them "oppressors" in any absolute sense; it is totally characteristic behavior of "the oppressed." See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 29-30, 33 [original edition]; 45, 48 [30th Anniversary Edition]. (No change.)

[105] See Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 44. This history, despite being far too rarely discussed and understood, is well documented: in the third chapter ("Class") of Thandeka's book, in the second chapter ("Drawing the Color Line") of Zinn's *People's History of the United States*—and in the book they both draw from, Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, reissue ed. (New York: Norton, 2003). I was heartened, a couple of years ago, to see it included in TakeAction Minnesota's training on "Worldview and Racial Justice," too.

So these bosses began what would become a time-honored tradition in American politics: they started a culture war. They passed new laws—easy to do, in a legislature where only white male landowners could participate—which gave their poor (landless) *white* workers little, symbolic bits of privilege: they got a few employment benefits, they were allowed to whip fellow black workers, and they were allowed to keep their clothes on when their bosses whipped them. This "divide-and-conquer class strategy," in the words of the Reverend Thandeka, "led the poor whites to identify with the ruling elite": with their fellow whites, rather than their fellow workers.[106] These poor whites, despite having been thrown a few crumbs, were still poor, and still oppressed, in the same way as their black and indigenous coworkers. But now they were oppressed in a new way, too. They were oppressed by their white privilege, an interpretive strategy that hindered them from *understanding* their shared oppression, and therefore hindered them—and continues to hinder *us*—from organizing across racial lines to break it.

This isn't about feeling sorry for the poor suffering white people. Understanding oppression, in Freire's sense, is *never* about feeling sorry for the oppressed. It's about doing an objective power-analysis: understanding what's keeping us apart and holding us back from working together toward our collective humanization. White privilege, along with the other "agent" privileges, is one of those things. When we understand privilege along Weinblatt's lines—not as a form of oppression but as the *opposite* of oppression—we unwittingly continue the work the Virginia plantation owners started. We make a fetish of the deep divide between us and our fellow workers; we turn it into an absolute, Descartes- and Althusser-style *truth*. We make the goal of our work to recognize and

[106] Thandeka, *Learning to Be White*, 46.

humble ourselves before the depths of this divide—as opposed to Freire's goal, which was to *overcome* it.[107] We make it ever harder for us, *any* of us, to see the very real oppression that we all share—in our common experience as part of the 99 percent, for example—and our equally real, simple self-interest in breaking them.

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[107] Or, in Hegel's language, to *aufheben* it. *Aufheben*, the German word that means "to raise up," "to tear down," and "to preserve," is the dialectical word *par excellence*. (Most English editions of Hegel translate *aufheben*—a common, normal German word—as "sublate," an obscure grotesquery that I will not acknowledge further.) When we have a dialectical understanding of historical progress, as Hegel and Freire did, two entities can be deeply, profoundly different, and yet through their conflict these differences can be simultaneously preserved, honored, and overcome. This *Aufhebung* seems to be the desired result of most anti-oppression work: we don't want to *end* the differences between men and women, or blacks and whites, or gays and straights. We want to honor and preserve them, in a way that lets us work together toward our collective humanization. Or better, thinking about Pete Marincel's story from SEIU, the reverse: we want to work together toward our collective humanization, to make a world that will honor and preserve our differences. (This is also why, for a dialectical thinker, class can never be a category of identity difference, like race and gender and the others. Class, like oppressor/oppressed—often but not always synonymous—is not an identity but a position in a dialectical relationship: precisely the dialectical relationship we are looking to *aufheben*. The goal is not to destroy identity differences, but it *is* to destroy class differences—and the whole system that supports them.) For a dialectical thinker, the goals of honoring, preserving, and overcoming identity difference are not contradictory. Anyone who has ever formed a close, lasting relationship with someone across some kind of difference—and through working on that relationship, has come to better understand and appreciate this difference—knows this to be true. Dialectical thought is *dynamic*, *relational* thought: thought that gets formed through the changing process of human (and non-human) relations, over time. It is, in the strict sense of Saul Alinsky, *radical*: it requires us to love all people, as participants in the messy, dynamic, relational progress of history toward humanization. It is the philosophical backbone of nearly every major revolutionary movement in modern times. Post-colonial academic critics may "debunk" Hegel and Marx for their Eurocentrism and phallocentrism, but *anti*-colonial organizers hold them dear. (This is where Freire's Hegelianism comes from: he quotes Frantz Fanon and other Hegel-influenced anti-colonial leaders extensively. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).) But dialecticism, the tradition of Hegel and Heraclitus, isn't the only major tradition of Western philosophy. There's also another, the tradition of Plato and Parmenides: *conservatism*. Philosophical conservatism has nothing (necessarily) to do with being a Republican; many liberals and progressives and leftists are, philosophically, conservatives. It means you believe the world is fundamentally made up of fixed forms, not ever-changing relationships. Maps, for instance, proceed from the conservative assumption that you *can* step in the same river twice: the water molecules may be different, and there may have been some more erosion, but it's still the Mississippi. The criminal justice system, likewise, is necessarily conservative: it wouldn't work very well if people could claim innocence because they're not the same person they were when they committed the crime. (Our "corrective" penal system does carry the dialectical assumptions that you won't always be the person you were—except when you apply for a job and you have to check "the box," or if you've committed a sex crime and need to register as a "sex offender.") Academia and para-academia, insofar as they're grounded in a search for the absolute truth that'll set us free, are fundamentally conservative. This includes the anarcho-liberal parts, with their insistence on absolute friends and enemies; on the absolute truth of language, identity, and difference; and on the unchangeable model of politics as isolated virtuous individuals resisting the all-powerful Master. When we neutered Freire, we turned him into a conservative, too. As long as we remain conservatives, we will, by definition, never be able to make much radical change.

I hope that Burke can ground her work in this shared oppression and self-interest. (I suggested as much to her. See the Appendix for her own thoughts.) Not that she should discount or downplay the deep differences between her and the people she's working with. Just because they're socially-constructed, by the Virginia plantation owners and their centuries of descendents, doesn't mean they're not real. But it does mean that they can be overcome. What I hope is that Burke can make *overcoming* these differences, through extended, relational work, the goal—rather than just the usual step-back and call-out and one-off act of resistance, such as our Legislative Theatre session in Minneapolis. Boal and Freire, understood with their roots in organizing and collective agency intact, can help get her there.

But it'll be a mighty strain on the habitus. Too hard a strain for Weinblatt, who admits: "As someone living in a body suit that possesses significant agency, I am aware that I could use my privilege and quit being an activist at any time. If I were doing more traditional activism as a community organizer, I worry that indeed I might quit."[108] Maybe too hard for anyone—at least, for anyone to do alone. Freire and Boal would be the first to say that we have to take these kinds of projects on as part of an organization: a revolutionary movement, a party, or at least an organized interest group. Cyberpunk neoliberalism has made these kinds of groups increasingly hard to come by; anarcho-liberalism has made those that remain increasingly hard to recognize and connect with.

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[108] Weinblatt, "Theatre of the Oppressor," 30. McGowan, likewise, once "asked a friend…why anyone who truly wanted to promote a feminist or Marxist revolution would ever make the decision to become an English professor." His friend responded with a long (and interesting) countercultural discussion of the "modernist adolescences" that drove many of their generation to modernist literature, alongside rock music, "to escape the suburbs in which we grew up"—but he concluded in a sadder and soberer way: "Besides, he added, look around. What other alternatives are there for the political radical; where else can you imagine a tolerable life for yourself?" See McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, 40-41.

But they're out there. As I learned a few years ago, when by sheer dumb luck, I stumbled upon the corridor of power.

To which we will now return.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Arendtian Impulse

This is a new arena for me. I don't know how to feel.
—Trainee, Ohio Organizing Collaborative weeklong training, June 2011

A Tale of…a Fail?

I used to love to teach *Brave New World*.

Partly because it's one of my favorite books. But more importantly, because it's misunderstood. In important ways. And I wanted to set things straight.

Most people, scholars and laypeople alike, read it like it's *1984*: a dystopian, cautionary tale about an oppressive, all-powerful System and the righteous but doomed individuals that try to fight it. It seems to have all the right markers of this kind of story. A weird, disturbing society that literally mass-produces people and engineers every aspect of their wants and needs—and then engineers a mass-consumer society to perfectly cater to each of these wants and needs.[1] (Eww.) A mass populace of homogenous hedonists who go mindlessly through their work- and play-lives from day to day, year to year, birth to death, laboring and consuming without a critical thought in their heads. (Eww.) And a handful of discontents, who share our disgust at this society, who are determined to step back from it, call it out, and resist it. (Yay!) Basically, they read it like it's an anarcho-liberal fairy tale.

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[1] An important and overlooked detail: Huxley's System does *not* engineer the people themselves. Contrary to popular belief, there is no genetic engineering involved at all, even simple Mendelian hybridity, which was well-known to Western scientists (and certainly to Huxley) by the late 1920s. All of the engineering takes the form of *conditioning*: designing the physical, social, cultural, and economic *conditions* in which the embryo, child, and adult exists. Huxley was not interested in altering human nature. He was interested, rather, in experimenting with the possibilities of human nature, as it was, given the right conditions. See Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

There's only one problem with this reading. The System in *Brave New World* might be all-powerful, but it isn't actually oppressing anyone. There's no secretly-exploited underclass, as in *The Time Machine*, or even a secretly-suffering individual, as in *The Giver*. No one is objectively exploited: all the value of society's (meaningless, centrally-directed) labor goes into the production of mass-consumer goods available to all, and class differences exist only to divide up the labor efficiently and maximize everyone's happiness. And no one is hindered in the pursuit of his or her self-affirmation as a responsible person: most people don't *want* any more than the (consumer-based) affirmation and (minimal) responsibility that they've got—and the few who do, such as our protagonists, are not punished but sent to an island, where they can live as independently and individualistically and critically as they please, without disturbing everyone else's (blissfully uncritical) happiness.[2]

And, without oppressing anyone, Huxley's System seems to provide *everything* we would ever want. Before we started reading the book, I used to ask my students to list all the things that would make a perfect world. You can guess the results: no war, no disease, no hunger, no violence, no prejudice, no unhappiness, and so on. Once we'd

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[2] "It's lucky," remarks World Controller Mustapha Mond, "that there are such a lot of islands in the world. I don't know what we should do without them. Put you all in the lethal chamber, I suppose" (Huxley, *Brave New World*, 205-206.) The flippancy of this remark, the only reference to violent punishment in the whole novel, suggests how very far-fetched an idea this is. The one place you could make an argument that oppression is still happening is with the Savages—who , in the eugenic eyes of 1930s Britain, may or may not have counted as people at all. And even this is questionable. They are allowed to live as they like, on their own land. There is a history of violence between the World Controllers and the Savages, and their land is patrolled and secured with an electric fence, but it seems the era of gas bombs ended long ago, and none of the Savages seems to want to leave. The sad case of John and Linda—which drives the novel's plot—is due not to a flaw in the System but to the irresponsible actions of two individuals within it: the hapless Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning, who never should have left Linda behind on the reservation, and the fatally-curious Mustapha Mond, who never should have allowed Linda or John (back) into "civilization," much less forced John to stay. (But of course, had these events not happened, Huxley would have been deprived of a plot.)

read the book, I would remind them of this list, and point out that Huxley's System provided *all* these things. And that even our aptly-named protagonist Bernard Marx, whom we liked so much when he started calling out this awful illiberal culture early in the book, stopped being quite so critical once he started getting laid.[3] I would wonder out loud whether this might be true for us, too. What leads some of us, including me, to spend so much of our lives criticizing "society"? Yes, of course there are legitimate things to criticize in our world (as opposed to Huxley's), but what makes *us* do it? What makes *me* do it, relatively privileged white guy that I am? Would I really have become a professional humanities academic—essentially, somebody who does call-outs for a living—if I had been one of those popular-kids-turned-investment-bankers, whom I openly mocked and secretly envied (and to some extent still do)? If I'd had friends before the age of sixteen, or sex before the age of twenty-seven? Personal bitterness and resentment aside, couldn't I have found happier, more fulfilling ways of living my life?

The reason we side with Bernard Marx, I would conclude, isn't because the System he criticized was oppressive. (It wasn't.) It was, rather, because we share his self-righteous outrage. We can't bear to think about a world that would deny us the possibility of being radical social critics, cyberpunk über-agents who—if we could just find the right code—could singlehandedly bring down everything out there that makes us

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[3] This little plot point, though rarely discussed, is hardly subtle: "success…completely reconciled him…to a world which, up till then, he had found very unsatisfactory. In so far as it recognized him as important, the order of things was good. But, reconciled by his success, he yet refused to forego the privilege of criticizing this order. For the act of criticizing heightened his sense of importance, made him feel larger. Moreover, he did genuinely believe that there were things to criticize. (At the same time, he genuinely liked being a success and having all the girls he wanted.)" And Mr. Marx's fall from grace only gets more pathetic from here: by his final appearance, near the end of the novel, he has been reduced to a blubbering wreck, sobbing, begging, and selling out his fellow cultural critics—all in an unsuccessful attempt to *remain* in the society he spent the whole novel criticizing, rather than be sent to the critical-individualist paradise of an island. See Huxley, *Brave New World*, 145, 203.

feel insecure about ourselves. This was not a fault of Huxley's System. There's nothing wrong with it. If we see something wrong with it, it means there's something wrong with *us*.

My students didn't buy it. (I choose this metaphor with care.) They agreed it was an interesting way to think about the book. But when pressed—and, of course, I pressed them—they still thought Bernard Marx was right and the System was wrong. My teacherly sense of professionalism stopped me from calling them out as hypocrites and self-indulgent sadists who would condemn untold millions to death and suffering and starvation and poverty and misery just so they could live out their little narcissistic fantasies of absolute academic agency—but just barely. They would grant me my points. They didn't necessarily know why they disagreed. They just…did. From somewhere deep in their habitus, it seemed. And honestly, I felt it, too. A sense that no, evidence be damned, this *couldn't* be a perfect world. I just assumed—given the lack of rational evidence—that this was my elitist academic habitus talking, formed by the capitalist, individualist, and otherwise evil market I lived on. So I resisted it, and as a good teacher of cultural studies, tried to get my students to resist it, too.

I should have known something was wrong, based on how I was teaching them. I was lecturing at them. I was trying to "get" them to do and believe something. And even how I framed what I was doing—"teaching *Brave New World*"—went against one of my most important teaching mantras: "We don't teach material; we teach people." What I was doing was wrong, and ineffective, and on some level I knew it. But I did it anyway. I'm not sure if I'd even call it a *fail*, because I was desperate. I didn't know what else to

do. I really believed teaching was political, and that the point of politics was to fight oppression, and so the point of teaching was to envision and create a world with no oppression. Even if that world ended up looking unsavory to our narcissistic, privileged eyes. And if my students couldn't see that—well, it was my job to *make* them see it.

It took a major habitus transformation before I was able to get some perspective on all of this—a transformation that I'll be describing, in detail, in this chapter. Now I'm convinced that my students were right, and I was wrong. Yes, there is no oppression in Huxley's world. But no, the point of politics is *not*, only, to fight oppression. (We know it's not, because then we would gladly accept Huxley's world as a utopia.) Politics, I now understand, is not just a negative activity—about stopping bad things. It's also, and more fundamentally, a *positive* activity: about *making the world we live in*. We reject Huxley's world, I realize now, because it's a *pre-fab* world. It'll be the same on the day we die as it was on the day we were born. We get no hand in *making* it; all we do is *consume* it, and *labor* mindlessly to reproduce the things we consume. We'll never have the chance to participate in *making* or *changing* our world in any way—and in Huxley's vision, maybe even creepier, we'll never *want* to.

This does not feel right. At all. We can't always explain why. It just doesn't. We reject this world, as if by impulse.

Or, maybe, *precisely* by impulse.

Public Work

"Looking back at that night when I beat her with an open hand, I didn't black out. I was feeling good. I was in power, I was strong, I was in control. I felt like a *man*."

This is a man in a domestic violence support group, as recorded by journalist Susan Faludi, describing what he felt while beating his wife. "But what struck me most strongly," Faludi continued, "was what he said next: that moment of control had been the only one in his recent life."[4]

This man, like so many others Faludi interviewed and observed in her massive study of American men in the mid-nineties, felt powerless, weak, and out of control. To the point where he did awful, inexcusable things to get even a little bit of that control back. Faludi traces these feelings back to "a culture that encourages people to play almost no functional public roles, only decorative or consumer ones"—the culture that developed when the neoliberals took power.[5] Faludi bookends her study with the story of McDonnell Douglas, the airplane manufacturer which was then in the process of closing one of its major American factories. She asked the CEO for his "thoughts on the security and well-being of the company's employees," and he replied that "McDonnell Douglas's duty was 'to take very good care' of only two parties: its customers and its shareholders."[6] Its workers had to take care of themselves. These workers, men who spent their lives as dedicated company employees, were experiencing a rude awakening:

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[4] Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1999), 8-9.
[5] Faludi, *Stiffed*, 34-35.
[6] Faludi, *Stiffed*, 579.

"loyalty, whether to a corporation, an army, or a football team, no longer allowed a man to lay claim to male virtue…it was as likely, in fact, to make him a pitiable sap."[7]

There's no use in calling out the CEO of McDonnell Douglas for his anti-social behavior. It's very possible that he's a decent guy who feels as desperate and powerless as the man who beat his wife. The point is that his behavior has, scarily, become the norm—as the job market, in the words of sociologist Alison Pugh, has moved "from stable, industrial employment to the fluid, modular, networked economy" that includes an "increase in employers' use of temporary or contract employment and of outsourcing as a tactic in good times and bad, the shrinking of men's job tenure, the increase in long-term unemployment and in perceived job insecurity, and the shifting of risk from employers to employees through changes in and curtailment of benefits." In this market, the postwar labor arrangement—where workers pledged lifelong loyalty and employers pledged benefits and job security—had been replaced by "the one-way honor system," where employees were expected to work hard and be loyal to their employers, but "any *employer* obligation was dependent on…a social contract 'we all know' has disappeared, and was no longer part of reasonable expectations."[8]

"We all know" is the operative phrase here. The reason "we all know" it is because the neoliberals successfully *made* us know it, and *made* it true.[9] Pugh observes the way laid-off workers "blame themselves for losing their job. They report, wistfully or

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[7] Faludi, *Stiffed*, 595.
[8] Allison J. Pugh, "The Social Meanings of Dignity at Work," *Hedgehog Review* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 30-38, 32, 33.
[9] Pugh acknowledges this explicitly: the reigning virtues of "mobility, choice, and independence…are not random virtues, but rather ones ensconced in the free market ideology of the postindustrial economy and the neoliberal withdrawal of the state." Pugh, "Social Meanings," 36. (Having studied the history of neoliberalism, we know that "withdrawal" was not exactly what was going on, but her point is well taken.)

tragically, that they should not have taken that job in the first place, they should have come to the job with better training or education, or they should not have complained about a problem or coworker." Many workers, she continues, "feel pressure to adopt a certain acceptance (either resigned or gleeful) towards insecurity. I found that many…actively worked on their feelings to generate the 'right sort of detachment.'"[10] In other words, they try to act like cyberpunks: radically detached, entrepreneurial individuals like Hiro and Molly, who see an insecure market as a way to be *powerful*. These workers are no dupes: on a unified neoliberal market, with all other markets and interpretive communities destroyed, acting like a cyberpunk is the *only* way to feel powerful.

But for most of us, it hurts. Education scholar Mike Rose observes that "not only are you demeaned by losing a job, or having a job that is low-wage and unstable, but…you're rendered impotent. You could express your anger, but the minute you do, your kids are going to suffer for it."[11] But suppressing these feelings, accepting our identity as cyberpunks, pretty much means giving up on the possibility of doing something, together, about the situation that's hurting us all. As Pugh writes: "While [workers] protect themselves from their feelings, they also protect their employers, suppress what could be an important impetus for collective action, and further a privatization of risk that brings the burdens of globalization to rest on their shoulders. In part in order to move forward as individuals, laid-off employees are, through their emotional labor, shunting aside a potentially important collective resource for social

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[10] Pugh, "Social Meanings," 34.
[11] "Work and Dignity: A Conversation Between Mike Rose and Matthew Crawford," *Hedgehog Review* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 39-47, 41.

change: their own antagonism."[12] The result of all this—as one man describes his feelings to Pugh—is that workers are left "lost and wandering."[13]

Or, to put it in philosophical terms: lonely.

We usually think of loneliness as something personal and private. Not so, says German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt. Arendt—probably best known among general readers for covering the Eichmann trial and coining the phrase "the banality of evil," and among broad-based community organizers for writing a very important book about public action[14]—argued that loneliness is a serious and dangerous political problem. Maybe even the most serious and dangerous problem in the modern world.[15]

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[12] Pugh, "Social Meanings," 36.
[13] Pugh, "Social Meanings," 37.
[14] See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin, 2006); and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958). A point of academic clarification: I am going to be talking a lot about Arendt in the first part of this chapter, because (1) she deals with the concept of loneliness in a particularly productive way, and (2) she is one of the most widely-cited philosophers in the public-work tradition, which forms the backbone of this chapter. My frequent references to Arendt are *not* meant to suggest that I agree with other academics who talk a lot about Arendt. Many theorists in the so-called "Arendt revival"—Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and the many contemporary academics who cite them as authorities—read Arendt in a way I find very questionable. Specifically, they recast Arendt as an anarcho-liberal who endorses a wide range of unserious symbolic acts of democratic purity, as a form of "politics." Conversely: though I will be criticizing Arendt, I do not necessarily agree with other academics who criticize Arendt. Tim Brennan, for example, unfairly calls her out as "*the* left Cold War intellectual" (*Wars of Position*, 20; emphasis in original). Arendt was indeed critical of Marx and communism and the Soviet Union, but she was no cheerleader for western capitalism, either. I read her through the interpretive strategies of the public-work tradition: appreciatively, for the insights she offers into building a democratic culture, and critically, for the unhelpful way she (like most Western political theorists) keeps "politics" and "action" separate from the rest of our lives, including (especially) our work lives. (For more on this, see note 22.)
[15] Pope Francis, interestingly, seems to concur. In a 2013 interview, he claimed: "The most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment and the loneliness of the old. The old need care and companionship; the young need work and hope but have neither one nor the other, and the problem is they don't even look for them anymore. They have been crushed by the present. You tell me: can you live crashed [*sic*] under the weight of the present? Without a memory of the past and without the desire to look ahead to the future by building something, a future, a family? Can you go on like this?" Francis, like Arendt, perceives how loneliness and joblessness are part of the same problem: the loss of companionship, hope, memory, community, and the impulse to be part of making the future by building things collectively. See "Pope Francis: The 'Most Serious' Evils are 'Youth Unemployment and the

Before we can understand why, first we need to understand exactly what Arendt means by "loneliness." It's not just, or even necessarily, about being alone. Solitude, time we intentionally spend alone, can be extremely healing and therapeutic: "In solitude…I am 'by myself,' together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others. All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought."[16]

Solitude is a virtue, and a choice: I choose to leave my community, the place in the world where I belong, to go off alone for a while and take care of my self—knowing that I can come back when I choose to. Loneliness, on the other hand, is not a choice: loneliness is what happens when that place, that community, does not exist. When there's no place to come back to. It's "the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences for man."[17]

Loneliness of the Old,'" *LifeSiteNews.com* (October 1, 2013), http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/pope-francis-the-most-serious-evils-are-youth-unemployment-and-the-loneline (January 1, 2014).

[16] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 475-476.

[17] Ibid. I experience the divide between solitude and loneliness, for example, when thinking about writing this book. Yes, I have deliberately isolated myself in order to write it—as I must. But it's a different kind of isolation from when I isolate to write, say, a script for a theater group I'm working with. There, I know I've got a place and a community to go back to when I'm done, which will take what I've written and run with it. (Of course, when we think about what larger community might care about the *theater company's* work, we're back to the same issue. To avoid it completely, we'd need to be living in a place like Arendt's mythical Athens—which may or may not have ever existed—where the bounds of our community were also the bounds of our essential world.) With a book like this, I can't be so sure. Will there be a community to take it back to? Who will read it, care about it, incorporate it into their lives and our shared world? I can't be sure. Nor can most writers, in my place. This lack of certainty is unnerving. It makes me wonder about my connection to the world, if I and my work matter at all. These are the seeds of Arendtian loneliness. (This feeling was the main impetus for the Facebook book-update project; see the Appendix.)

This discussion of loneliness isn't just philosophical navel-gazing—it's the conclusion to Arendt's book-length study of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. "Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government…is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness, which have been the curse of the modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become more acute with the rise of imperialism and social traditions in our own time"—and have become more acute, still, as the neoliberals have consolidated their power. "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century. The merciless process into which totalitarianism drives and organizes the masses looks like a suicidal escape from this reality…totalitarian domination tries never to leave him alone except in the extreme situation of solitary confinement."[18] (Or in the words of Don DeLillo's fictional "Hitler Studies" professor: "To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others.")[19]

Loneliness, according to Arendt, is the result of people losing their agency. This happens when people lose two out of our three basic capacities for activity in the world. The first is *action*—people's *collective* and *public* agency, their ability to act together to

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[18] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475, 478. Note, again, the striking resonances with Pope Francis's statement. Note, also, how this formulation confounds those who would dismiss Arendt as a simple "Cold War" thinker. Yes, she believes in the ideals of democracy and contrasts them with "totalitarianism," which comprises both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia—a conflation that angers many leftists. But she doesn't exactly extol the NATO nations as bulwarks of these democratic ideals, either. Insofar as mass loneliness exists here, too, Arendt sees us as only few steps away from totalitarianism ourselves—due, in no small part, to the workings of the capitalist "free" market.
[19] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 73.

affect their political, economic, and cultural world—which they lose when they're isolated from each other. "This isolation is, as it were, pretotalitarian; its hallmark is impotence insofar as power always comes from men acting together, 'acting in concert' (Burke); isolated men are powerless by definition." The second is *work*—people's *individual* and *private* agency, "the most elementary form of human creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world."[20] The third—all we have left, in a condition of loneliness—is *labor*, and its converse, *consumption*. The endless, self-perpetuating cycle of using our bodies to make and/or get the things we need to put back into those bodies in order to survive…in order to go make and/or get more of those things.[21]

At that point, we've lost our humanity. Literally: we've lost that which makes us human. To labor and to consume is literally to survive, and no more: every animal, and on some level even every machine, does these things. This is the bare minimum of existence. But to be human—to impulsively reject *Brave New World* as a utopia—means to have the impulses to *act* and to *work*. The combination of these two impulses—the impulse to "act in concert" with the people around us in order to "add something of one's own to the common world"—is what I'll call the impulse toward "public work," or the "Arendtian impulse." Once we lose the capacity to fulfill this impulse, Arendt suggests, it's only a matter of time before we lose it completely.[22]

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[20] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474-475.
[21] Arendt develops this argument, about the triumph of labor over work and action and its relationship to the degradation of both public and private life, in *The Human Condition*. This later book barely mentions totalitarianism or non-democratic governments at all: her main reference point is the 1950s United States, where she sees these same tendencies toward totalitarianism very much happening (see note 18, above).
[22] (Warning: this note is quite long. And necessarily so: it's the theoretical backbone of the whole chapter, with all the technical details that would otherwise clutter up the narrative. You don't need it to understand

the chapter, and unless you're really into political theory, you might want to skip it. Still reading? All right, here goes.) My major critical intervention into Arendt's theories can be summed up as follows: the distinction Arendt makes between *labor* and *work* is very necessary for public work, and often overlooked; the distinction she makes between *work* and *action*, on the other hand, is not, and must be abolished. Arendt grounds her distinction between *labor* and *work* deep in Western culture: "every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage...the word 'labor,' understood as a noun, never designates the finished product, the result of laboring"—it designates, rather, the primal animal *pain* of the process—"whereas the product itself is invariably derived from the word for work" (*Human Condition*, 80); "laboring and consuming follow each other so closely that they almost constitute one and the same movement, which is hardly ended when it must be started all over again" (100); "unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its 'toil and trouble' comes only with the death of this organism" (98). Theorists of public work, including my mentor and colleague Harry C. Boyte, sometimes miss the importance of this distinction. Boyte rightly criticizes political theorists for their tendency "to separate active citizenship from work," but then also criticizes Arendt for "her consignment of labor to the realm of necessity, not freedom" and argues we need to "shift the concept of Arendtian world-building from the fleeting moments found in revolutionary times to everyday, quotidian labors that build a common world." Conflating labor and work, as Boyte does, makes it impossible to recognize the central issue of loneliness. Work is what produces a common world; it involves agency and can be (but is not always) public. Labor is what *re*produces the current world; it does not involve agency and cannot be public. Labor isn't bad or wrong; it's probably necessary for existence, and it's only harmful when it is the *only* possible human activity. This, precisely, is the condition that produces loneliness. The neoliberal campaign has aimed, precisely, to reduce all work to labor—to eliminate all agency that lies outside of "the market." The public work tradition, on the other hand, aims to limit the amount of *labor* we must do, and replace a great deal of this labor with *work*. (To an important extent, the distinction between labor and work is *phenomenological*—it has as much to do with the interpretive strategies through which we understand the things we do, as it does with the nature of those things itself. Hence the apocryphal story Boyte told me, about two bricklayers working side by side, who are asked what they are doing. One says, "I'm laying bricks." The other says, "I'm building a cathedral." The distinction between labor and work is not about physical versus mental activity; it's about *non-agentive* versus *agentive* activity, about whether or not you feel like you're *taking part in building your world* .) Arendt's distinction between *work* and *action*, on the other hand, is far less defensible—and, as Boyte suggests, it is an impediment to public work. It makes sense abstractly: it's the difference between fabricating material objects, based in the private relationship of human and object, and participating in public life, based in the public relationship between human and human. But it makes much less sense in terms of our everyday experience: almost everything we make involves our relationship with other people (people we're making it with or for or about or because of), and almost every relationship with other people involves making something (a meal, a law, an institution, an idea, the relationship itself). I have trouble seeing a statement like "there can be hardly anything more alien or even more destructive to workmanship than teamwork" (*Human Condition*, 161) as anything other than personal opinion, and in the history of many art forms, blatantly inaccurate. And politically, keeping action and work apart can be downright destructive. Brennan is right to criticize Arendt for asserting that "praxis is that component of subjectivity associated with the public person—the person of the polis—although the meaning of praxis (literally 'action') is expressed in Arendt's reading only by way of activities that are not aimed at a goal and leave behind no work" (*Wars of Position*, 195). This understanding of action seems, almost by definition, to exclude action that's effective or agentive, that *changes something* or *makes something happen*—and, in a very Cold War fashion, to praise "democracy" for its own sake. But in Arendt's defense, this harmful distinction between work and action has been part of Western political theory since its origins in ancient Greece. Boyte criticizes the same error, this tendency to "accept a view of citizens as, in a sense, permanent outsiders," in most modern political theory: "When common action is separated from public debate, the process through which citizens learn crucial

This is what's happening, right here and right now. Faludi and Pugh and all the workers they talk to know it. And we know it, too—from the experience of so many of our friends and family and neighbors and colleagues, and very possibly ourselves. We may disagree on why it's happening (natural market forces? a conspiracy of the wealthy and powerful?), or who's to blame for it (Big Business? Big Government?), but we all know it's happening. We feel ourselves becoming more isolated, more abandoned by the communities and social structures and safety nets that once protected us. We don't know whether we'll have Social Security when we retire, or enough savings to put us through a hard time. We don't know when we might have to leave our closest friends behind, because they (or we) might have to *just leave*. We spend less and less time in public, and more and more time online, worrying we might be "missing out."[23] We feel, like

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dimensions of public life are lost because reflective reason is separated from experience of the consequences of action." The result, Boyte argues, is the replacement of *civic* agency—where ordinary people do things for themselves—with *expert* agency, where we wait for the laboring professionals (technicians, politicians, etc.) to do the things for us. (By accepting and endorsing the split between work and action, Arendt makes the end of civic agency—which she decries as the result of loneliness and the end of humanity itself—a foregone conclusion.) Culture war, including its anarcho-liberal variety, is the immediate result: "a romanticized and Manichean politics, where forces of light battle forces of evil and power is understood in primarily moral categories. Such a pattern characterized the protest politics of the 1960s and turned the crusade between the Free World and the Iron Curtain into its moral obverse, a battle between flower children and [the 'United $nake$' of] 'Amerikkka.' Subsequently, such an understanding of issue conflicts has come to characterize virtually every popular dispute on both left and right, from prayer in the schools to abortion, garbage incinerators to AIDS. Despite the participatory flavor of the new social movements and other forms of grass roots activism, the result has been a restriction of any possibility for a genuine public sphere"—for the collective construction of "free spaces" where people of diverse backgrounds and worldviews can fulfill their Arendtian impulse, acting in concert and adding something of our own to the common world—"ever since. Seeing controversies as the clash between innocents and moral monsters severely constricts the possibilities of genuine engagement with one's opponents." See Harry C. Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work: Organizing the Literature," *Political Theory* 39, no. 5 (October 2011): 630-660; and Harry C. Boyte, "The Pragmatic Ends of Popular Politics," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 340-355; see also Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 4th American ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially his defense of politics against its "false friends" the "non-political conservative," the "a-political liberal," and the "anti-political socialist" who practices "student politics," 111-139.

[23] The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), as linked to increased Facebook and other social media usage, has been widely documented in the popular press since 2011. (Google it and behold.)

Descartes, that we can't trust anything beyond our noses. We feel ourselves drifting toward loneliness, toward dehumanization (in the sense of both Arendt and Freire). And worst of all, we feel like there's very little we can do about it.

This desperate condition explains, for one, why we're so quick to call our political opponents "Nazis" or "Communists." I imagine most people would admit, when pressed, that neither Obama nor Bush actually wants to overthrow the U.S. government and impose a totalitarian state. But we're reacting to a very real, pre-totalitarian sense that our security, our place in the world, might be slipping away. It's a feeling of loneliness, and of fear: fear of even worse loneliness to come. The only real way to fight this fear, and this loneliness, and the real economic changes that are causing it, is through politics. That is, real politics—what I'm calling "public work": people coming together in public, Arendt-style, to collectively make their world. But most of the time, this kind of work feels impossible. Sure, we'd all love for the world to be that way, but we're not naïve. We *know* that There Is No Alternative but to do politics the way we see politics being done on the news, in Washington, and on Tumblr: as culture war. As a fight to the death against Them. A frame that exploits these feelings of loneliness and fear, and often makes them worse.

Witness the Detroit-area autoworker Dewey Burton, the *New York Times*'s poster child of the white working class throughout the 1970s. When asked if he supported the right-wing segregationist George Wallace, Burton replied: "I'm either for him or the

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Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, might diagnose it as a result of the public and private realms being eclipsed by "the social."

Communists, I don't care, just anybody who wouldn't be afraid of the big companies."[24] His ideology might have been mangled, but his basic self-interest was clear as day: he would support anyone who would stop the big companies, the big uncontrollable forces running the world, from taking over the little corner of the world he made for himself and his family.[25] "The DayGlo® 'This Family WILL NOT Be Bused' sticker on the Burtons' screen door was a complicated thing," observed historian Jefferson Cowie:

> Many anxious old liberals and impatient New Leftists dismissed votes like Dewey's as clear racism, but his political choices cannot be dismissed so simply.

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[24] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 5.

[25] Arendt places huge importance on this notion—of having a little corner of the world that's incontrovertibly your own. It's what she calls "property," not to be confused with "wealth." "Prior to the modern age, which began with the expropriation of the poor and then proceeded to emancipate the new propertyless classes, all civilizations have rested upon the sacredness of private property. Wealth, on the contrary, whether privately owned or publicly distributed, had never been sacred before. Originally, property meant no more or no less than to have one's location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic….This piece of privately owned world was so completely identical with the family that owned it that the expulsion of a citizen could mean not merely the confiscation of his estate but the actual destruction of the building itself" (*Human Condition*, 61-62). This basic distinction between wealth (the stuff you accumulate to get rich) and property (your little bit of "privately owned world" that lets you be you) has been lost in modern politics—and the result is a world where loneliness is a constant threat. Arendt would have no trouble understanding why our discussions of taxation tend to get emotionally charged and even existential: most of us would probably still agree that "to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human" (64)—and in a world where wealth equals property, if you're not accumulating enough wealth, you're in danger of losing your very humanity. Democrats and Republicans alike are often seen as inhumane for denying people their property, in the ancient definition. Republicans, through "entitlement" reform, would deny them the property itself. Democrats, through top-down initiatives like busing (and insensitive-if-accurate rhetoric like Obama's "you didn't build that"), would deny them the ability to make this property truly their own. This is the line of thinking that led to Arendt's most controversial political position: her opposition to federal intervention to desegregate the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. It's a position that's hard to defend—and Arendt itself "had the grace to reverse" it "after the intervention of the black novelist Ralph Ellison" (to quote critic Seyla Benhabib), but it's worth understanding the logic that led her to it. When people feel their basic property being challenged, they will react viciously. Without this kind of federal intervention fueling southerners' most existential fears, it's hard to imagine Nixon's cynical "Southern Strategy" working nearly as well as it did: playing on this mix of (illegitimate) racism and (legitimate) fear of loss of property to move the Southern working class into the Republican column for decades to come—where, Kansas-style, they ended up strengthening the neoliberal activists that did far more than Democratic desegregationists to destroy their property. See Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959): 45-56. See also Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*: 73-98; for more on "property-owning consciousness" (as opposed to class-consciousness) as a particularly American approach to citizenship—and foundation of the populst tradition—see Gerald Taylor, "Prometheus Unbound: Populism, The Property Question, and Social Invention," *The Good Society* 21, no. 2 (2012): 219-233.

> Raised poor (the first indoor running water he had was when he moved from southern Illinois to Detroit as a teenager), Dewey nonetheless profited from generations of segregated housing patterns, silent white privilege, and occupational segregation. Still, he felt open to black people as both leaders and neighbors. He touted his black union local leader as "the best president we've ever had" and claimed that he would welcome anyone into his neighborhood. "If a black mom and daddy buy or rent a house here and send their kids to [my son] David's school and pay their taxes, that's fine. Busing black kids to white neighborhoods and white kids to black neighborhoods is never going to achieve integration. It's upsetting. It's baloney." Like Wallace, Burton also detested "welfare freeloaders," pointing to an unruly white family down the block. His protest against liberalism had as much to do with control of his life, the fate of his family, and his modest and tenuous place on the social ladder as it did anything else.[26]

This, too, is the matter with Kansas. No industrial worker in the 1970s could be blamed for feeling in danger of losing control of his life, and losing his place on the social ladder. And whatever our personal opinions about busing, it's easy to understand how people like Burton could see it—for not entirely racist reasons—as yet one more way that his life and his world were being taken away from him.[27] Especially "at a time when the traditional working-class ally, the Democratic Party, offered precious little material comfort to working people" and "Ronald Reagan's New Right offered a restoration of the glory days by bolstering morale on the basis of patriotism, God, race, patriarchy, and a nostalgia for community."[28] This is the same logic of pretty much every culture war. Defend what little you've got left, your home and your identity and your

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[26] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 5.
[27] Nor are these feelings unique to the hard-hat set. In West Hartford, Connecticut, the upper-middle-class liberal suburb where I grew up, the Democrats *always* controlled the Town Council and Board of Education—with one exception: the term after they tried to desegregate the elementary schools by busing kids across town. (Since coming back to power, they have not tried again.) No one had a problem with *black* kids, of course; they just wanted "neighborhood schools." As with Burton, racism is a necessary but insufficient explanation.
[28] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 16.

values, because They—the government, the corporations, the Power Elites, the Ideological State Apparatuses—are coming for them.[29]

Burton was no dupe. The Democrats were forcing him to take his kids out of their neighborhood school and offering him nothing in return; the Republicans, at least, were offering him some "psychic income." So Burton, a lifelong labor Democrat, voted for Reagan. ("Sure, I've got some qualms deep inside me about voting for a Republican," he admitted. "But a man's got to grow up sometime.") And later, when Reagan turned out to be a neoliberal activist—Cowie calls him "the central protagonist in the new economic transformations devastating working-class communities across the heartland"—Burton got the message. "As Dewey later confessed: 'Reagan blindsided us.'"[30]

Leftists and liberals play on people's loneliness and fear, too. I discovered this myself, when I spent the summer after high school as a door-to-door canvasser for a citizen-action group. Our job was to spend sweltering summer evenings walking by ourselves around suburban subdivisions, knocking on people's doors, interrupting their dinners, reciting a script we'd memorized about how big corporations were taking over the world, and asking them to become members—which meant writing a check for sixty

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[29] The issue of guns fits this script in a particularly literal way, especially in light of Arendt on property. It's easy to think of a gun as agency incarnate, and not just because of its phallic properties. In a historical moment when we feel (and are sometimes *made* to feel) like we have less and less control over the world around us (the job market, the housing market, the popular culture, etc.), it's easy to understand how a gun (to a habitus formed on a certain market) can feel irresistible. It's power. It's control. It's the ability to defend my little bit of God-given property that makes me a person in this world, when all else fails. (Hence also the appeal of Stand Your Ground and Shoot First laws, based on so-called Castle Doctrine: my home is my castle.) Northern liberals like me may not express our feelings in this way, but we've got a lot of the same feelings. Gun rights folks are neither crazy nor stupid, and not nearly as different from "us" as we often think.

[30] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 14-17.

dollars. It was one of the loneliest experiences of my life. I was expected to raise eighty dollars a night. Most nights I didn't. Nor did I realize, until much later, that the same was true for almost all of my fellow canvassers. I spent my nights, and the days and weekends between them, feeling insecure, incompetent, and scared. (And I was one of the lucky ones who got paid a just-over-minimum-wage salary, regardless of how much I raised. My friends at other, similar organizations got paid commission.)[31]

Nor was the experience any less lonely for the "members" we signed up. "Membership" meant they wrote us a check, and we sent them emails—to "mobilize" them to write to their representatives, to attend the occasional "action," and, of course, to contribute more money. That's it. Members never met. They never got together to build the organization and determine its agenda. They were strictly isolated consumers, united only in their abstract agreement on certain issues, not in any lived sense of community or common work. (Is your next-door neighbor also a member? She could be—I did knock

[31] My parents, still traumatized by my experience, continue to give money to every door-to-door canvasser who comes to their house. This story has a curious epilogue: a decade after I worked at this organization, my father, who travels the state of Connecticut convincing towns to build more affordable housing, sent me an email telling me he met my old canvass director, then the chief of staff for a Connecticut city mayor. Apparently he spoke very highly of me. ("When he found out I was your father, he suddenly got a lot more cooperative !! So thanks!") Which shocked me—I always assumed, from the feedback I got, that I was mediocre at best—and made me wonder if all of my canvasser-colleagues felt as lonely and insufficient as I did. And my experience was far from unique. Boyte observes: "A century of 'mass politics' stressing universal claims, distributive justice, individual rights, and an essentially uprooted view of the citizen has come to shape progressive approaches to change. Mass politics is based on a consumer conception of the person as concerned with individual appetites and needs….It is closely tied to top-down mobilizing techniques like the door-to-door canvass and internet mobilizations, using a simplified script of good versus evil to rally large number of people, in which experts design both message and method." See Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work," 644. For more on canvassing, in particular, see also Dana R. Fisher, *Activism, Inc.: How the Outsourcing of Grassroots Campaigns is Strangling Progressive Politics in America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). On my last point: I recently suggested to some (rich New York liberal) family friends that many liberals know our MSNBC anchors better than we know our own neighbors. They did not see a problem with this. That, right there, is the problem.

on her door, too. But she could also be The Enemy, one of the evil Republican corporatists who are destroying our society. You'd never know. Best to stay indoors.)

Again, I'm not sure if anyone really *likes* this way of doing politics. My fellow canvassers and I sure didn't—in the very few times we felt we could discuss it, we talked about how we'd rather be building communities and engaging the public. But that wasn't the job we were hired for. Here, as in so many other situations, there appeared to be no alternative.

Why don't more people get involved in "politics"? This story suggests one reason. It's not necessarily that we don't care about the world we live in: the world where we work, play, eat, sleep, drink, and make things. Rather, it's that "politics" feels so very disconnected from that world. There was a time, Faludi suggests, where a man (in particular) could lead "a meaningful life—by being the kind of man who would struggle against racism at a shipyard union local, a neighborhood grocery store, a public school; by being a man whose actions mattered to a society he cared about." But in the wake of the neoliberal revolution, which outsourced the shipyard and busted the union and put the neighborhood grocery store out of business and diverted all the public school's resources into standardized test-prep, it's become difficult-to-impossible to practice this kind of "everyday politics."[32] Most of us only experience politics as consumers, in the abstract, on TV and/or online, and via the odd neighborhood canvasser. We don't encounter it in our everyday lives, where it might matter directly to us, and where we might be able to do something about it. Yes, we vaguely know it's still

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[32] Faludi, *Stiffed*, 596. "Everyday politics" is a steal from Boyte—see especially *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

important, but—in the immortal words of Luke Skywalker—"it's all such a long way from here."

The only time most of us get involved is when we feel threatened: when we, like Dewey Burton, get convinced that some bad guy is trying to take away what little agency we've got left, and we've got to fight like hell to defend it.[33] Which explains, finally, why culture war dominates our politics. It's the only thing that dependably gets our attention (and our cash)—and everybody in the industry knows it. That's why every political PR guru, from Frank Luntz on the right to George Lakoff on the left, tells you to take a top-down, us-versus-them approach to rhetoric and strategy.[34] Never mind all the polls and focus-group sessions that say people want to "change the tone" and "end the partisan bickering" and "stop the divisiveness." When the divisiveness stops, and the bickering amps down, and we are assured that our little bit of security is secure, we feel free to tune out.

It's a vicious circle. The more people disengage and stop participating, the more our politics becomes a culture war; the more our politics becomes a culture war, the more people disengage and stop participating. But there's more to the story. Yes, the neoliberals have had great success in destroying a lot of the places and interpretive communities where "politics" and everyday life come together, but they didn't act alone. In the words of my colleague and mentor, the political theorist Harry Boyte, sometime in the early twentieth century,

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[33] In that sense we all, regardless of ideology, fit Bernard Crick's description of the "apolitical liberal," who "will join in political crusades to clean up this or that, but [who] abhors the political regular." (Basically, the anarcho-liberal in its most passive form.) See Crick, *In Defense of Politics*, 97-98.
[34] See, for example, Luntz's *Words That Work* and Lakoff's *The Political Mind*.

> the left made a Faustian bargain. Socialists and welfare-state liberals alike said in effect that if democracy understood as popular power is impossible in the modern world, they will settle for a more equal distribution of resources and incomes instead, to be accomplished primarily through the state. This theme, expressed as the singular focus on questions of justice (both distributive and procedural) on the liberal left, was also given institutional foundations in the growing bureaucracies and large scale organizations of reform in the twentieth century: enormous unions, political parties, professional associations, and so forth. All of these progressively detached popular participation and agency from politics. As a consequence, justice, not power, has formed the main access of public debate in welfare-state politics.[35]

Like Dewey Burton, we saw where the wind was blowing. We felt our agency slipping away, as we became a mass society with distinctly pre-totalitarian overtones. So…we gave up. We gave up our agency, ceded our power to "technology" and "the Market" and the technocrats that claimed to represent it. We stopped trying to make the world ourselves, and became consumers—we consented to be served. We formed nonprofits and NGOs and other agencies, not to build power, but to provide services to the "underprivileged" and "marginalized"—whom we turned into consumers, too. We created a political culture that turned the resistance to agency, both our own agency and the agency of the "underprivileged" and "marginalized" we served, into a virtue. And after giving up our agency, and consenting to be served, we just asked in return that we be served fairly: we asked for "social justice." And then we were somehow surprised when The System didn't give it to us. (This is the origin of call-out culture—which, I

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[35] Boyte, "The Pragmatic Ends of Popular Politics," 349. This is the grain of truth in conservatives' argument that Nazism, Stalinism, and the New Deal have something in common. They do: it's called modernism. (Essentially: the idea, in art and architecture and literature and music as well as in politics, that a single, central designer can build something, alone and from scratch, that will solve every problem and answer every need.) Of course, many of conservatives' own organizing projects, such as neoliberalism and neoconservatism, are equally modernist (they just substitute the market and the military for the government). As are nearly all mainstream and not-so-mainstream modern political positions, across the spectrum. Only populism—which hardly counts as a position or ideology at all—may present an alternative…about which much more to come.

have found, is conspicuously absent in interpretive communities that take their own power and agency seriously.)

This was when we started pretending that *Brave New World* was a utopia, and that top-down schemes like busing might be a good idea. After all, if power and agency are off the table—and "social justice" is the only value we've got left—why not do it as efficiently as possible? This is exactly the attitude of many of the nonprofits I've worked with.[36] The people who work at these agencies tend to be wonderful: they work very hard at unglamorous jobs for not very much money. It's just that the market they're on incentivizes efficiency, not agency. The very language they speak, the set of interpretive strategies they use to make sense of their work, makes them powerless. It's all about doing things *for* other people—as opposed to *with* other people, or even for *themselves* (thinking about their own self-interest). Politics is framed in terms of *advocacy* (speaking for others) and *mobilization* (getting others to do things). Day-to-day work, kept separate from politics whenever possible, is framed in terms of the distinction between *server* and

[36] I'm not the first to make these observations. As scholar Derek Barker observes, on a market where nonprofits are accountable to centralized foundations instead of a citizen base, "citizen participation in decision making is likely to be viewed as risky, unpredictable, and disruptive…an unpredictable endeavor that could backfire, bringing conflict to the surface and complicating implementation of the NGO's primary agenda." See Derek W. M. Barker, "The Colonization of Civil Society," *Kettering Review* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 8-18. For a more radical (and well-documented) take on the same issue, see *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (New York: South End Press, 2009). And for more explicit evidence of how and why this model *doesn't* work, see Sarah Evans and Barbara Nelson, *Wage Justice: Comparable Worth and the Paradox of Technocratic Reform* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989). As Boyte summarizes, Evans and Nelson "find that equalizing wages was accomplished through centralizing processes which had the unintended effects of making workers increasingly powerless" ("Constructive Politics as Public Work," 644).

served, between the people working in those agencies and the people being *served* by them, who are called *clients* or *consumers*.[37]

The barriers between producers/providers/servers ("us") and consumers/clients/served ("them") aren't just linguistic. Walk into a homelessness-related nonprofit—I've been in more than sixty—and you'll almost always find yourself navigating a maze of locked doors, buzzers, security cameras, and monitored waiting rooms. The employees have the keys; the "clients" don't. I've sat in meetings of thoughtful, perceptive providers, who will criticize a case worker for not treating her clients with sufficient respect but a few minutes later will insist that you never want to give rent money directly to a homeless person; s/he'll drink it up.

Again, this is not to call out these people for their sins—they've each saved more lives than I ever will. It's just to point out that these agencies aren't places where people experiencing homelessness, or the people who serve them, have much agency. Their very structure, from their language to their physical space, makes it hard for "consumers" to become producers. And because of this, mission statements to the contrary, they are unlikely ever to end homelessness. This market structure, which incentivizes service and not agency, is the grain of truth in the conservative claim that the welfare industry reproduces itself.

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[37] Public work scholar Stephen Smith's assessment of a homeless shelter where he once worked is, in my experience, the norm: "the people who had the most control over our program were rich white funders. Then came the all-white 'administrative' staff that was based off-site. Then came the all-black 'client services' staff that was based at the shelter. And the people who had the least control over the program were, of course, the people who had the most to gain and lose: the homeless men, women, and children we called 'clients.'" See Stephen Smith, "Lessons I Wish I'd Learned On Campus," in *From Command to Community: A New Approach to Leadership Education in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Nicholas V. Longo and Cynthia M. Gibson (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2011): 234-246. Service agencies are often para-academic: they share a great deal of personnel, language, interpretive strategies, and market values with academia, including a characteristically anarcho-liberal resistance to agency.

I have discussed this issue with several "clients" and former "clients." I have yet to find one who disagrees. Nor do many nonprofit workers themselves. As with my canvassing colleagues, it's not that most people who work in these agencies *want* it to be the way it is. Many of them, especially the ones with social work degrees, have a basic understanding of "community organizing" and want to get the "grassroots" more involved. They're just not clear how this could happen, given current realities; once again, it feels like there's no alternative. Even if they could find some new sources of funding for agency-based work—the organizations on the corridor of power are largely foundation-funded, too—how would they use it? Organize the clients? Let them do whatever they want? *Not* have security at shelters?[38]

Clearly, this would all require a major shift in frame. But it wouldn't be breaking entirely new ground, either. Consider this story, told by broad-based organizer *par excellence* Saul Alinsky:[39]

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[38] I've found it particularly interesting how this provider/client relationship, with all of its anxieties, reproduces itself across all levels of nonprofit administration. For example, when I worked with a coalition of homelessness providers, the coalition staff expressed the same anxieties about the individual member agencies—basically, that they don't know how to govern themselves—that the staff of these agencies expressed about their "clients."

[39] You may note that here, as elsewhere, I quote Alinsky mostly from his lesser-known earlier, 1946 book *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), rather than from his more famous later, 1971 book *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989). There are a few reasons for this. First, *Reveille* gives a fuller picture of the *why* (rather than the *how*) of organizing—and when I quote Alinsky himself, that's mostly what I'm looking for. (For the *how*, I turn to the writings of more recent organizers such as Ed Chambers and Michael Gecan, to the writings of recent scholars of organizing such as Mark Warren and Richard Wood and Harry Boyte, and to my own notes and experiences.) Second, *Reveille* is connected to the populist tradition, including the Popular Front, in a way that *Rules* isn't: by 1971, after watching the effect that McCarthyism-inspired historical amnesia had on the 1960s "New Left," Alinsky had gone cynical. He had given up a lot of his expansive vision and talked instead of a much grimmer, bleaker future in which culture could not be changed, people are not just flawed but essentially corrupt, and the best we can ever do is struggle uphill, forever. *Rules* represents both the basic, foundational text of modern organizing—much of what I quote from more recent organizers can be traced back to it—as well as the nadir of organizers' optimism, from which they've been trying to emerge, while keeping the basic principles intact, ever since. See Harry C. Boyte, "Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert" (Kettering Foundation, 2009), http://kettering.org/publications/civic-agency-cult-exp/ (October 28, 2009), 20-25.

> A vivid illustration of the significance of what the people mean by their 'own' came out of a discussion of the program and budget of a people's movement which took place between one group that included stockbrokers, financiers, and some professional social workers and another group that included some of the main officers of the People's Organization. During this meeting one of the subjects that came up for discussion was the outdoor recreation center built and owned by the People's Organization. A prominent stockbroker pointed out that since there was a substantial sum involved in athletic equipment and such in this recreation center, the People's Organization should have a night watchman and ought to take immediate steps to hire one.
>
> Officials of the People's Organization brushed aside the suggestion with, "But why do we have to have a night watchman?"
>
> The stockbroker continued, "Well, the public park has equipment similar to yours and they have to hire a night watchman to make sure that the people in the neighborhood don't steal things—now do you see what I mean?"
>
> The officials of the People's Organization looked confused for a moment and then burst forth with, "No! We don't see what you mean. The public park doesn't belong to us; it belongs to the public. Our recreation center belongs to us—it's *ours*—and people aren't going to steal from themselves something which belongs to them—which is theirs. The public park belongs to the public—we don't own it; they *need* a night watchman."
>
> The stockbroker looked even more confused. The expression on his face indicated that he thought the People's Organization officials were "slightly nuts" and he dropped the subject.[40]

Would this approach work in a homeless shelter? Maybe, maybe not. All I'm saying, in general, is: yes, there is an alternative. It might be queer—*pace* Halberstam—but not in a divisive or countercultural way. If anything, it may sound weirdly Republican. Alinsky's "Iron Rule" is "never, never do for others what they can do for themselves."[41] "What you get by your own effort is really yours," Alinsky adds, in a

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[40] Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 178-179. Note how closely this story, and so much of Alinsky to come, resonates with Arendt's understanding of work, property, and loneliness. It also oddly resonates with Hobbes's insistence that sovereigns will never abuse their subjects because that would be like abusing (a part of) themselves—only here, that unity isn't assumed; it depends on a huge amount of organizing work, to bring people's self-interests into such clear alignment.

[41] It is also the second half of the epigram to *Roots for Radicals*, the most comprehensive guide to broad-based community organizing, written by Alinsky's colleague and successor Ed Chambers. The first half of the epigram, not coincidentally, is a quote from Arendt's *Human Condition*: "Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where

statement that almost—*almost*—could have come from Paul Ryan. "It is a part of you, bound and knit to you through the experiences that you have undergone in securing it….While to be given life's essentials may be physically pleasant it is psychologically horrible, and the recipient, though outwardly expressing appreciation, is inwardly filled with revulsion."[42]

I'm staggered, again and again, by how true this is: how important it is for people to do things for themselves, even when it would be so much more efficient to have someone else do it for us. This is definitely true for me; recall my story from Chapter One about how I doggedly refused my parents' money to pay for a doctor, even as I got sicker and sicker. It was equally true for a therapist friend of mine in Minnesota: when an unemployed client of hers came in one day and announced that he would enroll in a for-profit online university and finish his degree, and she gingerly tried to suggest that this online university was very expensive and not very good, he interrupted her, feeling dejected—"You don't like my plan?" And it was true for philosopher and agency scholar Matthew Crawford, who recalls "when my dad was getting old. He had Parkinson's disease. There was one time I got in the car with him, and he was trying to buckle his seatbelt. It was just going on and on, and it was all I could do to stop myself from just buckling it myself. After a long struggle he finally got it, and he turned to me, exhausted, and said, 'Thank you for not doing it.'"[43]

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words are used not to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities." See Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 7.

[42] Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 175.

[43] "Work and Dignity," 46-47. Alinsky tells many stories along this same line. One more, worth mentioning here: he quotes an "eleven-year-old newsboy in a slum community in Chicago," talking with a sociologist who'd spent some time living in that community: "Take my family. If we need dough we go to [a local community leader named] Big Butch. Tell him about it and he gives over a double sawbuck and no

Crawford is a self-described conservative. As are many of the political theorists who study agency—such as fellow conservative and Chicago Committee on Social Thought alum Yual Levin. Levin, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, insists that "real freedom is only possible with real responsibility. And real responsibility is only possible when you depend upon, and are depended upon by, people you know. It is, in other words, only possible in precisely that space between the individual and the state that the left has long sought to collapse"—except, of course, for leftists like Bertell Ollman (from Chapter Three), who similarly emphasized these "middle terms." In these "mediating institutions," Levin continues, which include "the family, civil society, and the private economy," we generally meet "face to face—between parents and children, neighbors and friends, buyers and sellers…In that space, in other words, we do more than provide for ourselves and others. We build our character and raise our children, we sustain and evolve our traditions and culture—we flourish and thrive."[44]

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questions asked. But you go to the Welfare and what happens? They start with how many times a day you part your hair and a hell of a lot of other questions that ain't nobody's business." When the sociologist gently reminded the boy "that the Welfare had given the family about $150 while Big Butch had contributed maybe $25…the newsboy looked at him with surprise and snorted: 'You don't seem to understand. It isn't what you give that's so damn important, it's how you give it. They got that dough from Big Butch not just without a single snoop but with a pat on the back and real sympathy. When you go to Butch you're a human being. When you go to the Welfare, you're a…a…Well, they got a word for it—you're called a "case"'" (*Reveille for Radicals*, 69-71).

[44] Yual Levin, "The Real Debate," *Weekly Standard* 18, no. 4 (October 8, 2012), http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/real-debate_653224.html (November 15, 2012). Lest I downplay their differences too much: Levin is thinking about the corner grocery store; Ollman is thinking about the proletariat. (Alinsky's "People's Organization" is somewhere in between.) Still, we're all speaking a similar language. We argue for the importance of an analysis, and a practiced, based in these "middle terms" or "mediating institutions." Which means we argue against the perspective of mainstream progressives and "fiscal" conservatives like, who will reduce all social analysis to government (or government/market) on one side, and unorganized individuals on the other—or, in anarcho-liberal-speak, to the State on one side, and "bodies" on the other. A final note on terminology: I will use "traditions," throughout this chapter—as Levin and Alinsky and many others do—as roughly a combination of "interpretive strategies," the ways a given community *makes* meaning in the world, and "dispositions," the ways that people's bodies comfortably move in a given community. The two are, of course, deeply related, almost to the point of being synonymous; the main difference is about emphasis.

Levin's categories are a little suspect; he seems to ignore the neoliberals' success at making "the state" the servant of "the private economy." (In the age where multinational, big box and Internet-based corporations have eclipsed the corner drug store, how much of "the private economy" actually happens "face to face"?) Still, Levin's larger point is well taken. And it's remarkably reminiscent both of Alinsky—"the enemy [Republicans] love to emulate," according to Thomas Frank[45]— and of Arendt. The great hope of the Arendtian impulse, the basic drive to work together with the people around us to build our institutions and make our common world, is that it can unite people across the political spectrum and the culture-war divide.[46] Not by force, like

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[45] Thomas Frank, "Donkey Business," *Harper's* 328, no. 1964 (January 2014): 5-8.

[46] To be clear: I'm not saying we're all the same, only that we share common ground—on which we have yet to build much. Big differences still remain. Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, insists (correctly, if smarmily) that most Americans are "New Age radicals," who "have simple faith that ingenuity and hard work can and should be rewarded" and "know that no amount of unearned money [such as money attained through a more progressive tax system] can ever heal the human heart" (*The Battle*, 71). Of course, the human heart is one thing; the human stomach is quite another. Alinsky asserts: "It is after he achieves enough food for today and all of the tomorrows that he moves to the next stage, realizing that this has not brought him happiness. Then he is ready for, and starts demanding, other things. Until that time you can no more tell a person striving for physical survival that survival in itself will not bring him happiness any more than you can tell a drowning man that a lifeline is not more important than anything else. On the West Coast the story is told of a white hippie preaching rejection of the system and all its immoral values, and pleading for members of his audience to drop out and join the hippies. At this point a young black spoke up, 'Hey, how can I drop out when I ain't never been in?'" ("Afterword to the Vintage Edition," *Reveille for Radicals*, 230). Arendt calls "necessity" a "prepolitical" matter, which many critics (such as Benhabib) take to mean she doesn't care about it. Not true. To participate in politics, she is quite clear, one must first "master necessity" and "become free" (*Human Condition*, 38). (In ancient Athens, this meant "ruling over slaves"—which has caused some of these same critics to call her out for condoning slavery—but in the modern world, we need no such thing. In the words of public work scholar and Denison University president Adam Weinberg: "we have the technology (e.g., knowledge, methods, processes, and physical tools) and the locally rooted assets to focus on climate change, human rights abuses, water shortages, joblessness, ethnic conflict, and other critical global issues. What we lack is the capacity to come together as human beings and socially organize ourselves to use our technology and assets to address these problems.") Arendt's major criticism of modern politics, which I find very accurate, is that it *only* addresses necessity, that it has become "gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping" (*Human Condition*, 28) that, in Paul Ryan's words, provides for the stomach (administers top-down services) at the expense of the heart (allows people to collectively work on the world they live in). See Adam Weinberg, "Preparing Students for Work as Citizens," in *Democracy's Education: A Symposium on Power, Public Work, and the Meaning of Citizenship*, ed. Harry C. Boyte (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2014).

neoliberalism, or by resignation, like anarcho-liberalism, but by active, engaged, participatory, public work. "In a time of concern on the left about the public squalor of a marketplace culture and on the right about the overreach of government technocrats," Boyte declares, "public work holds potential to break the impasse."[47]

Consider a recent example of this potential: the way readers and viewers of all political persuasions have reacted to *The Hunger Games*. Unlike many other recent youth phenomena, such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, which have turned off some big groups of readers (especially conservatives), I have yet to find a single category of people who don't claim *The Hunger Games* as their own. Left-wingers like Donald Sutherland, who plays the demonic President Snow in the movies and openly supports the Occupy movement, see *The Hunger Games* as a clear parable of economic inequality: the Capitol is the One Percent, the Districts are the 99 Percent, and it's a war to restore economic justice. The right-wingers at Fox News, though, insist it's a cautionary tale about the evils of government overreach: the Capitol is Big Government a ways down the Road to Serfdom; the Districts are the serfs, suffering from quotas and restrictions; and it's a war to restore the freedom of the individual and the market.[48]

As with any movie, or any "text," it's impossible to say who's right: it's all about the interpretive community you're in, and the interpretive strategies you're using. What's

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[47] Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work," 650.

[48] See Rory Carroll, "Donald Sutherland: 'I Want Hunger Games to Stir Up a Revolution,'" *The Guardian* (November 19, 2003), http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/nov/19/donald-sutherland-hunger-games-catching-fire (April 2, 2014); Silas Lesnick, "Donald Sutherland on the Sociopolitical Importance of *The Hunger Games*," *Comingsoon.net* (March 24, 2012), http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=88016 (April 2, 2014); James P. Pinkerton, "'Hunger Games' Shoots Arrows at Big Government, Big Media, Hits Bullseye," *Fox News* (March 22, 2012), http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/03/22/hunger-games-shoots-arrows-at-big-government-big-media-hits-bullseye/ (April 2, 2014).

important is that this story *resonates*. No one wants to side with the Capitol—and more importantly, everyone accepts the premise of the story. It is a story of radical revolution, both economic and political, but it doesn't fit any of the usual "radical" modes. It's not anarchist—no one is trying to abolish government, just to institute a better government. It's not liberal, neo- or anarcho- or otherwise—no one is fighting for abstract concepts ("the market," "justice"), and no one is petitioning the Capitol to provide a better distribution of wealth or calling them out for their social injustice (lotsa luck…). And it's not socialist—no one is looking to end capitalism, much less to end work, and no one is making any distinctions between the factory workers, the mine workers, the farm workers, the small shopkeepers, and the local government officials. All of these workers and local folks are part of "the people"—the producers, the everyday folks in the districts that make all the stuff. And they are pitted against "the powerful"—the consumers, the decadent people of the Capitol, who have more than they could ever need, and still demand more. This analysis—and *The Hunger Games* as a whole—comes straight out of one of America's oldest, most important, and most misunderstood political traditions: populism.[49]

"Why is there no socialism in the United States?" The German sociologist Werner Sombart asked that question early in the twentieth century, and American leftists have been debating it ever since. To me, though, the answer seems simple: because populism. Populism, for better and worse, fits most Americans' habitus much better than socialism. It appeals, specifically, to our Protestant commitment to *work* and our

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[49] For a detailed discussion of the relationship between populism and (other?) forms of leftist politics, see Harry C. Boyte, "Populism and the Left," *democracy* 1, no. 1 (April 1981): 53-66.

"aspirational" (rather than objective) understanding of *class*.[50] Socialism, in practice, tends to be caught up in the "Faustian bargain" that produced the welfare state: we give up some of our agency to a centralized bureaucracy, so we don't have to work as hard.[51] We don't like that. *I* don't like that. I consider myself pretty left-wing, and when I spent a year living in Germany—a relatively moderate welfare state—I felt uncomfortable with all the comfort. It seemed to produce a profound malaise.[52] But of course, I say that as an American. In Europe, there are a lot of people whose dream life includes *not* working. In the U.S., much less so.[53] Most of us, myself included, don't mind having work as a central part of our lives. What we want is for this work to be *good* work. Meaningful, dignified work—work that's *work*, in Arendt's terms, not just *labor*. Work that *adds* value to our lives, rather than subtracting value in a way that needs to be made up for in a salary.[54] The kind of work that fulfills our impulse to do things and make our world for

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[50] "Speak Aspirationally" is Rule Seven—and, I think, one of the most important—of Frank Luntz's "Ten Rules of Effective Language." "Aspirational advertising language doesn't sell the product as a mere tool or as an item that serves a specific, limited purpose. Instead it sells the you—the you that you will be when you use the product...a smarter, sexier, sunnier you." To speak to people aspirationally, Luntz argues, is to appeal to them much more than if you speak to them as they currently are. In this case: we're all middle class. Or at least, that's what you say, if you want to get elected. See Luntz, *Words That Work*, 18-20.

[51] The other approach to labor you used to hear among socialists—the Stalinist glorification of the most boring, repetitive labor—has thankfully gone out of style in all but the most stubbornly nostalgic Communist circles.

[52] I'm aware that "welfare state malaise" is a right-wing talking point, popularized especially by the conservative German economist Hans-Werner Sinn. As with the Arendt boosters and critics, I'm not suggesting that I agree with Sinn—I don't, most of the time—but that he raises an issue that is real, and that needs discussion, including by liberals and leftists and progressives. See Hans-Werner Sinn, *Can Germany Be Saved?: The Malaise of the World's First Welfare State* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

[53] "In Western democracies in general, and in America in particular, the working life has long been connected with identity, moral character, and human dignity," observes philosopher William Hasselberger. "The celebration of the moral worth of work is a fixture of American culture." See William Hasselberger, "Human Agency and the Ethics of Meaningful Work: A Bibliographic Essay," *Hedgehog Review* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 48-57.

[54] Russell Muirhead, another conservative public-work scholar (at the Hoover Institution), cites research suggesting that money can "spoil things," that "getting paid for doing an activity…can change the *meaning* of that activity"—and that when people are not paid for work, they enjoy that work more. (Assuming, of course, that they have enough to eat; Muirhead, like Brooks and other conservatives, seems to elide this

ourselves—that gives us, in the words of economist Amartya Sen, the "absolute capacity to take part in the life of the community."[55]

Populism is also very different in how it looks at those "middle terms" and "mediating institutions" of civil society: the local groups, associations, unions, and especially churches where people come together to make meaning. A lot of traditional liberals and leftists, including most academic and para-academic anarcho-liberals, tend to call out these institutions as impediments to social change. (I am someone who takes religion seriously, both academically and personally, which a lot of people in my various interpretive communities have trouble understanding. More than once, I've had friends and colleagues ask me how I could actually believe in something so backward and counterproductive.) Populists, on the other hand, see these institutions as places to start, elements that can be combined into bigger, more powerful organizations. Populists work *through* local institutions and traditions, not *against* them.[56]

This is not always a good thing. There's a reason people usually use "populist" to mean a bad thing; it's not just prejudice against the yokels. Populism draws its strength, in the words of Boyte and historian Sara Evans, from "the sense of aggrieved peoplehood that translates a community's common bonds into an insurgent…conviction that an elite

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small issue.) See Russell Muirhead, "Meaningful Work and Politics," *Hedgehog Review* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 21-29, especially 26.

[55] See Pugh, "Social Meanings," 30.

[56] Boyte's research suggests that this approach, in addition to being more appealing to many Americans, is also more politically effective: "the argument that radical protest movements emerge because of radical dissociation from traditional backgrounds is simply wrong. Recent [in 1981] social history of factory struggles demonstrates clearly that people draw on a range of ethnic, kinship, religious, and other traditional relations in fighting back and in developing a collective consciousness….The left [socialist] view neglects a range of resources that help to explain why ordinary people, steeped in lifelong experiences of degradation, defeat, and humiliation, gain the courage, the confidence, the skills, and the hope to fight back." See Boyte, "Populism and the Left," 58.

[the Capitol] has dishonored and abused a people's [the Districts'] sacred spaces, its historical memories and customs, its origins, common territory, and ways of life."[57] This kind of story and conviction can cut various ways. Martin Luther King, Jr., very much a populist, never called out or stepped back from the culture of the American South, despite obvious reasons to do so. Instead, he located his movement *within* southern culture and insisted that "segregation was an evil 'betrayal of the southern heritage' itself"—and in doing so, opened up the movement to a lot of sympathetic southerners (black and white) who would never have supported something that insulted this heritage.[58] At the same time, of course, there was this other movement called the Ku Klux Klan, which also claimed to be part of the southern tradition, with rather less inclusive and democratic results.[59]

These two kinds of populism, democratic and anti-democratic, inclusive and exclusive, MLK and KKK, have existed side by side pretty much as long as there's been populism at all. For a lot of people, especially academics and para-academic pundits, the fact that the KKK side exists is reason to call out (and throw out) the whole thing—but that is a huge mistake. Like it or not, populism is what we've got. Dig just below the surface, and you'll find that every major people's movement in the United States been has had its rhetorical and organizational roots in populism. If we want to be part of making change in the United States, as academics, para-academics, or otherwise—or

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[57] Boyte, "Populism and the Left," 61-62; see also Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 156.
[58] Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 158.
[59] "The very vagueness of the populist formulation leads to a political ambiguity and volatility….The vision of the American destiny put forth by populism can be inclusive, open, and cooperative. Or it can be closed, static, fearful, and bellicose" (Boyte, "Populism and the Left," 62, 64).

even if we just want to understand how others are making change—we have to pay attention to populism.

Boyte and Evans, two academics who do take populism seriously, have analyzed the populist movements of the past and come up with a compelling explanation for the difference between MLK-style and KKK-style populism. Populist movements are and remain democratic and inclusive, they conclude, when they're based in what they call "free spaces": "'schools for democracy' owned by participants themselves…settings which create new opportunities for self-definition, for the development of public and leadership skills, for a new confidence in the possibilities of participation, and for wider mappings of the connections between movement members and other groups and institutions."[60]

Free spaces can be churches, taverns, cafes, community centers, folk schools, union halls, classrooms, city squares, Occupy camps—pretty much any kind of space, as long as it's made, owned, and inhabited by the same people, who use it as a place to develop their own collective agency. Free spaces are both public, places where people of diverse backgrounds meet and discover their shared self-interest and learn to work and act together, and relatively safe, free enough from oppression and other external threats that people can put their guards down and allow themselves to grow.[61] These people

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[60] Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, ix, xix.

[61] Sociologist Richard Wood, writing about the internal culture of Alinsky-style organizations, observes that organizers and volunteer leaders "work to shape organizational cultures that help develop…informed, assertive, morally reflective participants," through "generating an internal public sphere, or what feminist theorist Nancy Fraser calls a 'subaltern counter-public,' within the organization." I want to quibble with Wood a bit. What these Alinsky-style organizations are trying to produce is free spaces. And free spaces are not exactly the same as "subaltern counter-publics" as Fraser describes them: "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." They're similar in that they're set off

might have entered the movement "in *defense* of their rights, traditions, and institutions," but as they spend more time in the movement's free spaces, "they discover in themselves and their traditions new resources and potentials. They repair their capacity to work together for collective problem solving. They find out new political facts about the world, they build networks and seek contacts with other groups of the powerless to forge a broader group identity." In this way, and only in this way, can a movement achieve "a transformation in power relations, not simply a return to past conditions or the replacement of one elite"—one Master—"with another."[62]

Without these free spaces, this kind of education and growth and transformation is not possible. All that's possible is resistance in the face of crushing oppression, which at best will only provide a band-aid solution, and at worst will be co-opted by all kinds of anti-democratic interests, from hate-mongers to product marketers.[63] To build a politics

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from the media-drenched arena of the state and the market, and therefore somewhat safer—but different, crucially, in that they're public and heterogeneous, intended not for a *single* subordinated social group but for many different ones to meet, build relationships, and work through their differences and find mutual self-interest. They are also not explicitly "counter" or "oppositional," in Fraser's sense: a populist politics based on free spaces explicitly rejects this kind of culture-war, us-versus-them orientation. Finally, and necessarily, free spaces are always assumed to be imperfect: Evans and Boyte stipulate that "there is no such things as a perfectly democratic 'free space' in our view"; it's an ideal to be worked toward." See Richard Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 161; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*: 109-142, 117; Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, xviii.

[62] Boyte, "Populism and the Left," 63-64.

[63] It's the movements devoid of free spaces, the anti-democratic and exclusive ones, that 68-era French philosopher Michel de Certeau describes in his schema for understanding political action, widely cited in academia and para-academia. His error is that he assumes these are the only possible movements. According to Certeau, all political action can be categorized either as *strategy*—action taken by the Master, with power, planned out in advance, in a space that's His own—or *tactics*—actions taken by the radically oppressed subalterns, with no power, done on the fly with no plan, on a terrain they don't own…because, you see, if they owned their own space, they wouldn't be radically oppressed subalterns anymore. In this deeply anarcho-liberal understanding of politics, all actions taken by the oppressed are and must be in the mode of resistance, because, having no space of their own, they are constantly being pressed up against the will of the Master to dominate every bit of their lives and subjectivities. (This also goes a long way toward explaining call-out culture: in a space where you have no defenses, no room to move, nothing at your back,

that goes beyond good-versus-evil, us-versus-them, oppression-versus-resistance—i.e., a politics that actually *builds* things that last—the first things we need to build are free spaces.

This is public work: the work of building free spaces, and the work of building a democratic culture *in* and *through* these free spaces. A culture that, in turn, changes the way we understand, relate to, and value our work and our (working) selves.[64] And by work, I really mean *work*. The kind of work that's your job, that you've been trained in, that means something to you, that you get paid for. "Public work" can be a hard concept to get our heads around, given that (for pretty much the whole history of Western

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you are naturally on high alert at all times; you feel like you have to protect yourself from every potential threat.) De Certeau gives a perfectly accurate description of political action that lacks free spaces. But when you have free spaces—that is, when you *make* them—things are different. Now the oppressed, ourselves very possibly among them, have some breathing room. We are not under constant threat. We can strategize. We can plan. We can keep what we win. We are not radical subalterns. We are human beings, working together and pooling our resources (people, money, ideas) to make a better life and world for ourselves and each other. One vivid example of the difference: the Georgia populist leader Tom Watson, when the free space of the People's Party was in full bloom in the 1890s, was an outspoken crusader against imperialist war ("it would arouse the military spirit everywhere…the time is approaching…when wars…will be just as much a relic of the past…as are now the old, rude ways of trial by combat and dueling") and for multiracial solidarity ("Now the People's party says to these two men [one white and one black], you are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both"). Two decades later with the People's Party in ashes and no other populist free spaces in sight and enemies seeming to press in all around, Watson had become a race-baiting bigot: most famously, he incited a mob to lynch the Jewish businessman Leo Frank in 1913 Atlanta. This is the difference a free space makes. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 34-39; and Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 174-181.

[64] In the present economy, dominated by neoliberals who (as we saw in Chapter Two) will stamp out free spaces at any opportunity and have created a situation where "workers must stand ever-ready to change employers and industries…the experience of work cuts against the gradual accumulation of ability, renders expertise irrelevant, and makes it hard to conceive of our careers (and perhaps our lives) as possessing any unity," declares the (conservative) Muirhead. Which makes the task of building more free spaces all the more vital. Pugh asks, on the same lines: "What if we thought about dignity [of work] as a social construct, something that refers to our capacity to stand as fully recognized participants in our social world, that derives its very meaning from its social context?" My anarcho-liberal habitus is still struggling to understanding "a social construct" as something *good*—but yes, very literally so. In free spaces, interpretive communities that *we* organize, we can intentionally *construct* the interpretive strategies we use to make meaning out of work—meaning that would be impossible on the neoliberal market. See Muirhead, "Meaningful Work and Politics," 21-22; Pugh, "Social Meanings," 30.

political thought) we've tended "to separate active citizenship from work," to assume that "citizenship is off-hours activity."[65] You go to work, put in your hours as a wage-slave, and then once you're done, in the time left over after taking care of dinner and the house and the spouse and the car and the kids and the preparation for tomorrow's work, maybe you go volunteer at the soup kitchen or make some calls at a campaign phone bank. Public work dares to imagine—and make—a different kind of world. In this world, "politics" isn't kept over in the corner away from your "real life." In this world, the work you do *during the day* is part of "self-organized efforts by a mix of people who solve common problems and create things, material or symbolic, of lasting civic value."[66] Public work can take lots of different forms—in theory, at least, as many forms as there are jobs. Public workers in various fields have successfully turned farms, science labs, doctor's offices, law firms, and nursing homes into free spaces—and the list is growing.[67]

Ironically, the people who often have the most trouble imagining what they do as public work are exactly the people who theoretically should be most interested in this kind of work. These are the people I'll broadly call the humanists. The "academics, artists, and activists." The people who spend their (our) lives working with ideas, and with other people. (The people, I imagine, most likely to be reading this book.) We understand, deeply, how important this work is, how much the world is hurting without it, and how much good it could do, but we often have the most trouble getting involved in

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[65] Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work," 645; Harry C. Boyte, "Turning Jobs into Public Work: A Project of the American Commonwealth Partnership" (Center for Democracy and Citizenship, November 2, 2012). Boyte notes, in this same paper, that "the congressionally mandated National Conference on Citizenship, which publishes an annual Civic Health Index with more than 40 measures to assess the civic health of communities and the nation, includes no indicators connected to work or the workplace."
[66] Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work," 632-633.
[67] See Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work," 649-650; see also Boyte, *Everyday Politics*.

this work, ourselves. Part of our problem is our habitus: many of us are on the market of academia and para-academia, and plagued by a disposition to resist agency.

But there's another part of it part of it, too, that's a lot simpler. Sure, we'd like to do public work, but…what, actually, could we do? Engineers, farmers, scientists, and caregivers (for example) have it relatively easy in this way. They *make* or *do* things. They can *publicly* make or do these things by building relationships with neighbors, finding out what their needs are, training some of them in some basic skills, and doing the work alongside them in a way that builds everyone's individual and collective agency.[68] But what do we have to offer? What do we make? What can we do, as public work?

That's the question that will concern us for the rest of this chapter. My answer is actually very simple, though it'll take some time to unpack. (You'll notice "the rest of this chapter" is quite a few more pages.) Basically I will argue that public work, for humanists, means three basic activities: organizing, making art, and teaching.[69] These

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[68] Albert Dzur, a leading public work scholar, elaborates: "We can train doctors, nurses, and public health workers to see and treat people primarily as patients or we can train them to listen to and respect people's knowledge and agency in the process of working on health and well-being together. We can teach legal professionals to represent clients, deliver justice, and provide security to a largely passive populace or we can teach them to include citizens and neighborhoods in co-creating a just social order. We can prompt policy analysts and public administrators to devise cheaper and faster means of serving citizens as clients or we can encourage them to involve citizens as equals in the planning process and in collaborative governance. We can continue to pass along tried and true curricula fitting for largely passive classrooms or we can help teachers encounter students as people with a voice and choice in their education." See Albert Dzur, "The Democratic Roots of Academic Professionalism: Power and Freedom in Co-Creation," in *Democracy's Education: A Symposium on Power, Public Work, and the Meaning of Citizenship*, ed. Harry C. Boyte (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2014); Dzur's footnotes include detailed studies of each of the cases he mentions in the quotation above.

[69] This is obviously a polemical argument, meant to provoke disagreement and discussion. You could make a good argument for lots of other possibilities other than these three. And you could certainly argue, as I will, that these three overlap with each other, to the point where they're sometimes hard to distinguish. But I will maintain that these are the three basic possibilities—both for argument's sake, and because I really believe it. You'll notice I have *not* included "research" or "writing" in this list. Not because they're not important to public work—they are, critically so. But not when done for their own sake. I want to argue that for research or writing to qualify as public work, we need to conceive and practice it in the context of organizing, making art, and/or teaching.

three activities aren't mutually-exclusive: to do any one of them, as public work, means to be doing some of the other two at the same time. There are important differences among these three activities, but approached from the perspective of public work—the work of collectively building free spaces and building a more democratic culture in and through those spaces—they're mostly differences of emphasis. Making public art involves doing some organizing and teaching; doing public teaching involves making some art and doing some organizing; doing public organizing involves doing some teaching and making some art.[70]

In these final three sections, we will explore each of these three activities in detail, and how they can be done as public work. Our central case study will be the experiences of one young public work scholar and academic/artist/activist who, by various turns of events, has stumbled into a great deal of training and experience in all three of these activities: me.

Organizing: Organic Intellectuals Among Us

University of Wisconsin professor Aaron Schultz, in his introductory course on community organizing, clarifies what makes organizing difficult in a neoliberal-dominated world: "The problem is not that people today don't belong to any organizations at all, or that they don't volunteer to help others. Instead, what have been

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[70] Myles Horton, the great American public educator who founded the Highlander Folk School and trained many of the most important southern organizers and educators of the twentieth century (most famously Rosa Parks), makes this point in a conversation with Paulo Freire: "Saul [Alinsky] says that organizing educates. I said that education makes possible organization, but there's a different interest, a different emphasis." See Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 115.

lost are collections of people who see themselves as an ongoing, relatively permanent 'we' that can act as collectives."[71]

This is a more precise definition of loneliness than the one I offered earlier. It's not that we never associate: "teamwork" and "group work" have never been more popular, in the classroom and in the boardroom. It's that our associations are usually cyberpunk-style. When we come together, it's for a specific project over a specific term. We might come together in a very serious, intense way, for an extended period of time, but we still know that as soon as the term and project is over we'll scatter and become strangers once more, just like Case and Molly and Hiro and Y.T. Whether we like it or not. We may try to make ourselves like it, like the workers Alison Pugh interviewed, but we'll have only limited success. Even in these cyberpunk stories there's always a tinge of regret. And in my own, real-life stories—from the last night of camp at Appel Farm Arts and Music Center, where I've worked for the past six summers; to the last meeting of many of the classes I've taught at the University of Minnesota; to the last performance of a play my theater company in Chicago had worked on for months—people flat-out don't want to leave. We want to do more together, to share more of our lives, to keep working in the mutual interests and traditions that we've discovered and created. We hate that we have to leave; we feel awful that we have to leave; sometimes we even cry because we have to leave.

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[71] Aaron Schutz, "One-On-Ones," http://www.educationaction.org/uploads/1/0/4/5/104537/171--one_on_ones-f.doc (December 30, 2013). Schutz cites Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), a book that's become required reading for many professional organizers. Putnam charts this decline in the disposition to understand ourselves in the permanent first-person plural across many aspects of American life—including, iconically, the decline in bowling leagues. Various scholars have lodged legitimate critiques of some of Putnam's arguments, in the decade-and-a-half since the book's publication, but his big point is undeniable and very important.

But we know we have to leave. There is no alternative. We have to leave and go back to the "real world." What is this "real world"? We usually don't ask, much less try to explain it; we just *know*. Organizer Ed Chambers, Alinsky's protégé and successor, offers as good a definition as I've seen: "Self-preservation, food, clothing, shelter, safety, health care, education, and work are necessary for everyone. Large numbers of people agonize over these things every day of their lives; many of us think of nothing else. This demanding set of real circumstances, which we didn't create but which we are thrown into, is the world as it is. When people refer to the 'real world' in conversation, this is what they mean."[72] In the language of Hannah Arendt, whom Chambers often cites, the "real world" is labor. When we understand this "real world" as the only world there is, or the only *real* world there is, we experience loneliness.

Chambers, a good organizer in the Alinsky tradition, believes "we live with a tension under our skin at the center of our personhood" between this "world as it is" and an equally real "world as it should be," made of our deepest ideals and aspirations.[73] The way to work through this tension—to work in the world-as-it-is and make it more like the world-as-it-should-be—is to organize, as Chambers and Alinsky and countless others have done for their whole lives. But for most of us, who don't organize and don't even know how we could or what that would look or feel like, the "world as it is" is it. We didn't make it, and we often don't like it, but we feel we can't fight it. This goes for pretty much everyone, regardless of how privileged we are (or aren't): in a culture where neoliberals have wiped out most markets other than the consumer-and-entrepreneur-

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[72] Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 21.
[73] Ibid.

based Market, even those of us who have built or received a lot of value on this market still usually don't have the dispositions and interpretive strategies necessary to *challenge* it. (That is, the more privileged among us are no more likely to bring the market down than the less—even though, in a real way, it would probably be in all of their interests.)

This problem—the destruction of markets other than the consumer-and-entrepreneur one—used to be a major area of research, especially in cultural studies, the academic tradition I'm closest to. Early practitioners of cultural studies, working in and around the Birmingham (UK) Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, argued that yes, corporate-produced mass-media culture did have the power to shape the habitus of the lower classes—to turn workers into consumers—but only because these lower classes were, or had *become*, disorganized. These early cultural studies practitioners, many of them organizers themselves, saw this "mass culture" as a kind of *ersatz* organizing: the habitus-forming glue, poured in from above, that held isolated and lonely people together in an interpretive community that made them easy to exploit and oppress.[74] Cultural studies was the study of how mass culture worked, on one hand, and the study of "popular culture" (what we'd call "folk" or "indigenous" culture) on the other: those other markets and interpretive communities that hadn't (yet) been destroyed, the ways in which they kept people from being entirely isolated and lonely—and the ways in which these "popular" traditions could form the foundation for a renewed organizing effort to

[74] In the words of cultural studies leader Stuart Hall, when people (in his case, working-class blacks and working-class whites) are divided, "capital penetrates through and occupies the gap." See Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 395.

resist the domination of mass culture and its elite owners, and to create the free spaces necessary to remake our world ourselves.[75]

When Birmingham cultural studies practitioner-turned-Princeton sociologist Paul Willis set out in the 1970s set out to discover *How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, he concluded with a two-level argument. Level one—right out of *What's the Matter with Kansas?*—is that working-class kids are culturally aware enough to know that the school system is a mechanism for reproducing the dominant ideology of a society they don't like, so they rebel against it; but they're not culturally aware enough to know that in rebelling against this school system, and getting bad grades which qualify them for only low-paying jobs, they are actually reproducing their own lower-class status. (To describe this situation, Willis invents the accurate but unfortunate term "partial penetration": the kids "penetrated" the dominant ideology, but only "partially.") But level two is that this situation of partial penetration happens because of "the lack of political organization." More specifically, the lack of an organization with a *populist* sensibility: "before any mass party could articulate itself properly as the representative of the working class it must understand and *learn* from working class consciousness and culture," rather than calling it out or dictating to it.[76]

While Willis was writing his study, five of his colleagues were working on another study, which would take the same argument even further: the 1978 book

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[75] This is a gross oversimplification. It leaves out, for instance, the important question of Marxism—which is not the same as populism. But it's a true story, in broad outline. See Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990), especially Chapter 2.
[76] Willis, *Learning to Labor*, 145, 154n. Emphasis in original. He continues: "Until that effort the dialectical relation of party and consciousness is a dead letter." Willis, though a Marxist who believes in mass parties and dialectics and class consciousness, sounds so very populist and Alinskyan nonetheless.

Policing the Crisis. These five authors, headed by Center director Stuart Hall, were writing about the "moral panic" around "mugging" (black violent crime) that erupted in the London news media in the mid-1970s, and its relationship to British racism and the rise of neoliberalism. Their goal, ultimately, was to understand "how we think, and organize to contest, the internal divisions within the working class which currently articulate themselves 'along racial lines.'" "Black crime," they conclude, "functions as one of the vehicles of this division" and "sustains the political separation" between working-class blacks, who resist their community's persecution in a "substantial, organized, and political form," and working-class whites, who are seduced by right-wing rhetoric "calculated to nourish unorganized white working-class resentment." The stated goal of their research is to develop "a theoretically informed political practice and strategy."[77]

Why bother with these British relics from the 1970s? Because they represented something we don't see much these days: a school of intellectuals who spoke the language of organizing. They rejected the detached elitism and fatalism of many post-1968 leftists and followed, instead, in the footsteps of the 1920s Italian organizer and political theorist Antonio Gramsci.[78] They drew, especially, on his concept of the "organic intellectual," which we briefly discussed in Chapter Three.[79] Unlike the

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[77] Hall, et al, *Policing the Crisis*, especially Chapter 10 ("The Politics of Mugging"), 329, 393-396.
[78] This is not an act of interpretation on my part. Hall himself has talked and written about his engagement with Gramsci extensively—see, for example, Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992): 277-294. *Policing the Crisis*, like many Hall publications, is riddled with Gramsci citations and terminology.
[79] Tim Brennan, a Gramsci scholar, makes two important points that I want to add here as caveats. First, as hard as these cultural studies practitioners tried to escape the shadow of Althusser and the interpretive strategies of anarcho-liberalism, they did not entirely succeed. "Stuart Hall…and others all concede that

"traditional intellectual," formed on the market of academia and para-academia and disposed to detach from the "real world" of labor and organizations, the organic intellectual has no illusions of being "autonomous and independent" of this latter world. The work of an organic intellectual includes "active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just [as] a simple orator." Organic intellectuals, in other words, are *intellectuals who work as organizers* as well as writers (artists) and teachers. Like all intellectuals, they work with ideas; unlike other kinds of intellectuals, they also understand that all ideas are inherently organized—because all meaning gets made in interpretive communities, which get made and changed and expanded and destroyed through the work of organizing. And so they understand that having agency in the world of ideas means doing organizing work: either working as organizers themselves (organizing people and money along with ideas), or working in close strategic collaboration with organizers.[80]

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their Gramsci came *through* Althusser." That is, Gramsci might have provided their answers, but Althusser still determined the questions—questions that kept them focused on "representation and ideology" in the disembodied, disorganized abstract; questions about what the System does to the individual *consumer*; and questions that kept them locked in a culture-war mode and limited their ability to think in terms of collective agency and the strategic power-building needed to produce it (*Wars of Position*, 247). Thus, Evans and Boyte attribute the idea of "the pervasive domination of ruling-class ideas in every social nook and cranny" not to Althusser but to Gramsci—or at least to "one reading" of Gramsci (*Free Spaces* xvii). Second, the term "organic intellectual" was not nearly as central or important for Gramsci as it seems in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, the standard English-language collection of his writings. The term "does not exist in Gramsci's original Italian until later in the essay, and then only in a subordinate, offhanded way (not as a definitive category. He is…speaking of intellectuals *who organize*—who are aware of their place in a field of political interests" (*Wars of Position*, 268). Like other icons of theory we've discussed, "Gramsci" as we know him is quite separate from Antonio Gramsci the human being. His writings may not have been "neutered" in quite the way Freire's have, but there are similarities. The term "organic intellectual" has taken on a life of its own: it has become pretty much *the* way academic leftists (including McGowan from Chapter Three) have come to talk about themselves in relationship to politics and organizing. So even if it wasn't that important for Gramsci, it's important for us.

[80] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 3-23; see especially 7-10. Gramsci, in turn, drew much of his inspiration from the tradition of Marxism, a tradition that has been defined by organic intellectuals all the way back to Marx and Engels themselves.

The modern world has no shortage of organic intellectuals. Most of them, both in Gramsci's time and in our own, work as "the 'permanent persuaders' of the media, lawyers, clerks, and the factory pencil pushers."[81] But there are, and have always been, some organic intellectuals who work elsewhere—such as Gramsci himself, who left a cushy position at the University of Turin to organize with the local communist party and, later on, become a minister in the Italian parliament.[82] This was the tradition in which Willis and Hall and their Birmingham colleagues understood themselves. Like Gramsci, they understood culture in terms of "alliances and blocs, leadership acting in the name of specific interests." They understood the lower classes (a rough translation of Gramsci's "the subaltern") as, at least potentially, "an active historical agent…a collective subject [a "we"!] that erupts into a transformative force."[83] They thought, basically, like organizers.

All the same, if they wanted to be organic intellectuals (as the evidence suggests), they never quite made it. Not because they weren't "subaltern" themselves, or because

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[81] Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 268. This doesn't make them the "bad guys"; they're just workers, with specific skills, looking for the places on the market where those skills will be valued the most. But it does mean, contrary to popular academic belief, that organic intellectuals aren't always the "good guys," either. Brennan explains: "The famous division between 'organic' and 'traditional' intellectuals is not, as is often said, a distinction between progressive critical minds and old-style humanists, aesthetes, or 'men of letters.'…Gramsci's distinction, moreover, is not normative; it was possible to be a politically abhorrent organic intellectual, as indeed he shows with most of his examples" (*Wars of Position*, 268). Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* provides a typical example of this misunderstanding. "The split between the traditional and the organic intellectual is important," Halberstam argues, "because it recognizes the tension between intellectuals who participate in the construction of the hegemonic (as much through form as through content) and intellectuals who work with others, with a class of people in Marxist terms, to sort through the contradictions of capitalism and to illuminate the oppressive forms of governance that have infiltrated everyday life." In the same vein, Halberstam describes Gramsci not as an organizer but as "a political intellectual and a socialist activist on the Italian political scene"—a model Halberstam wishes to claim for her own work, which fits much better with the contemporary (cyberpunk, anarcho-liberal) resistance to understanding oneself as part of "an ongoing, relatively permanent 'we.'" ("Gramsci," Halberstam continues, "was involved in political parties his whole life and served at various levels of politics over time"—as if she knew the truth, that he was an organizer and fully committed to the Communist party, even up through serving as one of the party's ministers in the Italian parliament—but her habitus wouldn't let her say it.) See Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 16-17.

[82] Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 234.

[83] Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 256.

they kept their academic jobs, but because they didn't organize. They didn't build power through organized people, money, and ideas, and they didn't work strategically with people and organizations that did. They stayed detached. There are probably several reasons why. For one, as we've seen, the academic market has *heavy* incentives against this kind of sustained, long-term, relational work. But this was less of a concern at the Center, where after decades of internal organizing they had succeeded in making their own little market, where this kind of work might have been more valued.

No, the bigger reason why Hall and his colleagues stayed detached was that the interpretive strategies of Gramsci, and of pretty much every organic intellectual on the academic radar screen, come from *Marxist* organizing. (Marxist organic intellectuals like Gramsci, Freire, Lenin, Georg Lukacs, and Henri Lefebvre, are regulars on academic syllabi. Populist ones like Alinsky, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, and Myles Horton, not so much.)[84] For a Marxist organizer—as opposed to a populist one—a *political* organization means a Communist Party and a proletarian mass organization behind it. These were rather hard to find in 1970s Britain, to say nothing of the twenty-

[84] These lists—though partial and somewhat arbitrary—are nonetheless worth comparing. The Marxists are all white, non-American (mostly European) men unknown to most Americans, except occasionally as insults. The populists are all Americans, of different races and (to a lesser extent) genders, some of whom are well known and some aren't. These differences are important. "Theory," on the current academic market, seems to be *defined* by its Europhilia and mainstream unknown-ness—which, in turn, keeps it detached from mainstream culture and inaccessible to anyone outside the club. (To my academic habitus, it feels almost impossible to think about reading King, or even Rustin or Baker, as "theory.") Excluding these populist organizers from the academic market, besides detaching American academics from the most vital tradition of political change in our own country, has also produced a curious distortion. Given our present situation, where of all the theorists we read in academia, the *organizers* are all white men (even non-white/male/European *Marxist* organizers like Rosa Luxemburg and C.L.R. James tend to get short shrift) and many of the most prominent *anarcho-liberals* are not (Spivak, Bhabha, hooks, Mouffe, etc.), it's not surprising perhaps that many academics and para-academics (of all races and genders) have been led to the (very, very false) assumption that the only people who care about organizing and agency are white men. From there, it's easy to imagine that to care about organizing and agency at all is somehow an expression of *privilege*, which can—and must—be called out.

first century United States. Willis and Hall, weaned on Marxist organizing, would not have seen the hodgepodge of religious, community, and neighborhood organizations around them as possible roots of political agency. To a Marxist, they are useless at best, and counter-revolutionary at worst.[85]

In this context, we can understand Hall's claim—to a conference of famous American and British cultural studies practitioners in 1990—that "we were trying to find an institutional practice in cultural studies that might produce an organic intellectual," but

> we didn't know previously what that would mean, in the context of Britain in the 1970s, and we weren't sure we would recognize him or her if we managed to produce it. The problem about the concept of an organic intellectual is that it appears to align intellectuals with an emerging historic movement and we couldn't tell then, and can hardly tell now, where that emerging historical movement was to be found. We were organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference; organic intellectuals with a nostalgia or will or hope (to use Gramsci's phrase from another context) that at some point we would be prepared in intellectual work for that kind of relationship, if such a conjuncture [historical moment] ever appeared….We never produced organic intellectuals (would that we had) at the Centre. We never connected with that rising historic movement; it was a metaphoric exercise.[86]

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[85] Boyte elaborates: "Seeing emancipation [of workers] as an intellectual shedding of the past produces strong temptations toward condescension by such [Marxist] theorists, and self-distancing from such important elements of the social fabric as churches, informal forms of association, clubs, ethnic groups, and so forth." See Boyte, "Populism and the Left," 59.

[86] Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," 281-282. One of the striking things about this talk is how "extremely anxious" (in his own words) Hall was throughout. Even his very measured, distanced discussion of organic intellectuals, he worried, might appear to his audience as "anti-theoretical discourse" (281). In the question-and-answer session to follow, he repeatedly felt the need to deny that he was a "populist"—for suggesting that non-academics had things to teach academics, for example. Both he and his audience seemed to equate "populist" with "sentimental," "vulgar," and otherwise simpleminded. Hall's anxiety accurately reflects how very far away the interpretive strategies of academia and para-academia—even this most *radical* fringe—had moved from anything resembling organizing. After ten years of neoliberal domination, and at the height of the (historical) Culture Wars, cultural studies had become a fully *consumer*-based project. Gone were the various and conflicting black, white, rich, and poor people's organizations of *Policing the Crisis*, each vying for agency and, in the process, creating the contours of modern racism. To understand racism now meant to understand—and call out—the ways an all-powerful, heavily adjectivized System ("white supremacist capitalist patriarchy") does things to you, the individual consumer of movies and TV and books and other media: how it causes you to get "commodified" (bad) or "marginalized" (bad) or "appropriated" (bad), or encouraged to "transgress" or "shift your positionality" (good!), or confirmed in your "power and privilege" (bad). The best of these theorists, such as bell hooks—my source for these quotations—seem to recognize that this culture war- and

Their work was "metaphoric," Hall explains, because there was no "rising historic movement" for them to connect with. Gramsci's writings were strategy documents for the revolutionary Italian Communist Party. *Policing the Crisis* was also a strategy document, of true Gramscian brilliance, for a revolutionary Communist Party that didn't exist. Maybe someday it would. In the meanwhile, theirs was but to write and wait. In Hall's conception, the organic intellectual sounds an awful lot like the Messiah: a mythical savior that we mere mortals can but await and prepare the way for.[87]

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consumer-based frame is a problem. hooks expressed concern that "communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption," and that statements like "fight the power" are useless "when that declaration is in no way linked to a collective organized struggle"; she made an "urgent demand that there be renewed and viable revolutionary black liberation struggle." But these protests, here and elsewhere, are just fleeting moments in the middle of arguments that are themselves thoroughly based on the consumer model—to which, theorists like hooks tacitly agree, there is no alternative. This is loneliness, in the mode of theory. With no (perceived) possibility of working in relationship with "a collective organized struggle," and no sense that such a struggle even exists, theorists fall back onto thinking, as Althusser did, that they *are* the struggle, that the theory they write is the *replacement for*, rather than the *auxiliary to*, the work of organizing. This is the common and unwitting pretentiousness expressed, with uncommon explicitness and honesty, by UNC English professor John McGowan: "The intellectuals who practice leftist cultural politics are 'out of touch' with the people, but…there is not any group already existing out there ready-made, for them to get into touch with. That group—or coalition of groups—needs to be made, to be forged, through the performatives of cultural politics." This understanding of theory *as* political action also unwittingly reproduces the top-down service model of Boyte's "Faustian bargain." Again in McGowan's words, we the theorists will enact social justice, not for ourselves but *on behalf of* "another group—a group often figured as oppressed—who is to benefit from the intellectual's activities. This group isn't seen as directly connected (either through reading or other direct encounters) with the intellectual's work, but is to benefit nonetheless." Our academic (and para-academic) understanding of "social justice," as it's been inscribed in our interpretive strategies, is therefore basically consumerist. We can quote Freire and Lilla Watson and dialogue about "dialogue" all we want, but the very language we speak means we're talking about us, the theorists, providing "social justice" as a service to anonymous "marginalized populations" *about* whom—not *with* or even *for* whom—we write. (Meanwhile, *Policing the Crisis* has become such an afterthought that it hasn't been in print in decades. I got my copy, some years ago, for $45, and that was a *steal*. The cheapest copies I see on Amazon now go for just under $200.) See bell hooks, "Eating the Other," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 21-39; and John McGowan, *Democracy's Children*, ix, 3-4, 23. See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of McGowan and his line of argument.

[87] Nor was this conception limited to Marxists. A great deal of the "theory" read by academics and para-academics is not Marxist, and especially after 1968, some of it is explicitly *anti*-Marxist. Regardless, most of these non- and anti-Marxists were once Marxists, and in any case, share Marxists' interpretive strategies for understanding what organizing is and must be (basically, a Communist party and a mass organization). For that reason, when these anti-Marxist theorists reject Marxism, they (and the academics and para-academics who follow them) end up rejecting the organizational habitus altogether, in a way that's had profound implications for the interpretive strategies of academia and para-academia. To the point where

To Gramsci, this would all sound absurd: the organic intellectual was the local church pastor working to organize his parishioners to practice their love of God through supporting the general strike—or, more likely, to convince them that God would want them to work as scabs. Organic intellectuals did, and do, actually exist as part of our everyday lives. It doesn't take an act of Providence to produce one.

All it takes is some training.

Thus did I find myself, on the morning of Monday, June 6, 2011, among a group of ex-convicts, church pastors, neighborhood leaders, educators, health care workers, entrepreneurs; blacks, whites, and Latinos; in their early twenties through their late sixties; who had gathered in a conference room at Ohio Dominican University, just outside Columbus, to discuss Thucydides. We might have been at a university discussing an ancient text, but this was no academic seminar. It was a *training*, run and paid for by the Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC), a statewide group of faith and labor and regional organizations, and ISAIAH, the major faith organizing network in Minnesota, with offices in the corridor of power. It was a training modeled closely, though with some important deviations, on trainings that have taken place across the country several times a year for the past forty years, ever since Saul Alinsky and Ed Chambers hosted the

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Hall—who clearly cares about organizing—finds himself making statements like "politics is impossible…without what Homi Bhabha called social agency as an arbitrary closure." The assumption, in other words, is that we academics start off floating in the Cartesian/cyberpunk disembodied ether, with infinite intellectual and theoretical possibilities stretching out in all directions, unfettered by the Debbie Downers of actual human organization. But then, to deal with actual politics and agency, we must endure the unpleasantness of closing off some of these possibilities arbitrarily, as we descend to earth like Hiro in his helicopter. And once we're there, we have no choice but to take earthly positions: "It is a question of positionalities. Now, it is true that those positionalities are never final, they're never absolute. They can't be translated intact from one conjuncture to another; they cannot be depended on to remain in the same place." Or basically, what Alinsky calls "no permanent friends, no permanent enemies." Just in 40 words, instead of 6. See Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," 278.

first Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) Ten-Day Training in the early 1970s. These trainings have different official names in different places, but in the nationwide interpretive community of Alinsky-style organizers, they are usually known as "weeklong."

Unless you're an organizer or public work scholar yourself, you probably haven't heard of weeklong. Despite being a decades-old American intellectual and pedagogical tradition that has trained millions of Americans, it's all but unknown in academia, para-academia, and mainstream media culture. Just like "organizing" as a whole. Even in the Obama era, where everyone and her mother is a "community organizer," for most people "organizing" still means activism. It means Occupy. It means counterculture. It means, as Chambers puts it, people who "dress in black, wear masks, [and] kick in shop windows." It means "youth, frustrated idealists, and cynical ideologues" marching down the street chanting, "'What do we want?' 'Freedom.' 'When do we want it?' 'Now!'"—and then, more often than not, going home, without having changed anything. For the "80 percent of moderates who comprise the world as it is," it means people who aren't *you*, and people you might not ever want to be associated with.[88] Even for me, not exactly a moderate, it meant I spent years thinking I wasn't countercultural enough,

[88] Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 13, 107. This understanding of organizing is harmful, in so far as it cuts off potential allies. In my nonprofit consulting work, for instance, I have encountered a lot of people who are skeptical of "organizing" because they associate it with confrontational counterculture, and for that reason, they eschew the idea of building power relationally at all. In their understanding—the usual understanding—there are only two options: activism (bottom-up) or service (top-down). They're understandably wary of the first option, which seems to involve throwing out all expertise and leaving everything to the mob (confrontational marches, quixotic letter-writing campaign, etc.), so they feel they have no choice but to embrace the second option: making all decisions at the top, based on the formal expertise of technocrats and scientific studies, and denying the people below (the agencies, the providers, the "clients") any agency in the process. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Boyte, "Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert."

connected enough, radical enough, cool enough, and otherwise good enough to be an *organizer*.[89]

Organizing in the Alinsky tradition—which has close ties to the black freedom tradition—which are both derived from the 1930s Popular Front tradition—which owes a great debt to the populist tradition—is a different animal.[90] Rather than alienating those 80 percent of moderates, it intentionally *focuses* on them. A good broad-based community organization consists of "some political conservatives, lots of moderates, and some liberals" who seek "common ground, refusing to allow ideological differences to perpetuate social divisions."[91] This kind of organization doesn't ask members to leave the communities and identities that define them (race, religion, job, family),[92] but just the

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[89] My dilemma, and (I'm pretty sure) that of many others, can be explained based on the results of two recent, popular Internet quizzes that are meant to place you on the political spectrum (left to right). According to an October 2013 quiz based on an Esquire-NBC News survey about "the new American center"—which asked me about my positions on issues such as economic inequality, as well as my level of engagement and awareness—I am a "bleeding heart," all the way to the left. But according to a January 2014 quiz developed by pop-psychologist Jonathan Haidt (the "self-righteous hypocrites" guy from Chapter One)—which asked me culture war-style questions about my preference about pets (dogs > cats), movies (action > documentary), respect for authority (that it's important to teach to kids…along with the importance of respectfully *questioning* that authority), and self-expression versus self-control (how are these things mutually exclusive?)—I'm right in the middle. So…where do I belong? Where's my place? Am I, in one sense, a "moderate" after all? See (for yourself!) "Quiz: Are You a Member of the New American Center?," *NBC Politics*, http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/10/15/20977799-quiz-are-you-a-member-of-the-new-american-center?lite (January 14, 2014); and Jonathan Haidt and Chris Wilson, "Can *Time* Predict Your Politics?," *Time Magazine*, http://science.time.com/2014/01/09/can-time-predict-your-politics/ (January 14, 2014).

[90] For a brief overview of this historical trajectory, see Boyte, "Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert," 22-23.

[91] Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 15.

[92] Graeber, in his ethnographic study of anarchist activist groups, discusses "the journal *Race Traitor*, which was…avidly read in activist circles. Its motto was 'Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity.'" This may well be true. But it's not a truth that most Americans are ready to embrace in their (our?) own lives. Most people, white or otherwise, are not ready to understand themselves as "race traitors"—and when we're told we have to, we're likely to turn off entirely. As IAF organizer Michael Gecan says: "Most Americans can't imagine themselves doused with black paint, lying on a sidewalk, amid hustling shoppers and observant cops. If this is 'action,' if this is public engagement, if this is what you need to do to get attention, recognition, and response, then most people will just dash past, play solitaire on the office computer, or pray that their college-aged kids grow out of this fad and apply to business school." See Graeber, *Direct Action*, 241; and Gecan, *Going Public*, 52-53.

opposite: it trains members to *reinvest* in their own communities and identities, to dig deeper and take them further.[93] They likewise don't ask members to negate their own self-interest—either through charity (mainstream liberalism) or through masochism (anarcho-liberalism)—but again, just the opposite: they train members to get "clear"

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[93] Broad-based organizers often describe their organizations as "organizations of organizations": "While most political organizations recruit the relatively disconnected activist," observes sociologist Mark Warren, "the IAF approach engages citizens as they are rooted in relatively stable community networks." Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood, a leader of the IAF-affiliated East Brooklyn Congregations (organized by Gecan), insists: "We are not a grassroots organization. Grass roots are shallow roots. Grass roots are fragile roots. *Our* roots are deep roots." Originally, back in the 1940s, this meant a wide range of neighborhood, ethnic, labor, and faith groups—but as suburbanization and white flight and (later) neoliberalism weakened many of these groups, IAF organizations became focused on religious congregations. "The IAF doesn't organize congregations because of any high moral reasons," Chambers explains, "but because they are pockets of power with leadership and roots in local communities. These neighborhood institutions are the only ones that haven't been redlined. The fastest growing urban institutions are black Pentecostal and black Baptist churches. That's because people and families need a support system, and congregations, like unions, are natural support systems for family and community." By organizing already-existing organizations rather than individuals, Warren continues, IAF organizations circumvent the difficulty of getting "people to cooperate with each other from scratch. Existing institutions incorporate networks of citizens who share some level of initial trust and cooperative ties. Moreover, institutions embody the traditions and values that can sustain community life. A commitment to community, and the motivation to care for it, rarely exist in the abstract. Communities and their institutions share a history through which people develop particular traditions that bind them together and motivate them to act." While organizers—as opposed to countercultural activists or mainstream service providers—actively seek to work *through* (rather than over or against) these local community institutions and traditions, they also—as opposed to anti-democratic populists—actively work to (in Wood's terms) "rework these cultural meanings." Alinsky unequivocally opposed labor organizers who upheld segregation because "after all in a town located so far south they had to respect local traditions and a lot of stuff like that." Less dramatically, Wood observes, local cultures often include "unexamined cultural assumptions" that work against their own people's agency, such as the assumptions that conflict is bad and politics are dirty and it's more important to be ethically pure than to be politically effective; "to circumvent these accepted cultural meanings, organizers engage in [what he and fellow scholars call] cultural work," defined as "both intentionally importing cultural meanings from the [local] organization's wider environment and reworking these cultural meanings within the organization." Purists may object that this "reworking" contradicts organizers' commitment to respecting local traditions; Alinsky would respond simply that "life is a story of contradictions." Organizer and scholar Romand Coles would elaborate that a "trickster sensibility" undergirds all of the work of organizing, for instance in the "political jujitsu" (Alinsky and Chambers's term) that organizers use to align people's self-interests in directions that those people never originally intended, but always—and this is the test—ultimately serve to build all of those people's collective power. See Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20, 30-31; Harry C. Boyte, *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 83; Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 129; Wood, *Faith in Action*, 156; Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, xiv, 170-173, and for several more examples of "political jujitsu," 108-119; and Romand Coles, "Of Tensions and Tricksters: Grassroots Democracy between Theory and Practice," *Perspectives on Politics* 4, no. 3 (September 2006): 547-561, especially 550-552; see also Gecan, *Going Public*, 152.

about their own self-interest, and to get "serious" about building the necessary power to "impose your self-interest on the world."[94]

This work wouldn't be possible, of course, if our differences really ran as deep as the rhetoric of the culture wars would have us believe. Luckily, they don't. Alinsky asserts, with characteristic bluntness, that there are "general issues of the kind that all people support, such as medical care, full employment, good housing, good schools, equal opportunities, and above all the opportunity to create their own program."[95] When I first read this, I didn't buy it: aren't there large, organized, and well-funded groups that *oppose* full-employment, housing, education, and (especially) health care laws? Yes, of course there are, I realized after thinking about it some more, but that's not what Alinsky meant. He didn't mean that everyone wants these things *for everyone else*, or that everyone wants the *government* to *give* these things to everyone else. He meant that we all want these things *for ourselves, and for the people we love as ourselves*. That, right there, is Alinsky's answer to all the pundits, and to everyone else who insists that *difference* is too absolute to work through. This is the self-interest that we all share, across every possible culture-war divide. Including, crucially, that last part about "the opportunity to create [our] own program": the Arendtian impulse.[96]

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[94] "Clear" and "serious," as discussed in a footnote in Chapter Three, occur frequently in the vocabulary of organizers. When I write them, I particularly hear the voices of the aforementioned Pete Marincel, the organizer who (more than anyone else) trained and mentored me, and his father Paul Marincel, the organizer who founded ISAIAH and once led the national Gamaliel Foundation, and who trained me in agitation. The last quotation—"the ability to impose your self-interest on the world," as a not-uncontroversial definition of power—comes from Paul.
[95] Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 54.
[96] This doesn't mean we agree on everything, or ever will—or ever will need to. "The IAF does not assume members have common interests," Warren writes. "In fact, IAF organizations are premised upon the understanding that people have different interests. The IAF intentionally seeks to build broad-based organizations, that is, affiliates made up of institutions that have diverse traditions and interests." Thinking

Here was a kind of organizing work I could get behind, that I could feel good about myself while doing. But the question remains: if this world is so hidden from academia and para-academia and mainstream culture, how did I manage to find it in the first place? The answer: pretty much by accident. I arrived in Minneapolis in back in 2007 as a first-year graduate student, very excited to research Theatre of the Oppressed. I met with University of Minnesota theater professor Sonja Kuftinec, an expert in this kind of theater and an organic intellectual with an immense network of people and organizations. Sonja urged me to make contact with a Theatre of the Oppressed group at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. Working through my disdain and slight fear of community colleges—good suburban Connecticut boy that I was, I had never set foot in one before—I went. Within an hour, my prejudices had been systematically demolished.

Courageous Conversations, the campus Theatre of the Oppressed organization, was a group of energetic, extremely smart people—multiracial, multi-ethnic, pretty much multi-everything—who were deeply committed to doing really important work. I was particularly struck by two of the group's leaders: Michael Kuhne, an English professor,

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especially in terms of race, Warren observes that "the multiracial organizations formed by the IAF are not integrationist. In fact, the institutional organizing approach"—the *church* or *union* you already belong to becomes a member; again, you don't become a member on your own—"is meant to respect the traditions of each racial community….Participation in the IAF does not require African American participants to submerge their history and deny racial differences in favor of a homogenous whole. The purpose of building broad-based organizations is to bring communities with different traditions and interests together, not so they become the same, but so that they can learn to support each other and to find a common ground for action." The Alinsky method doesn't assume all our interests are the same; it just "quite explicitly rejects the notion that these interests are in permanent conflict. Instead, it seeks to *structure a process* in which a diverse group of participants can find a commonality of interests and an understanding of the common good." Weeklong, as we will see, is an essential part of structuring this process: it ensures that organizers and leaders have significant overlap in their habitus, with shared dispositions that let them see *enough* things similarly *enough* that they can do this cross-cultural work effectively. See Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 153, 227. (Emphasis added.)

and Nickia Jensen, then a student (now a middle-school math teacher). There was *something different* about them—not different from other people at the community college, where they fit in seamlessly, but different from other "social justice" and "social justice theater" practitioners I'd met. They were grounded, practical, and strategic. They set goals and evaluated everything they did based on how well it met those goals. They built relationships with as wide a group of people as possible, regardless of how "progressive" or "non-progressive" they were. They were deeply interested in justice work, and deeply *un*interested in the kind of call-outs and infighting and divisive behavior that often infiltrates this kind of work.

I flatter myself to think Nickia and Michael saw something in me, too; in any case, they made an effort to get to know me. They met with me, worked with me some more, and challenged me (researcher or not) to do serious artistic work in collaboration with black, Somali, gay, trans, and working-class students—*without* making it about my own race- and class- and other privilege-guilt. And they would mentor me through it. I felt my chest clench up, but then I exhaled a little. This felt *good*. In a way I'd never quite felt before. I didn't know I could do this kind of work, and enter into serious relationships with "those kind of people" (forgive; I was a year out of college and so very nervously white) without feeling bad about myself. And I'd never felt so intentionally *invested in* before, by people I respected and admired but didn't really know all that well. I wanted more of this. I made a point of building my relationships with Nickia and Michael. I taught a class with Nickia through the local Experimental College, and I roomed with Michael at my first Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference.

And as we got to know each other, they started telling me about this thing called "organizing." And this thing called "weeklong." They'd both been through it—and since coming back, they had incorporated what they'd learned into their work, both in pedagogy and in theater.[97] (It would be a while longer before I understood they were putting *back* the organizing that had originally been at the center of this work, which most first-world practitioners had unwittingly *removed*.) They encouraged me to go to weeklong myself—but to be honest, I wasn't sure how I felt about a super-intense week of super-experienced organizers challenging you about why you're not more politically active in the world. I thought that kind of challenge could only be a call-out, something that would make me feel even more guilty about my privilege and inaction than I already did. And besides, there was no *organization* I was working with. Like Hall, I didn't know where I could find one. (The fact that I was already working with one, Courageous Conversations, and *in* another, the University of Minnesota Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, did not register—let alone the corridor of power sitting a couple of miles east.) I started doing some research; I started reading about organizing and meeting with a couple of local organizers and incorporating principles of organizing into my academic writing; but it would take another push before I would actually go get trained as an organizer myself.

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[97] The two of them, I would later learn, discovered organizing in turn through Harry Boyte and, especially, his organizer-colleague Dennis Donovan at the local Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC). Donovan was in the process of actively recruiting schoolteachers, at all levels, to participate in the CDC's signature program, called Public Achievement, in which students, from middle school- to college-age, learn and practice the basic principles and skills of organizing, to better their immediate school environment in a way that follows from their own self-interest. Michael and Nickia both got involved in Public Achievement, becoming "coaches" for local teams, and later trainers. For more information, see http://www.augsburg.edu/democracy/publicachievement/ (April 17, 2014).

That last push finally came in the spring of 2011. Through a chance meeting with a former student at an anarchist café (the pull of para-academia abides), I learned about a local upstart Lutheran-based faith community that used organizing techniques in its worship services. Jew though I am, I was intrigued. So I went. And I found something like a home. Spirit of Truth, as the community called itself, was a group of smart, thoughtful, mostly young and white people looking to connect—or often reconnect—with their religious practice in a way that resonated with their political values and commitments. It was a small group, but they had a trained and experienced young organizer on staff, the aforementioned Pete Marincel, and they had serious personal connections to many of the most powerful organizers and organizations in the region, organizations I'd heard of and was interested in, but had no idea how to access. And like Michael and Nickia, they seemed very interested in building a relationship with *me*. (It's amazing, I find myself thinking as I reflect on all this, how much work and commitment you can get from people—including me—when you offer them (us) a home and a place in the world. Even without offering them any money. Arendt would nod, knowingly.)

Only days after we'd met on that first Sunday, Pete contacted me and asked if I'd like to do a "one-to-one." (Or more exactly: Pete contacted a mutual acquaintance, who contacted me. It's all about the relationships.) A one-to-one, I knew from Nickia's notes in her copy of Chambers, was "the bread and butter of organizing," the basis of any public relationship. It's a short meeting, meant "to focus deliberately on another person, to seek out their talent, [self-]interest, energy, and vision," and to determine if that person

is worth developing as a leader in your organization.[98] Pete asked me incisive, increasingly hard questions, and he listened and responded empathetically to my answers. We talked about, well, a lot of the stuff I've written about in this book: about my feelings of detachment as an academic, about my cyberpunk desire to stay detached and feel like I have (at least the potential for) infinite understanding of the world, and about my simultaneous frustration that I didn't have a place, a path, and a way to act. Basically, we talked about loneliness.

We ended and agreed to meet again. We kept meeting, and I kept going to Spirit of Truth. Before long, I'd learned a lot more about organizing and met a lot of really interesting people and started feeling like I actually had a home and a context in the Twin Cities. And then, a few months after our first one-to-one, Pete asked me to go to weeklong. (In organizer-speak, I would learn at weeklong, what Pete did was *proposition* me, according to a time-honored five-point process: he came in with a *plan*, he made a specific *ask* of me, he shared with me his *vision* of me and told me how going to weeklong would help me get there, he pledged to *partner* with me as a mentor through the process, and he pushed me, gently but firmly, for a *commitment*.) I took a few days to think it over, but of course I said yes. We met more times, we talked through the basic concepts of power and self-interest and my ongoing journey toward understanding my own. As the date approached, we also talked about my fears. These fears were mostly about not being good enough, not being "truly oppressed" enough, not being institutionally-connected enough, and of course, about being called out.

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[98] Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 44-54.

Before I left, Pete left me with one last piece of wisdom: what he called the "three kinds of people who go to weeklong." Most people, he said, were people like me, new leaders looking to find our "path to power." But there were also two other types—people who, as I see it now, couldn't or wouldn't push their habitus out of the service frame and into the agency frame: "victims," who would dwell on their own suffering rather than look for ways to build power and overcome it (what Augusto Boal called the *de*pressed rather than the *o*ppressed), and "caretakers," who would dwell on the victims' suffering, and their own relative privilege, rather than look for ways for either/both of them to build power and overcome it. Pete said I would be tempted to be a caretaker: to be so overwhelmed by the stories of people's sufferings, people who had lived lives very different from mine, that I'd forget about my own self-interest and pursuit of power. I told him I'd try hard not to.

When I pulled up to the dorm at Ohio Dominican University where I'd be staying, I was nervous. The immediate cause of my nervousness, if I'm going to be honest, was the handful of poor- and urban-looking black folks I saw unloading their cars and moving into the dorm with me. They are *all* going to call me out, I kept thinking. I am so privileged, and so out of place, and they are going to call me out, and it's going to feel bad and really uncomfortable. Those were my conscious thoughts, anyway. What unconscious thoughts and feelings lurked beneath, I cannot say. I imagine I was a little like Dewey Burton opposing busing: dealing with a combination of ingrained white racism and a fear of loneliness, of losing my place. In my case, that meant losing my place as a respected intellectual and teacher whose thoughts mattered, here where I knew

no one and all my book-learning and formal credentials would be called into question. There's a reason, I realize only now, why I brought my tattered tan professor's jacket along and wore it compulsively for the first few days.

I needn't have worried so much. By the end of the first night I felt better. Comfortable, even. I moved in, had dinner, went to the first session, and talked into the night with people I'd just met. In that first session, we were asked to tell the story of what our grandparents wanted for us and our parents and what that means for us. "What makes organizing powerful is our *stories*," explained Trevelle Harp, executive director of the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope (NOAH) and our first trainer. He ended the session by observing that "these stories," about jobs and access and immigration and the American Dream, "are all the same." I wrote in my journal that night:

> Wonderful to be here….Rather scared and shy coming in, as always, or at least as usual. Puttered around the dorm, putting things in order. But got a chance to talk with [my roommate, a young fresh-out-of-Northwestern organizer from Cleveland] a little bit…we had dinner together and realized we had a great deal in common. First session (intros) felt a little awkward and over-long, and honestly I was disappointed not to be agitated by Trevelle….I thought I sounded quiet and unconfident and noncommittal, but Genevieve [another trainee] later said the passion was clear….Great people. Loud. Assertive. So much easier to talk across racial divide than I thought, at least so far….Lots of war stories from many.[99]

Weeklong is basically organic intellectual boot camp. It's a tightly-packed week, five days with six to nine hours of training per day, conducted by experienced organizers flown in from across the country, who themselves have been prepared through an

[99] My account of weeklong comes from extensive notes I kept throughout, as well as a nightly journal. These are my sources for the description below. Quotations from my journal are direct, save the odd corrected typo. Quotations from trainers and trainees—in quotation marks—are exact or close to it: I wrote them down, in the moment. Everything else, not in quotation marks, is my paraphrasing.

intensive process of training and evaluation.[100] There's a ton of information and skills to learn—how to do one-to-ones, how to be a leader and build a following, how to proposition and develop new leaders, how to define ("cut") issues and build strategic actions and campaigns, how to raise money, and how to run effective meetings. But the main point isn't to learn these facts and skills. The real point, the thing you go to weeklong for and (if it works) keep for the rest of your life, is to change your habitus.[101] To turn you from a well-meaning but powerless do-gooder into a strong, grounded, power-seeking and ultimately powerful leader. (Weeklong exists to train the new leaders—both paid staff organizers and volunteer leaders—that its sponsoring

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[100] Having later lived with a full-time organizer who ran sessions at weeklong, I've gotten to see some of the "back end" of the process. Behind the weeklong trainings lies a whole other series of "train the trainer" events, where experienced trainers train new trainers in the delicate art of agitational training (about which more below). And each weeklong training session is evaluated by at least one (usually more like three) other organizers who sit in the back of the room, observe, and debrief with the trainer afterwards.

[101] This is my language, not theirs: while many organizers read Arendt, I don't know many who read Bourdieu. But Bourdieu offers the best description of what they're doing. (One of the implicit arguments of this book, as you might have noticed, is that organizers, and especially organic intellectuals, would do well to spend some more time with Bourdieu. Bourdieu, an organic intellectual himself with ties to the French Communist Party among other organizations, would have no doubt agreed.) Weeklong is a clear example of what Bourdieu called a "rite of institution," an "act of social magic" that makes mere mortals into organizers, just as hazing makes them into fraternity brothers, and residency turns them into doctors. These kind of experiences are intentionally intense, and even somewhat painful: the point is to change your habitus, both by developing new "durable dispositions"—new moves, new interpretive strategies, new ways it *feels right* to act and be in the world—and by cultivating loyalty to the institution to which you have given so much intense time and labor. One of the reasons organizers have stayed away from Bourdieu, I imagine—besides the fact that his writing style is dense to the point of impenetrability (just ask my poor students)—is that he talks only about the "bad" side of rites of institution. As Harry Boyte once said to me: "There's not much agency in Bourdieu." Indeed, all the examples he gives are about how rites of institution take agency *away* from underprivileged people and reinforce structural inequality: by the time and labor and money and connections (fiscal and cultural capital) needed to access them (med school is expensive…as are unpaid internships), and by the "naturalness" they confer on the people that hold positions of authority (*you* try and see if your underprivileged and –trained body is able to perform brain surgery, or conduct international diplomatic negotiation!). These things are true and important. At the same time, I want to argue, we can and should use Bourdieu's analysis to understand other rites of institution, such as weeklong, that *confer* agency on underprivileged people, and start to *undermine* structural inequality. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 117-126, especially 123.

organizations need to sustain themselves.)[102] One participant in Texas explained: "National training is so intense it serves to break down your old picture and get a new one as a whole."[103] The trainers' agenda, above all, is to put us, in the words of my fellow trainee from this chapter's epigram, into a "new arena," where we "don't know what to feel"—and then to *teach* us what and how to feel, from the ground up.

Their primary tool in this habitus-changing work was *agitation*, another term of art among organizers. In the words of Paul Marincel (Pete's father), the founder of ISAIAH, who trained us in agitation in Ohio, agitation is the act of "holding up a mirror." Specifically, holding up a mirror in front of a colleague, someone you care about, and someone whose growth and development is in your own self-interest. The goal is "breaking down the bubble" and getting that colleague more in touch with his or her own self-interest. Like a proposition, it's a strategic and planned piece of rhetoric, with a standard structure. You present the colleague with three judgments and a proposition: (1) where s/he is *now*, (2) where s/he *could be*, (3) what's *in the way*, and finally (4) what you think s/he should *do*. Then you let the colleague respond and "own it"—including the decision either to accept or to reject your agitation.[104]

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[102] "While Alinsky had many strengths," Gecan recalled, "he did not create organizations that endured." It was Chambers who, in the late 1960s, "realized that we would burn ourselves out if things kept on like this"; he called Alinsky and insisted (as he remembers it): "'Saul, I'm returning to Chicago to set up the IAF Training Institute. We need more organizers. I'm thirty-seven now and I'll burn out if we don't do this.' There was silence. I explained a little more. Still silence. Then he asked, 'Who is going to pay you?' 'You are,' I answered." Thus—combined with a well-timed $250,000 grant from the founder of Midas Mufflers (you can't make this stuff up) and a foundation matching grant—was weeklong born. See Gecan, *Going Public*, 9; and Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 101.

[103] Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 226.

[104] Paul started the session, after a revealing opening story about his own self-interest (his young adult children, whom he's worried won't have the opportunity to succeed the way he has, as he'd always assumed), the way he sees it relating to some of the issues people in the room in Ohio are dealing with (especially around felons losing their citizenship), and some of his own questions and concerns about organizing ("we're doing a lot of organizing but losing a lot of things"), by agitating several people around

Agitation is the Alinskyan answer to the call-out. A call-out is individualistic, competitive, and zero-sum: the caller-out increases his or her cultural capital, by proving s/he's right, at the expense of the called-out, who has been proven wrong. A culture of call-outs tends to decrease trust and increase suspicion, as participants censor themselves for fear of being called out. Agitation, when it's done right, is the opposite. It's nurturing and collaborative, born out of working together toward the same goal, and it lets agitator and agitated increase their cultural capital together, as well as the cultural capital of their organization as a whole. It is a public act of love, and it builds trusting relationships.

It is also dangerous. A bad agitation—poorly planned, timed, and/or executed—can hurt a working relationship or even end a friendship. I've seen both. Paul warned us, rightly, against doing unplanned agitations: "random = reckless." A queer feminist organizer friend took this warning much further, suggesting to me, seriously and with good reason, that people who do agitations should be required to get S&M training.

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the question: "It's Thursday afternoon—time to start making choices about ourselves. What are we wrestling with, about ourselves, in terms of building more power around ourselves? To deal with things you care about in the world?" After several agitations, he stepped back and took us through the above description and instructions. Finally, he gave us time to prepare our own agitations—of other people in the room (whom we'd been getting to know for the past four days)—and then asked some of us to share. I volunteered, and he chose me first. My agitation was of Zach: my roommate, whom I'd also done a formal one-to-one with. I told him he was a brilliant, young organizer who was coming into a new community with the potential to bridge several worlds and draw on his experience with various other cultures; he *could be* a loud, articulate voice for African-American youth in the larger world, expanding NOAH (the Cleveland organization where he'd just started working) in totally new ways; and what was *in his way* was his lack of confidence and assuredness, his feeling like because he was new he didn't belong, and he didn't exactly "know his place." Zach accepted the agitation and—he told me later—he took it very much to heart. From my journal: "Tears nearly came to his eyes—in a good, productive way. Paul's one criticism: I didn't push him enough on turning the idea of loneliness (which Zach said he thought people in the least privileged areas felt, and I got him to agree that he felt it too) into building public life and power. I said that was significant [that that was the one place I *didn't* push Zach enough], because that's right where my own self-interest is too. [Paul] said, 'yes, I know.'"

It is the practice of agitation, more than even the jam-packed schedule, that gives weeklong its reputation for intensity. Most of the sessions at weeklong are *agitational* trainings: they combine the Socratic method (the trainer asks people questions to elicit a specific answer) with frequent agitations (in public, during the session, in front of everyone else). Everything at weeklong is set up with agitation in mind. The training room was set up in a U shape, with the top facing the front of the room, so a trainer could easily get face-to-face with anyone at any time. Most trainers, like most organizers in general, prefer a humble flip-chart to PowerPoints and other fancier visuals. The unspoken logic is simple: all the focus should be on the people and their relationships. When eyes are on a screen, they're not on each other.

To come to weeklong is to ask to be agitated: it is, as per the S&M comment, to give tacit consent. This is one of the reasons weeklong attendees have sponsors (like Pete for me), organizers from home who proposition them to go when they're ready and then counsel them through the process. By the time I got to Ohio, I knew what I was in for. If anything I left feeling disappointed—on the first night, as my journal indicates, and also for the rest of the week—that I didn't get agitated *more*.[105] But I'd be lying, of course, if I said I wasn't nervous about it.

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[105] In retrospect, I realize I might not have been agitated more because I wasn't involved with an OOC or ISAIAH organizing campaign. Organizing, as we were taught and trained, is all about working in your self-interest; and weeklong exists because of these organizations' self-interest in developing new leaders; so it might just not have been directly in these trainers' self-interest to agitate me—at least not as much as it was in their self-interest to agitate leaders from their own organizations and campaigns, whom they were looking to develop for immediate purposes in the immediate future. I've heard similar reports from colleagues who have been to other weeklong trainings: trainers, who are also active organizers actively working on campaigns, are looking to get specific things from specific people, and they will often use weeklong as a means to get it. (We witnessed at least one "real-life" proposition in our training, when Lisa Amman, leader organizer of ISAIAH, propositioned a trainee into taking on a new and bigger role in the campaign she was working on.) I am not ready to condemn or call-out this approach. It certainly

Judging from the faces and body language of my fellow trainees, as we all filed in and took our seats on Monday morning, I wasn't alone. This was the Thucydides session, the most written-about moment in weeklong. It's the most distinctive (it's really unlike anything anywhere else), it's the most consistent (everyone's been doing it pretty much the same way since Alinsky and Chambers invented it in the late '60s), and it's by far the most dramatic.[106] Before coming to Ohio, we'd been sent a five page-long excerpt of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, which we were told to read before arriving at weeklong—without further explanation. (Many of us, on Sunday night, speculated about what we'd be doing with it and why it might be relevant.) Those five pages told the story of the moment in the war after the Athenians had conquered the small island of Melos and were bargaining with its inhabitants, the Melians, for their lives.

As Wikipedia summarizes:

> The Athenians demanded that the Melians surrender their city and pay them tribute or face the destruction of their city. The Melians claimed their right to remain neutral, appealing to the Athenians' sense of decency and mercy toward a small, peaceful, and defenseless city. The Athenians sternly replied that questions of justice did not arise between unequal powers and proceeded to lay siege to Melos as they had threatened to do, and to starve the resisting inhabitants into surrender, slaughter the men of military age, and enslave the women and children.[107]

At the start of the session, Trevelle (our trainer once again) asked for eight volunteers to come to the front of the room. He sat them in two columns of four, facing each other; he assigned one side to be the Athenians and the other to be the Melians; and

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demonstrates organizers' commitment to the principles they are training us in. At the same time, for someone like me, it was still frustrating.

[106] See Boyte, *CommonWealth*, 48-49; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 223; Gecan, *Going Public*, 36.

[107] "Melian Dialogue," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melian_dialogue (January 14, 2014).

he told them to re-enact the debate. On the flip chart he had written: "One rule: I will interrupt!" And interrupt he did. First he asked people to switch sides. Then he started subbing people in and out. Then he started asking some people, who had previously been in the debate, to leave the room. Finally, he told everyone who remained in the room to be the Melians, reacting and debating with him. At some point he asked me to leave the room at some point—and I did. (Those of us outside started planning a direct action, where we'd burst back into the room brandishing some coat-hangers we found as weapons, but Trevelle called us back in before we could carry it out.)

Then, with all of us back in the room, came the first agitation: "Why did you leave?" All the typical responses followed: because you told us to, because you were the authority, because we trusted you, because we've been trained to do what we're told, etc. Trevelle pushed the point: "The authority in the room wants you to leave—do you? The way people act in situations like this is like the way people act in the public arena—do you agree?" He followed these provocative questions, typically, with a personal story: he had grown up "very churched," he wanted to be the "best Christian," which he thought meant being passive and letting people walk all over him and not wanting power. The point was, yes he was agitating us, but he understood where we were. We were in this together. He asked for other, similar stories from us. (One woman volunteered a powerful story of abuse.) He asked us: "What were the obstacles for your taking power earlier? How many people here want to be accepted? What're you going to do when you get out of here? Where are you going to take this training?

After some back-and-forth with several people, he turned his attention to the role-play. "If you were a Melian not in the room, how would you feel, when a few other people were making life and death decisions for you? Why didn't the Melians sitting in the room [in the audience] ask their representatives to caucus?" We didn't, of course, because we didn't think of it. (Someone said, "We could have done that?!" Trevelle reminded us there was just *one* rule—"I will interrupt!—otherwise, all was fair game. A couple of others asked about the historical context, the differences between then and now. Trevelle responded sharply: John Kasich, the union-killing governor of Ohio, is "our representative." Is he representing you?) The point was: we didn't think of all this because we weren't *disposed* to think of it. We were disposed to try to *win* the debate, and to side with the Melians, who were more morally righteous…which just *felt right*. Just as Trevelle—and Alinsky—knew it would.[108]

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[108] All of this, like so many of the sessions at weeklong, has a deep history. ("Organizing," for better and worse, is a culture all its own, with fiercely guarded mores and dispositions and traditions.) Alinsky originally chose the Melian dialogue as a training document to demonstrate to the children of 1968 the difference between "abstract ideals and power politics"—and above all, "to shock the new trainees. Shock them it did. Alinsky's recruits came to the field of community organizing out of a range of settings—civil rights, religious activism, student involvement, and other causes—flushed with zeal to advocate the cause of the powerless and the poor. The eager students would, of course, side with the Melians. They suggested 'better arguments' the Melians might have advanced. They speculated that the islanders may have lost at the moment but 'won' in some sense as lasting martyrs to the cause of liberty. And, inevitably when asked, they would argue with vehemence that the Melians had 'done the right thing' in defending their autonomy and principles even at the cost of their lives. When IAF teachers called them romantics, operating out of a perspective of 'victims,' they would be greeted with offended outrage. Student outrage was precisely the expectation of the IAF educators. Their use of Thucydides was a dramatic device to have students refocus from what Alinsky called 'the world-as-we-would-like-it-to-be' to the 'world-as-it-is.' Alinsky-style organizers drew from Thucydides's story the lesson that the Melians' 'all or nothing' approach failed to understand the process of conflict, power, self-change, self-interest, and negotiations that always is the medium for the expression of ideals in politics." When Chambers set up the permanent IAF Training Institute, he institutionalized the story's use in the first session of every training. See Boyte, *CommonWealth*, 48-49, 179n. See also Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 223: "The IAF believes that many people who get involved in social justice politics are too righteous and fail to understand that politics is about practical power. In the story, the Melians heroically defend their liberty, refuse to give in to the Athenians, and are eventually slaughtered. The point of the exercise is to show that negotiation and

Then came the big agitation: Trevelle insisted it was the *Athenians*, not the Melians, whom we should be imitating. Not that we should go around slaughtering people—the Alinskyan tradition has a tacit, though not an explicit, commitment to nonviolence[109]—but that we should operate in the "world-as-it-is": a world of power and

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compromise over interests, not the assertion of principles, constitute the essence of politics, and consequently the basis for IAF political activity."

[109] Alinsky himself, it's worth noting, never ruled out violence as a possibility. "The radical may resort to the sword but when he does he is not filled with hatred against those individuals whom he attacks" (*Reveille for Radicals*, 18). That being said, I have never heard of any contemporary organizing network planning an action that includes intentional violence, nor do I imagine most organizers I know being comfortable with that kind of action. Nonetheless, it's important to note that unlike a lot of other "radical" political traditions, Alinskyan organizers don't hold up nonviolence as a principle. At a national ELCA gathering I attended through Spirit of Truth, I once agitated a Lutheran pastor about his requirement that congregations he worked with engage in "nonviolent" community action. Why call it "nonviolent," I asked him? Did he really think his white, middle-class parishioners in the Pacific Northwest were likely to go out and hurt people? He agreed that was unlikely. That being the case, I suggested, the "nonviolent" label might be doing something else: it might be suggesting that it's not important to take *power* and *effectiveness* of their actions seriously, that as long as they were *being nonviolent*, they were doing the most important work. It was an argument rooted in the work of linguist H. Paul Grice: by flouting what Grice called the "maxim of quantity"—it was unnecessary to specify that actions should be nonviolent—the pastor was actually conveying other meanings. (The pastor told me he heard what I was saying, that he'd never thought of it that way before, and that he'd think more about it.) The same is true in a lot of para-academic spaces (meetings, actions, performance venues) that go out of their way to label themselves as "nonviolent," "safe," "anti-oppressive," etc.—as if violence, danger, and oppression might otherwise have been thought to be acceptable while having lunch at the Hard Times Café. These labels appear to have two functions. First, they define an in-group, the interpretive community that "nods" when they see these kind of labels and *knows what they really mean*—namely, that it'll be a space where people talk, dress, move, think, and act in certain predictable, Graeber-ish ways. Second, as with the pastor, they suggest to participants that they are *doing the work* simply by being in these spaces and *being* "nonviolent," and calling out others when they are not—and in this way, they perpetuate the anarcho-liberal resistance to agency. Getting back to the point about Alinskyan organizers: it's not just that they don't hold up nonviolence as a principle; it's that they don't hold up non- or anti-*anything* as a principle. This is what Alinsky and others mean when they call their work "non-ideological": not that they don't work from clear *positions* or *values* (they clearly do), but that they don't define their positions in terms of being *for* or *against* a given abstract concept or –ism. They define their work, rather, in terms of *people*, and communities, and organizations, and campaigns with specific material goals. (They have this in common with the mob. Which is not an idle comparison: Alinsky studied Mafia organizing techniques extensively, and personally.) This, as opposed to para-academic interpretive communities like Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, where being anti-isms is the given justification for pretty much everything. See, for instance, critical pedagogue Elizabeth Ellsworth's well-known description of "the actual political agendas I assume such ['critical' academic] writers share with me—namely, antiracism, antisexism, anti-elitism, anti-heterosexism, anti-ableism, anticlassism, and anti-neoconservatism." See H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975): 41-58.; and Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (August 1989): 297-324, 300.

negotiation, not the self-righteous defense of hopeless, abstract principles. That's what the Athenians did. They lived in the "real world," they did a realistic power analysis, they acted based on the power they had, they understood their self-interest and that of the Melians, and they were ready to accept compromise. The Melians, on the other hand, lived in the "world-as-it-should-be": a dream world, where the right argument wins and justice prevails and power is unimportant and we all love and include each other and everyone has universal health care—Trevelle explained, as he literally pranced around the room. They lived, as the bumper-sticker says, "as if the revolution already happened." And as a result, they got slaughtered. "There's no Melians alive today—period."

The takeaway point: we need power. We need to build power.[110] "Raise your hand if you want power," Trevelle said—and then agitated people. The point of this training, he told us, was "to change behaviors that keep us powerless." He asked us "where does power come from?" and elicited all the normal answers—the soul, etc.—before handing us the formula: organized people and organized money. "Period."[111]

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[110] "Staff work hard to promote a positive understanding of power within organizational culture," Wood observes, "initially by undermining the negative connotations of the term." Trevelle concurred: "The problem with power is that it is often used against us, unilaterally, by people who are over us. We then associate power with negative forces, institutions, hostile individuals, and then think of power as something negative and destructive." Organizers insist that power it is just the same as the Spanish verb *poder*, the verb meaning "can." As in "Sí, se puede!," the original "Yes, we can!" There is discrepancy among organizers, and among the major organizing networks, about the different *types* of power: first, about whether all power is the same, or whether (as theologian Bernard Loomer would have it) there were "unilateral" (power-over) and "relational" (power-with) types, and second, if so, whether we are *only* looking to build "relational" power (as Trevelle instructed us) or whether we are looking to build *both* kinds, for use in different situations. See Wood, *Faith in Action*, 189; Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 28; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 68.

[111] Like many organizers, especially when teaching new recruits at weeklong, Trevelle did not accept "organized ideas" as a form of power. Knowledge isn't power, he said, but it can help you *build* power. Power, he continued, is not about having a Ph.D., or about "that quaint phrase 'empowerment.'" Agreed. At the same time, as Boyte argues, the people-plus-money formula "fails to acknowledge power based on

I left feeling shaken up. I was feeling compelled to call out the pedagogy of this session; thankfully, I saved it for my journal that night: "I'm still not convinced by the Melian dialogue thing—the role-play was fine and good, but the dismissing people from the room thing is contrived. First of all, the roles were not clearly defined—and especially not the role of the trainer. I see the point, but it feels unnecessarily manipulative." Manipulative it certainly was; it was a setup. We had come to weeklong to learn from our trainers. To question them, sure, but not to be openly insubordinate. We were put in a situation where we couldn't but fail. But of course, this was probably part of the exercise. Maybe it took that kind of failure, that kind of humiliation and powerlessness, to put us in the proper position to learn such a radical, habitus-altering truth about power.[112] This was high-risk pedagogy, which requires immense finesse. Trevelle was talented, but he was new; he hadn't quite gotten it yet.

What I deeply appreciated about him, though, was how diligently he agitated people by bringing them back to "where do you live?" and "how does this affect your community?" Keeping it personal, I wrote in the margins of my notes, is a "way to get beyond rehearsed rhetoric." Later that week, Doran Schrantz, executive director of

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control over the flow of information, communications, professional practices, and cultural productions—what might be called knowledge power." This knowledge power, based in organized ideas, is not the same as *having the right answer* and assuming it'll set you free. It's about doing organizing—building new interpretive communities, including through organizing people and money the old fashioned way—in "institutions such as higher education and schools, entertainment and communications industries, professional associations, and the intellectual life of a society." See Boyte, "Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work," 16.

[112] The pedagogy of weeklong—authoritarian as it sometimes seems—is very similar to Freire in its focus on what both Freire and IAF supervisor Ernesto Cortes call *praxis*: "a more theoretically informed practice which, in turn, is consciously reflected upon" (Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 221). Freire defines it as "action-reflection." Chambers talks about "research, action, evaluation." More on this in the next section.

ISAIAH, similarly agitated a trainee named Larry,[113] who was having trouble propositioning people to contribute to his organization and explaining his problems with abstractions about "society." Doran responded: "This isn't about 'society.' It's about Larry, and the people you care about….Larry, you are really wrestling with whether you deserve this. You can talk about anything but yourself."

Doran was performing one of the two most common agitations at weeklong—*get "clear" about your self-interest*; the other is *get "serious" about building power to realize that self-interest*. These two basic dispositions, getting "clear" about your self-interest and getting "serious" about building power, are what many organizers call "countercultural." On a neoliberalism-dominated market, where acting on self-interest means buying the things we like and taking power means calling people out when the service is bad, we don't have much opportunity to learn or practice these dispositions. And so we have a hard time with them. Back in Chapter One, I argued that Thomas Frank's Kansans weren't acting against their interests; their interests, like everyone's, is to *feel right*; and given the market they were on, the only way they were going to feel right was to vote Republican. This is true—in the same way that it was in Larry's self-interest to bullshit about "society" and dodge his personal pain.

But that can't be all there is to self-interest. Otherwise Larry wouldn't be at weeklong, trying to figure out what his self-interest *really* is. It's easy to go through life assuming that our consumer-based self-interest is our real self-interest; we try not to think about the nagging feelings of loneliness and discontent in the back of our minds; and besides, who has the time, or the space, to think about it? Weeklong, a free space, gives

[113] A pseudonym.

people this space and time. We put down our lives for five days, all that labor that constitutes the "real world," and focus on understanding our self-interest and our path to power. Power, as we've seen, is hard. Self-interest—finding out what makes us tick, what propels us to act as we do—is no easier. Our self-interest, there in that room, was clearly not just in buying things or taking the easiest path. We had come to weeklong; we were asking and paying people to agitate us, to make us deal with some of the hardest parts of our lives. Even people like me, who could have a happy uncritical suburban white professional middle-class life if I wanted one.

But I couldn't, actually. For entirely self-interested reasons. I knew, deep down, that trying to live that way would make me feel awful, unfulfilled, worthless, *lonely*. My desire to take a tougher, rougher path through life—to live in public, to build power and make change—is fundamentally not about helping anyone else. I certainly want others to be helped along the way, of course, but I'm doing what I know I need to do *for myself*. That doesn't make it *bad*, but it also doesn't make it *good*. It just *is*. (A couple of years ago—I forget under what circumstances—I got agitated after I called someone out for being "apathetic." The people I think are "apathetic," my agitator suggested, just have a different self-interest than I do; they don't care about what *I* care about, or what *I* want them to care about. Do I want to change what they care about? Fine. Then I've got to do the organizing work.)

But why? Why do I feel compelled to live this kind of life? What, exactly, am I after? That, figuring that out, was the central work of weeklong. The only way to build power is to know one's own self-interest, identify other people whose self-interests

overlap it (mostly through doing lots of one-to-ones), and work together with those people out of that mutual self-interest. That's how broad-based community organizers are able to build relationships across so many different divides (culture, class, race, religion, political party).[114] Without this self-interest bond, the work will stop being about building power together and degenerate into service: into helping, charity, sacrifice, privilege, abstractions, self-negation, incommensurable difference, misunderstanding, resentment, call-outs, burn-out, and protestations that the "real people," the "truly oppressed," the people it's really about, were never in the room to begin with. That is, it will turn into ineffectiveness and loneliness.

The session on self-interest, on Monday afternoon, was appropriately hard. Our trainer, David Kimball of the Center for Community Change in California, told us he would train us in telling our "public narrative" or "story of self"—a concept he told us came from the work of Marshall Ganz, the organizer and Harvard professor who had advised the 2008 Obama campaign. He also threw in Arendt's definition of self-interest, the standard among Alinskyans—"something which [in Latin] *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together"—but there he didn't cite his source.[115] He was smart and talented, but he tried to do too much, too quickly:

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[114] The annals of organizing are filled with unbelievable stories of coalitions between the least likely allies, who come together to do a project on some shared shred of self-interest they'd found. Alinsky is an endless source of such examples: the segregationist union leader who champions integration for fear of bad press coverage (which the organizer both engineers and then helps him avoid), the gambling-hall owner who becomes an extremely effective Delinquency Committee chairman after organizers find out what he really wants is for his two young daughters to respect their father (and help him make that happen), even the reluctant business leader who joins a local power organization because he was frustrated at (organizers intentionally staging situations where he would be) feeling left out of the conversation! See Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, especially 89-173.

[115] See Ganz, "What is Public Narrative?" and Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182. I was struck, throughout weeklong, by how rarely any trainers talked about the sources of the techniques and principles

Ganz's concept of public narrative, *plus* Arendt's concept of self-interest, *plus* the example of Obama's 2004 convention speech, *plus* enough personal work-time to let us reduce our self-interest to a coherent two-minute talk, and then to further reduce them into a one- to two-sentence-long description. All this, within a couple of hours. I didn't know what to do with myself. One of the assistant trainers/evaluators called my two-minute talk incoherent; I'm sure it was.[116] (My journal reminds me that "I was crushed. Nearly cried.") On top of all this, my notes remind me that I was feeling ashamed, as an "overly educated privileged person…to be talking about my own self-interest….I didn't think I had the right to tell my story, without a big history of oppression." (I was years away from understanding privilege as a form of oppression.)

But that night, I started to get it. We went to a session called "The Big Lie," run by an evangelical pastor and Civil Rights historian from Cincinnati named Troy Jackson. Troy was a newcomer to organizing who, he told me in a one-to-one, was skeptical of

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they were training us in. Their understandings of self-interest and (recall from earlier) of power come directly from Arendt, yet her name didn't get mentioned once. Same with the names "Alinsky," "Chambers," and "Cortes." The "Alinskyan tradition" and "Alinskyans" are terms I use, but they don't: to hear them tell it, they're just "organizers" doing "organizing." (They did talk about the Civil Rights Movement some, but it usually felt more like a pop-culture reference than an acknowledgement of a source.) This feels like a legitimation issue: they don't want to get into critical, comparative discussions of different modes and models of organizing. I can understand that. Many of them, I've discovered in one-to-ones, are quite interested in questioning the organizing model and exploring other models; weeklong, they might argue, just isn't the place for it. This is a *training*, and the point is to develop a habitus uniform enough to work off of shared dispositions. So they just insist *this is how organizing is*. Warren elaborates: "While issues are always negotiable in the IAF, the network's principles of organizing are not. IAF participants do not discuss these principles; they are trained in them. Unity on these principles is inherent in the IAF's notion of leadership development. Development means learning these principles, which are simply considered the correct way to do organizing. These principles are skills to be learned, not political alternatives to be debated." (See the last section of this chapter for a more detailed discussion of the teaching techniques of weeklong and their implications.) I do worry, though, that this closed-mindedness can seep into organizers' and trainers' own habitus and spill over from instrumental into real. Then again, maybe my academic habitus is making too much of this; a friend and colleague of mine once suggested that the biggest difference between academia and in the rest of the world is that in the rest of the world, you're not expected to cite things. See Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 235.

[116] I talked—or tried to talk—about my experiences trying to direct *Assassins* in high school; see the Prologue.

some of the Alinskyan orthodoxy. This session, he told us, had its origins in something the black freedom movement learned from Gandhi: "Any injustice," Troy paraphrased, "involves a big lie, told often enough and in so many ways that people come to believe it's true." Organizers asked themselves what the big lie was in the Jim Crow South, and they came up with: "Some people are worth more than others." Segregation, they decided, was the clearest manifestation of this lie, and so they devised the bus boycotts and sit-ins as the "antidote" that would disprove that lie and move toward the truth. (We would learn later in the week that there was also a strategic element to this choice. Segregation, organizers thought, was a particularly clear and winnable issue—so, in organizer-speak, they "cut" it out of the larger problem of Jim Crow.)

Troy broke us into groups and asked us to state "the big lie in your community that everyone believes." The results were telling. *America is the land of the free. We live in an equal-opportunity society. The American Dream. Anyone can do anything if they work hard enough.* I felt uneasy. Something was wrong about all these. I soon figured out what it was: they were call-outs, big lies *in reverse*. They expressed *good* things, which *should* be true but aren't. To denounce "some people are worth more than others" as a lie is to reaffirm your conviction that all people *are* worth the same—a basic article of faith for so many Americans, something people will fight to make real. But to denounce "anyone can do anything if they work hard enough" as a lie is to reaffirm your conviction that…America is fundamentally corrupt and unequal? Sure, but, where do

you go from there? What shared tradition can you call upon to act? Only the negative tradition shared oppression. Which a lot fewer people will fight for.[117]

This opportunity to think critically and analytically about rhetoric—that was something I knew how to do!—got me thinking about my own self-interest again. Why did these call-outs bother me so much? Finally, at the end of the session, I got it. Troy had asked us: "What are the lies that you've internalized, that get in your way? That stop you from telling your story of self?" I put my hand up. From my journal that night:

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[117] This is the big problem with two popular alternative forms of organizing: the student-based New Left of the 1960s, and the "race-based" organizing practiced by groups like the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO) and the now-defunct ACORN. They don't have much of a positive, shared tradition to draw on; they're united only in the negative, by being oppressed by the same groups and wanting to call out that oppression. The student radicals of the New Left "took the stance of detached *social critics*, outside American culture. In *The Port Huron Statement* there is virtually no reference to American *antecedents* of its quest for 'participatory democracy,' no recitation of prior movements, or mention of the aspirations of those who had gone before….Critics who have pointed to the ineffectiveness of the New Left's constant, interminable preoccupation with group process—consensus meetings, endless discussion, hostility toward formal leadership structures, and the like—have missed the point. In the absence of genuine community, process itself necessarily became communal substance. 'Community Now,' expressed in events like 'love-ins' (and echoing 'Peace Now,' or 'Power to the People') was the spirit of the youth movement, substituting for long-term organizing campaigns. Exhortation to ideals and feelings were the only form of power that existed" (Boyte, *CommonWealth*, 71, 73). (This is the same amnesia toward American democratic traditions that explains a lot of the anti-American sentiment, and fetishism of European theory and Third World movements, that characterizes the still-dominant post-'68 tradition of academic theory. It's a tradition that many of these same activists, who would soon "march on the English department" (in Todd Gitlin's words), helped to create.) Race-based organizing, likewise, "roots itself culturally in the racial identities of participants, appealing to potential participants as 'people of color'…such a multiracial culture is a future ideal and a tentatively emerging reality within the organization; it is not a solidly established cultural reality in people's lives, reinforced by a mutual commitment to a shared culture" (Wood, *Faith in Action*, 7, 98). Both of these kinds of organizing are at least partially para-academic: the New Left's opposition to the "power elite" comes from 1950s sociologist C. Wright Mills; CTWO's opposition to "the dominant society" and "the incarceration-industrial complex" comes from the anarcho-liberal language of post-'68 theory (see Wood 91-95). The major piece of academic theory to emerge from Third World organizing, Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*, is Althusserian to the core—and heartbreaking in its deft but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to wrench a tradition of agency out of a body of theory that opposes her at every turn. (These two traditions speak a language that's almost para-academic; as a result, they get much more play in academia and para-academia—including on the news—than the Alinskyan tradition does.) This kind of all-negative tradition, Wood and Boyte both argue, is a thin foundation to build upon: both traditions have had trouble building their base, expanding their membership, cultivating relationships with allies, and sustaining high-turnout actions and campaigns. Though to be fair, Boyte and Wood—and I—are all somewhat partial to the IAF tradition. For a very well-argued case from the perspective of CTWO, including some very valid critiques of Alinsky and the IAF, see Rinku Sen, *Stir It Up: Lessons in Community Organizing and Advocacy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), especially the Introduction (xliii-lxv); see also Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

> I'm glad I was able, in the evening session, to say it out loud and in public: one Big Lie I am still working through is that, given my various whitenesses and privilegednesses (is there a better word for this?), my stories don't matter and I should be ashamed in telling them, and [that] flagellating myself does someone good. (Bill,[118] sitting next to me, asked me what flagellating meant. I told him…then started flagellating myself for using the word…then told him I was doing it. (He told me not to. Correct.))

"My self-interest," I told Pete Marincel when we talked on the phone the next day, "is being valued, and not being de-valued." This came from a lot of deep places. From not having friends or people to talk to about the things I cared about, for so long. From getting censored and pretty harshly condescended to, just as I was developing an artistic voice as a teenager. From working for years as a graduate assistant, where the pay's not great and the chances for dignity are worse. ("Oh, you're just a student; none of the work you're doing now matters." Not sure if anyone ever actually said that to me, but I certainly said it to myself a lot.) It was my own personal way of expressing the universal, Arendtian self-interest: to stop being lonely, by making a space where I can make things that matter with the people around me.

I realized I got so worked-up about call-out culture because I feel like it was de-valuing me, my stories, my experience, and my work. Which is not okay. The big lie was that privilege determines a person's worth—in *either* direction; that people of different levels of privilege need to fight each other for recognition; and that *somebody* needs to get demeaned and de-valued in the process. Those of us in "the movement" with significant privilege would never permit our less-privileged colleagues to be demeaned or de-valued. We should extend the same respect and dignity to ourselves.

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[118] A pseudonym, referring to a young black trainee who had earlier asked me to explain "capitalism" and "socialism," and would later annihilate me at chess.

We are all working toward the same goal—making a world where *all* of us, our stories, our experience, and our work are valued. Which means fighting the various organized money-interests that *stop* us from being valued. And we are all bringing what capital we have, fiscal and cultural, to that fight.[119]

Those lessons, about the nature of power and self-interest, were the biggest things I learned from weeklong. The rest of the week was about how to *implement* those lessons, in terms of leadership, issues, actions, campaigns, and money. This is important information, but it's widely available elsewhere (especially in Chambers's and Gecan's books), so there's no need to rehash it here. The important point, for my argument, is that in good Alinskyan organizing, all of these practical matters (running the campaigns, winning the issues, raising the funds) go hand in hand with building a culture where everyone has dignity.[120] This doesn't always happen, of course, but it's the goal—and at weeklong, it was happening quite a bit. Even as I was going through days of painful soul-searching, I noted in my journal

> how not de-valued I feel here, as opposed to pretty much everywhere in my life except Appel Farm. People actually respect me for being a teacher/"professor"—including (especially?) poorer folks of color [some of whom, including Bill, had taken to calling me "the professor"…endearingly, I think]. A world of difference from PTO: it is truly in my self-interest to be here and not there. Just like I am

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[119] Alinsky makes this point very clearly, even crudely, in his late-'60s Afterword to *Reveille for Radicals*: "During the recent trial of Black Panther leader Huey Newton, many San Francisco white liberals wore large buttons reading 'Honkies for Huey!' Can you imagine if a white civil rights leader were on trial that blacks would go around with buttons reading 'Niggers for ———!' Of course not. So long as mindless white masochism and unproductive, groveling guilt prevails, so long will there not be any meaningful communication or constructive positive changes for a world of equality" (215).

[120] Coles calls this "trickster politics": "a politics that one plays one game (e.g., interest-group coalition politics aimed at redistributions that address pressing issues) in order, more importantly, to enhance another one (e.g., building radical democratic relationships, counter-culture, and power)." None of which is to say that winning the issues, the first game, isn't important. It is—both for itself, and because it is the only way to effectively play the second game. This "trickster politics" is one of the biggest differences between work that builds power and agency, and work that provides services and help: in service/help work, you're *only* playing the first game, the redistribution game. See Coles, "Of Tensions and Tricksters," 547.

> not interested in working with theory that necessitates my hating myself, nor am I interested in being in communities that necessitate my hating myself.[121]

Like a kid with a new toy, for a while I thought I'd found *the answer*. Surely if everyone—every idiot liberal, misguided conservative, surly pundit, Rush listener, academic and para-academic—went to weeklong, and got trained to understand their self-interest and build power and became organizers that could change everything!

Well yes, maybe it could. But that won't happen: weeklong is a deeply interpersonal, resource-intensive process that could never be reproduced on a nationwide scale. And even if it could, I'd still have my doubts. Organizing has broken down so many walls and opened up so many new opportunities in my own life, and in the lives of so many other people—yet it is still limited, as public work. For the volunteer "leaders" that do the bulk of the work, this public work is strictly separate from their "real" work. As fulfilling and exciting as it might be to work to build power in their own self-interest, they still have to set their self-interest down for eight (or more) hours every day and go earn a living in what is probably a very un-free space, where they are building power for someone else and keeping the cycle of consumption going.[122]

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[121] To be clear: these represent my feelings at a particular, euphoric moment. It's not meant to indict PTO, an organization and group of people I care about and respect. I just felt its self-interest and mine starting to diverge—a divergence that's continued over the years. When I came back to Minneapolis and told Harry Boyte how different weeklong felt from the PTO conference I'd attended later that summer, how at weeklong I felt like we were all working together across differences toward the same goals, and without call-outs, Harry nodded, raised his eyebrow, and grinned: "The working class doesn't have much time for that."

[122] Rinku Sen criticizes the Alinsky model for its distinction between paid organizers, who train and coordinate and stage-manage campaigns from behind, and at least historically have been mostly white (though this is changing); and volunteer leaders, who do a lot of the actual work and represent their community in public, and are primarily non-white. This is a fair critique. The unanswered question, though, remains: where will the money come from to pay all of these leaders? Especially in organizations like CTWO, which often reject partnerships (in mutual self-interest on given issues) with commercial

As for the paid staff organizers, they might make a wonderful free space for the volunteer leaders they recruit and train, but for themselves the space is often not so free. The work of a professional organizer is often "countercultural" in more ways than one. Despite the efforts of people like Chambers to reduce the "*machismo* style" of organizing—upping pay and job security, providing health benefits and sabbaticals, making the hours and working conditions more amenable to women and people with families—I have to agree with contemporary academic and organizer Romand Coles; there are still "elements of a certain 'machismo' that sometimes haunt organizing cultures."[123] It's visible in a lot of small ways, such as a jock-like cultural market that values going to the bar with your fellow organizers—just organizers—and talking *about organizing*. Sometimes about how drunk you got the other night, or all the people you've slept with lately, but mostly about organizing.

Because organizing is the holy of holies. There's an unspoken feeling, among many organizers I know, that they're the chosen ones. That they're the only ones doing *real* public work, that (with apologies to Eldridge Cleaver) you're either part of "the movement" or part of "the System." This applies even to some of the most thoughtful and creative organizers out there—such as Ernesto Cortes, one of the IAF's most important and visionary leaders (who apparently still argues with Chambers about who invented the one-to-one), who still falls right into the culture-war frame when he calls IAF organizations "monasteries of democracy, surviving the dark ages of a degraded

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businesses because they are deemed "not progressive"? See Sen, *Stir It Up*, Introduction; and Wood, *Faith in Action*, 97.

[123] Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 104; Coles, "Of Tensions and Tricksters," 556.

culture."[124] This kind of medieval separatism may be hard to avoid in a profession that "has all the seriousness and craft of a highly skilled guild," but it is still distressing to see so many organizers abandon the effort to change culture as a whole—to make the United States into something that we could proudly call a democracy.[125]

Organizers, as a culture, have a certain "hardness" about them, a toughness, a Spartan-ness, even sometimes a tinge of sadomasochism. They are people who will dedicate their lives to what Alinsky calls "an eternal war," moving rapidly from one campaign to another, and often one organization to another, as political needs and funding opportunities dictate.[126] They can talk with anyone—in the form of one-to-ones, propositions, and agitations—but often only about "hard" things like material power and self-interest. They feel at home in contentious meetings and continual agitations and power struggles and late nights and unstable jobs and fluorescent-lit offices with bare walls and flip-chart paper strewn about everywhere—and often less at home in "softer" situations, based more in communality than conflict. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with all this. I'm just saying it's an ethos and an aesthetic, and ultimately a

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[124] See Boyte, "Reinventing Citizenship," 16. Boyte elaborates, elsewhere: "Every major organizing network has thus made a distinction between 'building broad-based organizations,' which they define as their aim, and 'movements,' which they equate with the protests of the late 1960s, ephemeral, thin, and transient. The contrast has had the effect of creating a sharp division between internal and external cultures that I have long observed, a sort of civic schizophrenia. Internally, leaders and organizers use a rich relational and value language full of democratic, communal, and religious allusions and references. But when they make public demands, their language is much sparser, expressed usually in the transactional politics of economic interests. Some have explained this by envisioning their organizations as 'monasteries of democracy,' surviving the Dark Age of a corrupt culture impervious to change." See Boyte, "Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert," 25.

[125] Boyte, *CommonWealth*, 189n.

[126] "A People's Organization is dedicated to an eternal war. It is a war against poverty, misery, delinquency, disease, injustice, hopelessness, despair, and unhappiness"—but a war nonetheless. See Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 133.

habitus, that'll keep "organizing" accessible and attractive to only a certain, relatively small number of people.

I'm not sure if I'm one of those people. As this book makes clear, I have been deeply moved, and irrevocably changed (for the better), by my experiences going to weeklong and working as an organizer. I'm just not convinced, given everything I've just described, that being a professional organizer is in my self-interest. And so I'm left with a big question. Here I am, with all these well-honed dispositions toward building power and understanding self-interest (both mine and others'), yet I don't want to be an organizer. So what do I do with them?

I use them to do public work. If not as an organizer *per se*—and who knows, maybe I'll change my mind about that—then as an artist and/or a teacher, who happens to have an unusually sophisticated sense of the role power and self-interest play in this kind of work.

In the last two sections of this chapter, I'll explain how.

Making Art: The Dr. Evil Problem

Scott Evil was having a rough day. It wasn't bad enough that he had to drag his father out of his underground lair. Or that he had to show up to the therapy group, in a nice bright schoolroom filled with colorful happy people, with his father still dressed in a gray '60s-era World War III dinner jacket-qua-nuclear suit. No, the worst part happened after they got there and sat down in the circle with all the other fathers and sons who were

working through their issues with each other; Scott kept trying to talk with the therapist, and his father just wouldn't cooperate:

> SCOTT EVIL: OK. Well, I just really met my Dad for the first time three days ago. He was partially frozen for thirty years. I never knew him growing up. He comes back and now he wants me to take over the family business.
>
> THERAPIST: And how do you feel about that?
>
> SCOTT EVIL: I don't wanna take over the family business.
>
> DR. EVIL: But Scott, who's going to take over the world when I die?
>
> SCOTT EVIL: Not me.
>
> THERAPIST: What do you want to do, Scott?
>
> SCOTT EVIL: I don't know. I was thinking, maybe I'd be a vet or something, cause I like animals and stuff.
>
> DR. EVIL: An *evil* vet?
>
> SCOTT EVIL: No. Maybe, like, work in a petting zoo or something.
>
> DR. EVIL: An *evil* petting zoo?
>
> SCOTT EVIL *(shouting)*: You always do that![127]

Evaluation of actions, successful and not, is a key organizing skill that we learned at weeklong. (As the TakeAction Minnesota slogan goes: if it's worth doing, it's worth evaluating.) So how would I evaluate Dr. Evil's attempt to move Scott into the evil-doing business?

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[127] Mike Myers, *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1996), http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Austin-Powers---International-Man-of-Mystery.html (January 15, 2014). Emphasis added, to match Mike Myers's inflection. The dialogue is slightly different in the final film, no doubt in part because of the improvisations the actors were constantly doing on set.

Well, we start with two people with differing self-interests. Scott's self-interest is working with animals. Dr. Evil's self-interest is doing evil. Dr. Evil, we know, has built an organization out of his self-interest, which has grown powerful through building strong relationships (out of mutual self-interest) with terrorists, assassins, and henchmen from around the world. But he is concerned that the organization is not developing enough new leadership. So he decided to proposition his son to become a leader.

The trouble is, while Dr. Evil is clear on his own self-interest, he is less clear on Scott's. (This is not surprising, given that they have only a three-day-long relationship, and their single attempt at a one-to-one was a dismal failure. Had Dr. Evil gone to weeklong, he would have known this was an insufficient relational foundation for such an important proposition.) He makes no attempt to understand or speak to Scott's self-interest, or to find places where their self-interests overlap; instead, he seems to assume that Scott shares his own self-interest, which he clearly does not. For this reason, the proposition was unsuccessful.

This is a common mistake, not limited to cinematic supervillains. It's easy to become so convinced of the universal rightness of the things we deeply care about—be they doing evil or doing good—that we forget to get clear on the self-interest of the people we're working with.[128] Or we forget about our *own* self-interest: we get so

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[128] In talking about self-interest in this context, I mean it in a broader, older sense than a lot of contemporary organizers (let alone economists) do. I mean it in a populist and Popular Front sense, what a young Alinsky called the "habits, experiences, customs, controls, and values" of a culture. I mean it in terms of the traditions that matter to us, that we've learned and that bring meaning to our lives, and in the deeds we imagine ourselves doing to achieve the greatness we see ourselves as having—as Alinsky writes: "Adolescent daydreams, whether they are of being a movie star, athletic hero, national political leader, or what, do not end with the days of adolescence; they only lessen in intensity. These dreams express the inner yearnings of people who hunger for a place in the sun—preferably a good place. They like to think of themselves as being admired or looked up to by others. In their inner fantasies they are very brave and very

convinced of the universal rightness of the things we *should* deeply care about that we have trouble remembering or paying attention to the things we actually *do*. Dr. Evil, in other words, can also live inside our heads—or more precisely, in our habitus.[129]

I've seen this happen often in churches and synagogues. It's the difference between a congregation that puts shared traditions (ritual, spiritual conviction) and commitment to each other at the center of community life—and then decides together to work on an issue-campaign or raise money for a local organization as an extension and

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great people." (For this reason, it's very important for organizers *not to debunk* these aspirational myths, or to confuse them with big lies. They are very often self-objects; they are part of us, the part that we live for, our impetus to action beyond our narrowest material interests. Going into a community of moderate, white Americans and calling-out the Founding Fathers for being racists makes about as much sense as going into a community of Orthodox Jews eating a ham sandwich—to use Alinsky's favorite hypothetical. Of course it's your *right* to eat that sandwich, just as some of the Founding Fathers *were* racists, but it's not going to get you anywhere in organizing the local community to pursue power and justice.) The only reason public work is possible is because in every cultural tradition, however disparate, there are traces of the Arendtian impulse: tendencies toward building free spaces and a broadly democratic (with a *small* d) culture. Coles explains: "In response to those who think that organizers must come into communities with an ethically and politically 'correct' vision, the IAF counters not with blind faith in the everyday traditions they find already in play, but a profound sense that the traditions of most communities have multiple sources (including traditions of radical democracy) that can be drawn upon to animate people to engage in more dialogical and receptive practices through which a democratically deeper and more plural 'we' can be engendered." Many contemporary organizers are trying to go back to this older, broader understanding of self-interest. Ernesto Cortes, according to Evans and Boyte, "distinguished between 'self-interest' and 'narrow self-interest,' or selfishness. He argued that people's basic concerns are not only financial or narrowly for themselves but also include communal ties such as the happiness of their families, the well-being of their neighbors and friends, the vitality of their faith and their traditions, and their own feelings of dignity and self-worth." Self-interest includes living out your traditions, your convictions, and your faith, *in public*. If organizing is to be public work—the collective production of free spaces, and of democratic culture *in* and *through* those free spaces—this broader, tradition-based understanding of self-interest is essential. See Coles, "Of Tensions and Tricksters," 552; Boyte, *CommonWealth*, 76-78; Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 115; Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 198.

[129] I'm intentionally riffing on Augusto Boal's concept of "the cop in the head," which he developed in exile, while working with the privileged folks of France and their (supposedly) first-world problems. It's Boal's way of dealing with that subset of oppression called privilege. The cop that objectively exploits you or hinders your pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person—stopping you from advocating for your dignity on the job, or working in solidarity with others whose dignity is being similarly compromised—may be in your head now, but his barracks are outside. In other words, no matter how subjective and internalized (including internalized as privilege) this oppression may feel, is still real, and still external to *who you are*, and still oppressing others in the same way. For this reason, you can find mutual self-interest with others, including *more* and *less* severely oppressed others, in fighting this common oppressor. Dr. Evil, I am suggesting, is one form of the cop in the head. See Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, trans. Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially 40-46 and 136-150.

expression of that community's life—and a congregation that revolves around this kind of work, at the expense of the integrity of their traditions. In this latter kind of congregation, Scott might say he wants to have a worship service (or community meal, or a movie night, or whatever) and Dr. Evil—in his head or elsewhere the congregation—will interrupt: "A *social-justice* worship service?"[130]

In the first (not-so-)hypothetical congregation,[131] the public work comes directly out of the same language, interpretive strategies, and dispositions that congregants share anyway, and that they have built together through a long history of collective work toward their common self-interest of building a committed religious community. Congregants who do public work, in this kind of community, are doing this work out of a deep commitment to tradition, ritual, faith, and maybe above all, to each other. In the second congregation, the public work *is* the main language, interpretive strategy, and disposition that's shared. It's done without building the necessary, deep foundation of ritual, relationships, and continual commitment—sometimes it's even done at the *expense* of this kind of work (no time! the injustice is too pressing!). The result is that the self-

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[130] Wood, in his comparative study of the faith-based (IAF-style) organizing network PICO and the race-based CTWO, makes this argument in great detail. Churches within the PICO network do often make intentional choices in their liturgy and core traditions that reflect their commitment to justice, but these changes "happen subtly rather than provocatively; little here makes traditionalists uncomfortable enough to leave the community." That's the point: to build and sustain a broad base, based *not* on a commitment to "justice" or "anti-oppression" in the abstract, but on the same shared faith values and traditions that congregants have always held—and then to slowly, relationally develop leaders who will express those values and traditions through the public work of organizing. It's members' commitment to these long-held values and traditions and the community they've built around them, not a commitment to abstract concepts, that will "sustain participants in long-term political engagement." CTWO, on the other hand, has no such deep, shared traditions to organize around, and so they *do* try to organize people around abstract concepts: a shared (negative) experience of oppression by the "dominant culture," and a shared (not-yet-existent) "multiculture" as "people of color." Wood argues this is one reason CTWO has been unable to build the kind of large, powerful organizations that PICO has. See Wood, *Faith in Action*, 95-105, 120-121, 194, 210.

[131] Of course, like any good Jew, I have two actual congregations in mind. As per the old joke in the Chapter One footnote, I have the synagogue I *go to*, and the one I'd *never set foot in!*

interest of participants is not clear, including, often, to themselves—this is where white/liberal/privilege-based guilt often seeps in—and the public work is likely to come and go in spurts, to remain shallow and unsustainable.

The specter of Dr. Evil haunts all public work, or work with the potential to be public. He haunts faith-based organizing, as we've just seen. He haunts teaching, as we'll see later. He haunts academic research, too, turning so many promising books and articles—with the potential to be useful organizing strategy, influential works of art, and/or great teaching tools—into slavish exercises in proving why Foucault (or another big-name theorist who has no relationship with the things or people being discussed) was right.[132]

But most often, I've met Dr. Evil in the arts. Especially in the theater, probably my greatest love.[133] When I was twenty, I founded a theater company, and poured my life into it for a year, raising funds, securing space, and mounting seven productions

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[132] As I discussed in the Prologue, I have been trying to model a different kind of scholarship, in this book: one that's based in the Freirean/Alinskyan idea of *praxis*, of doing actions and reflecting on them, and then acting on those reflections, etc. I have tried to introduce "theoretical" writers, like everyone else I write about, in the context of situations they were/are actually involved in: Halberstam and Latour in the context of academia, Freire and Boal in the context of PTO, Alinsky and Arendt and Gramsci in the context of organizing, and so on. The major exceptions to this rule, I think, are Fish and Bourdieu: I introduced them in Chapter One as a frame, and I've tried to describe their ideas in enough detail—and then refer back them enough—that they become a sort of "native language" for this book. After a while, I hope, "habitus" and "cultural capital" and "interpretive community" start sounding less like theory-with-a-capital-T, attached to a Big Name, and more like theory-with-a-small-t, one half of *praxis*, part of the way we can work through and understand whatever we're studying. This is a model I've developed and used in the classroom for many years; this book is my first major attempt at using it in a piece of writing. It is, no doubt, imperfect.

[133] "Love," in this case, feels like a much more accurate description than "self-interest." It harkens back to the older, broader populist definition of self-interest—see my previous note. It also resonates with the quote from theologian Frederick Buechner that Troy Jackson (the pastor and "big lie" trainer) paraphrased to us at one of the last sessions of weeklong: "The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The accident of this love (or "deep gladness"), which has drawn me to make theater above all else, also explains why I focus on theater in this section—a decision bolstered by Arendt's convenient conviction that "the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others" (*Human Condition*, 188).

within a single year, including two musicals and several original works. When I was twenty-one, it died an awful death, of betrayal and apathy. I was plunged into deep, existential doubt. I didn't direct anything again for years. *What's the point?* I asked myself. *Why make theater at all? What good is it doing in the world?* When I had my company, I didn't have these same doubts, or at least they didn't stop me from doing the work. We made theater because…that's what we did. We were always interested in issues of oppression and justice—expressed mostly in agitprop theater of questionable effectiveness and maturity—but we made other kinds of theater, too. It all came from the same place: our self-interest—our love—was making theater. Together. For, and with, each other. Now, with that community and those people and relationships and traditions gone, I was lonely. All I had were the abstract concepts (creative! original! political! worthwhile!), and my guilt-ridden doubts about ever being able to live up to them.

That's when I discovered Augusto Boal. I read *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and it kicked me in the ass. "You think all theater is political?" Boal seemed to be saying to me. "Sure it is. You want to know how *most* theater is political? Including all the stuff you've been doing?" I got a little apprehensive. "It's political in that it tells people to sit down, shut up, and do what they're told!" I was sweating; I felt my heart beat. "Now you want to do some theater that's political in a *different* way?!" I nodded my head. "Fine. I'll show you how."[134]

I was hooked. I was ready to make theater again.

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[134] See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*: Chapters 1-3 on how most Western theater is oppressive, and Chapters 4-5 on his experiments with a theater that's not. It is still the most important book on theater I have ever read. I am very grateful that I was able to meet Augusto and thank him for this life-changing moment, not quite a year before he died in 2009.

Of course, to do theater the way I thought Boal was telling me to, I had to give up a few things. Scripts, for one. All of those already-written plays, and especially musicals, I was excited to work on? Coercive instruments of oppression. Actors, for two. We work with whom we find, in the community, otherwise we're reifying a capitalist division of labor. Theaters, for three. We go where the community is; professional theaters are spaces of bourgeois domination. Dr. Evil was talking to me, and I was listening. (Boal himself, who directed plays at the Royal Shakespeare Company as well as in the favelas of Rio, would have counseled me differently.) I spent years trying to deny my basic, elemental self-interest in *making art, collaboratively*, without necessarily attaching any prefixes (like "community based") or suffixes (like "for social justice") to it. In my worst moments, I would literally go to a rehearsal and spend the whole time fixated on all the worthier people than I who were out on the streets making social change while I was in here doing this decadent, bourgeois activity.

Those moments are, thankfully, behind me. During my time on the PTO Board, I noticed I wasn't the only one who enjoyed spending breaks between meetings talking about the non-prefixed/suffixed theater we'd been seeing and making. I've started coming to terms with the fact that making theater, and art, are basic parts of my self-interest—period—and that's okay. Yet even now I can rarely bring myself to make un-prefixed/suffixed theater: most of what I make is either educational theater, mostly during my summer work at Appel Farm, or community-based/social-justice theater, mostly as a contracted short-term trainer or workshop-leader. Even if Dr. Evil has been tamed in my head, he still looms large on the market. It's not easy to find space to work

as a theater-making "cultural worker." (Like Hall, I often find myself saying: all right, I want to do this, but where? Where's the context, the community?)[135] I share this dilemma with Jamie Haft, professional theater practitioner and a leader with the public work organization Imagining America. Haft depicts this dilemma in a short skit she improvised with a class of conservatory students who had "given up on their dream of starring on Broadway":

> *Prospective Arts Student*: Excuse me, are you an artist?
>
> *Graduate 1*: I use the arts in the public school classes I teach helping middle school students learn to express themselves and understand the material from their other subjects in new ways. No, I'm not an artist.
>
> *Prospective Arts Student*: Are you an artist?
>
> *Graduate 2:* I use art to facilitate community dialogues, with the goal of encouraging civic participation and changing local policy. No, I'm not an artist.
>
> *Prospective Arts Student*: Are you an artist?
>
> *Graduate 3*: No, I use the arts to help people with spinal cord injuries find the will to go on. I'm not an artist.
>
> *Prospective Arts Student:* What about you—are you an artist?
>
> *Graduate 4*: Yes, I am! I have a Bachelor's of Fine Arts, and now I'm temping by day and bartending by night—waiting for my big break on Broadway or in Hollywood!! I'm an artist![136]

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[135] In a statement very reminiscent of Hall, a member of the renowned 1960s radical San Francisco Mime Troupe once declared: "if there were a Red Army, we would be an 'art and propaganda team.'" Alas, there was no Red Army. (There *was* the United Farm Workers, including their company of organic theatrical intellectuals called El Teatro Campesino that *was* their 'art and propaganda team' during the famous Delano grape strike. And some members of the Mime Troupe, as individuals, worked with them. But this fell far short of an ongoing, organizational partnership made in mutual self-interest.) The Mime Troupe, like Hall and McGowan and the rest of the Marx-inspired academics, was still waiting for Lefty. See Arthur Sainer, *The New Radical Theatre Notebook* (New York: Applause Books, 1997), 21.

[136] Jamie Haft, "A Civic Actor Prepares: Training Artists for Work in Community," in *Democracy's Education: A Symposium on Power, Public Work, and the Meaning of Citizenship*, ed. Harry C. Boyte (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2014).

All right, so there seem to be a lot of advantages, as an artist, for ditching "the industry" in favor of public work. First and foremost, as this scene shows, there are more jobs there. In addition, many young artists (myself included) are turned off by what Haft describes as the industry's "hermetic training studios" and perpetual obsession with "individual genius" and being "marketable in the mass popular culture." Haft took a group of Tisch students to a public work program in Kentucky; these students, who are normally "pitted against each other vying for limited parts in main stage productions or a few slots in a talent agent showcase, rejoiced in having their peers as collaborators instead of competitors." One of them told Haft: "It's this shameful thing to be a part of something, especially at Tisch. It's nice to see artists who are just naturally following in the tradition and in others' footsteps." Doing public work meant getting to work in a better, freer space, building meaningful relationships, and making work that clearly *matters* to people. "Here, students didn't have to hide their cultural identities, their feelings for their home communities, or their concerns about social justice…community-based art reinforces their own cultural identity, something the [NYU] Tisch training program was intent on stripping them of."

But Haft's skit also shows that these good feelings come with a price. Giving up the industry for a life of public work often also means having to repress your basic self-interest—your love, your "deep gladness"—to work *as an artist*. The first three graduates don't understand themselves as artists, and it's not because they're dupes. It's because their jobs, however good and helpful and justice-oriented they are, make them

reduce the thing they love to an *instrument*, to achieve some other, external goal. They *use the arts*; they don't *do art* or *make art* or get to *be an artist*. Haft concludes: "the prospect for finding work as a citizen artist is better than the prospect for those in the professional arts industry; however, the talent and training of citizen artists is still woefully under-deployed."[137]

There are exceptions to this rule. There are people and organizations that make art that's both aesthetically fulfilling and politically serious. Two examples out of many, which I know through my work with PTO, are Jana Sanskriti, a veritable Theatre of the Oppressed mass peasant movement in rural India, and Combatants for Peace, an Israeli theater company composed of former IDF soldiers who collaborate with Palestinians on performance-based actions meant to provoke the authorities and the citizenry into questioning the status quo. These groups share a lot in common with Alinskyan power organizations. They work together over long periods of time and build strong, lasting relationships, both with each other and with their audiences. They are realistic about what they can achieve, starting with small winnable issues and moving on to more difficult ones only when they've built the base and the relationships. They are clear about their own self-interest and are deeply rooted in the cultures and traditions they work in.[138]

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[137] Ibid.

[138] See *Jana Sanskriti* (website), http://www.janasanskriti.org/index.html (April 10, 2014); and *Combatants for Peace* (website), http://cfpeace.org/ (April 10, 2014). One of the most successful accounts of arts-based public work in *written* form is the ethnographer and director Dwight Conquergood's account of founding a theater group in a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand in the mid-1980s. This could have very easily been *one of those* projects, where a privileged white man went to "help" the poor starving children in the Third World—but it wasn't. Conquergood came in clear about his own self-interest, his cultural curiosity, and when he arrived at the camp, he immediately started building relationships and learning the self-interest of the people he'd be working with—including their very clear self-interest, based in long-held traditions, in

These kinds of organizations are still in the minority, though. On the dominant market—even the dominant non-profit market, where foundation-funding and the service-based habitus reign supreme—it's no surprise that most artists trying to do public work find themselves working in organizations whose relationship to power and self-interest is a lot less clear. Such is the case at zAmya Theater Project of Minneapolis, where I've done a lot of my recent arts-based public work. zAmya describes itself, on its website, as "a unique creative process that brings together homeless and housed individuals to create and perform a theatrical production. zAmya turns 'homeless' from a word back into a person. Or persons. Living, breathing, laughing, singing persons. Who act—yes, act—in entertaining, genre-defying productions that are guaranteed to change your mind, if not your life."[139] They typically write, perform, and tour one original play per year; actors come and go, but a core "troupe" has formed in recent years, which has stayed pretty constant from production to production.

zAmya's *external* intent, for its audience, is "to change your mind, if not your life"; its *internal* intent, for the actors themselves, is to create a free space. In the words of theater historian (and former colleague) Rachel Chaves, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on zAmya, the goal is to create "a space free of violence and oppression, a

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performing and making theater. As he worked with local youth to build the theater group, they built stories from within the Hmong storytelling traditions, creating new characters (only) when necessary, and they carefully incorporated audience feedback. They set clear goals for their actions—would this performance get people to bring in their dogs for rabies vaccination, as intended?—and they evaluated their successes and failures afterward. One such failure was in their choice of targets, a failure Conquergood links directly to his own self-interest: I should have been more assiduous in attempts to reach the expatriate personnel who were most ethnocentric in their dealings with the Hmong. My sympathies were with the refugees. My interests and energies were devoted to understanding and working with the Hmong. It was easier to identify with the Hmong; the dogmatic Christians became the Other for me." See Dwight Conquergood, "Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp: Performance, Communication, and Culture," *TDR* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 174-208.

[139] *zAmya Theater Project* (website), http://ststephensmpls.org/programs/zamya (January 17, 2014).

space of agency where firsthand accounts of homelessness can be told."[140] Lecia Grossman, who founded the project in 2004 (and whose own politics often tend conservative), "didn't want to do something *for* homeless people, I wanted to do something *with* them."[141]

My self-interest in homelessness is longstanding, but only recently did I start to understand why: it's the epitome of being de-valued, unseen, lonely in the most extreme Arendtian sense. Being homeless, in the words of former troupe member Larry Brown, means "feeling lost out there."[142] And often not just "out there," but even in some of the spaces designed for them. As we've seen, the vast majority of environments that homeless people find themselves in are ones in which they're treated (and referred to) as "consumers" or "clients," not agents in their own right.[143] zAmya tries to be a different

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[140] Rachel Chaves, "zAmya Theater Project: Toward an Intimacy of Social Change" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2010), 73. I discovered zAmya, like the Theatre of the Oppressed group at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, through professor Sonja Kuftinec, who also directed Chaves's dissertation.
[141] Chaves, "zAmya," 19.
[142] Chaves, "zAmya," 44
[143] How to refer to this population is a much-contested issue. Among people in the homeless-service industry, "clients" and "consumers" are the norm, though some workers find these terms put their "clients" off. (Especially "consumer": when, these so-called consumers ask, do they get to go shopping?) Others, in academia and the upper echelons of the nonprofit world, prefer "people experiencing homelessness"—which seems to mark homelessness as a condition, which can happen to anyone, rather than as a way to mark off a specific kind of (presumably inferior) person. Chaves, invoking Kuftinec, suggests we go even further: "we say 'the home*less*, implying a lack—why not use a term like nomad…one that is not so pejorative?" (Chaves, "zAmya," 17). I have complicated feelings about this. Of course I don't want to call anyone inferior, and yes, I have met some people who actively prefer not being housed. Most homeless people I have met, though, call themselves homeless—and don't want to be. That is, they *perceive* their condition as a lack. (I will therefore use "homeless people" and "people experiencing homelessness"—though *not* "clients" or "consumers"—interchangeably.) Once again, my experiences mirror Alinsky's: "At various universities members of the Students for a Democratic Society have asked me, 'Mr. Alinsky, do you know that what you are doing is organizing the poor for the acceptance of these bourgeois, decadent, degenerate, bankrupt, materialistic, imperialistic, hawkish middle-class values of today's society?' There has been a long silence when I have responded with, 'Do you know what the poor of America or, I might add, the poor of the world want? They want a bigger and fatter piece of these decadent, degenerate, bankrupt, materialistic, bourgeois values and what goes with it!'…One can never reject these [middle-class] possessions unless one has experienced them, just as you cannot preach spiritual values to someone who is starving and whose idea of happiness is having enough food. It is after he

kind of space—a space that's theirs, where they are the producers. "At zAmya," Chaves explains, "the space of performance is owned (if only fleetingly) by the bodies of zAmya's actors, some of whom own no other place of permanence."[144]

Or at least that's the goal. The reality sometimes falls short, for understandable reasons. Most obviously, the space zAmya inhabits is not actually theirs. For the past several years, due to a combination of convenience and financial necessity, zAmya has been a wholly-owned subsidiary of St. Stephen's Human Services, a service-based nonprofit. Unless you're a St. Stephen's employee—which I'm not, and none of the actors are—to get into the zAmya space you need to get through the familiar service-nonprofit array of buzzers, locked doors, and starkly empty, grey hallways. The space itself is large and comfortable, with plenty of room to move and play, but it's not theirs. The walls are empty and bare, and anything we write on the whiteboard is likely to get erased. These ownership issues pervade the culture of zAmya. Even the name "zAmya" itself—which Chaves explains is "a Sanskrit word which means 'aiming for peace'"[145]—doesn't seem to have come from the actors themselves. None of them, to my knowledge, knows Sanskrit.

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achieves enough food for today and all of the tomorrows that he moves on to the next stage, realizing that this has not brought him happiness. Then he is ready for, and starts demanding, other things" (Alinsky, "Afterword" to *Reveille for Radicals*, 229-230). This is what the great Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht meant, in *The Threepenny Opera*, by "erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral" ("first comes the feeding, then comes the morality"). Until people have taken secured their basic dignity—which includes food, housing, *and* agency; not *just* agency, as the SDS idealists thought, or *just* food and shelter, as Maslow and the service people think—this basic dignity is going to be a big part of their self-interest. We organic intellectuals need to recognize and respect that fact, even when it feels uncomfortable. It's what Paulo Freire meant when my doctoral advisor Robin Brown asked him, "what do you do if you enter into critical dialogue with the poor, and what they really want is…motor scooters?"—and Freire (to hear Robin tell it) answered, softly: "Help them to get motor scooters."

[144] Chaves, "zAmya," 72.

[145] Chaves, "zAmya," 20.

In my experience with zAmya, as dramaturg, sound designer, writer, trainer, and audience member, this uneasiness around ownership puts blinkers on the work. Take the issue of payment. Troupe members get paid a small-but-not-insignificant stipend for attending rehearsals, performances, workshops, and trainings, which in and of itself I think is wonderful. The problem is, they are not held to anywhere near the standard of professional actors. I don't mean in terms of talent—I share what Haft calls "the citizen artist's high regard for amateur expression"[146]—but in terms of accountability. Actors don't learn their lines on time, they forget their blocking, they drop character, all without much push-back from the director, the stage manager, their fellow actors, or anyone else. Rehearsals rarely start on time: actors often arrive late or are absent without notice, and excuses, from transportation problems to job conflicts to child-care snafus, are indulged without question.

These challenges are real, and they're particularly hard on the low-income populations these actors come from. All the same, the way zAmya handles them is counterproductive. It can often feel like a kid-glove treatment, which unintentionally demeans and infantilizes these very talented and dedicated performers, treating them as if they couldn't do better. (They absolutely can.) The result is a culture where actors sometimes feel more like clients than collaborators. It's feels unclear, at times, whether actors' paychecks are compensation for professional work or charity for the needy.[147]

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[146] Haft, "A Civic Actor Prepares."
[147] Caveat: this is my observation, based on a few years of watching how actors in the troupe behave. It's nothing that anyone else has ever *expressed*, at least to me or in my presence.

Maren Ward, the accomplished local director and theater manager who has been the company's artistic director from the beginning, does a lot to set the culture of the troupe. Chaves's observations very much mirror my own:

> Maren tends to perform this kind of cosmic patience with actors—she accepts almost any idea that is brought to the process, is unreservedly kind and generous, and goes out of her way to make people feel valued and important to the project. This kind of attitude seems absolutely vital in this space, but it also carries a huge cost, which reveals itself sometimes when Maren just lays her head down on the table, or wanders out of the room during thorny debates about the show's content and structure….Her responses to questions in rehearsal are always slow, careful, and tender—the result of constant self-reflection. She told me once that she'd rather be mugged than cross the street to move away from someone who looked suspicious or dangerous, and thereby run the risk of offending that person. And so, she gets a little emotionally mugged in rehearsal from time to time, always putting others' needs and feelings ahead of her own….zAmya is committed to providing a space for the actors experiencing homelessness to tell their own stories. However, in the process, Maren's story and labor often go overlooked, often through her very own actions: it is as though she has convinced herself that to structure the work being done by others, or to take credit for the work being accomplished, would be unethical, taking focus away from where it "should" be.[148]

Chaves concludes: "Maren is a terrifically talented theater artist, and bringing those skills to the process would, far from obscuring the work of the actors, bring it into relief."[149] I wholeheartedly agree—not just for Maren, but for the troupe as well. They all have potential that the current culture doesn't always let them express. But to change

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[148] Chaves, "zAmya," 101-102. Maren in many ways represents the "frailty" that Graeber finds often in anarchist and activist cultures. (She herself is part of several such groups.) Her baggy clothing, her constant plastic and glass containers of vegan food and drink, her penchant for biking everywhere even through the Minnesota winter, and her sensual but non-sexual presence, all resonate with Graeber's description of the characteristic "maze of barriers…endless food taboos…chain backrubs…human chains…[and other] general patterns of touching…largely, but not strictly, desexualized." Such a "curious emphasis on weakness," as Graeber observes, can feel very alien to outsiders. It is not my place to call out this culture; I would just suggest that absent some critical reflection, it can unintentionally turn off potential allies and collaborators, and thus rob people within it of their potential as agents and public workers. (It's basically the same argument I made earlier about the so-called "non-violent" spaces; we're talking about a lot of the same people.) See Graeber, *Direct Action*, 263-264.

[149] Chaves, "zAmya," 103.

that culture, to make a space where everyone can give her or his all, will be difficult. In addition to organizing some other funding sources and getting their own physical space, they would also need to organize themselves into a different market, one based less around charity and service and more around agency and power—including the harder edge (if not quite the organizers' *machismo*) that this kind of market requires.

If they chose to go that route, I think they'd find they have the resources. Even with the culture they've got now, issues notwithstanding, they do amazing work. zAmya, both in rehearsal and performance, has a basic and unshakable feeling of love, laughter, and joy in each other's company. This is a group of people that has built a real community of their own, with its own deeply-rooted rituals and traditions: Dr. Evil is not in charge here. These feelings, and this community, translate into performances that are entertaining, compelling, and downright *funny* in a way a lot of "social justice" theater just isn't.[150] I've seen zAmya actors, when pushed, take tremendous risks. In the spring of 2013, after a mere two weeks of training and rehearsal (led by me), they walked into a downtown Minneapolis soup kitchen at 10:30 in the morning; set up shop in the middle of the crowded and loud space; and performed an original, short piece of theater. They then started the same piece over again and invited the people sitting in the soup kitchen to

[150] Chaves concurs: "The voicing of laughter marks zAmya as a resistant space, both because it signals the flow of affective circuits (laughter as a contagion opening up portals between people), and because it defies the convention of feeling which says *we, the privileged, must be serious around the homeless because their lives are so difficult* or *we, the homeless, must be sad all the time because our lives are so difficult*. As Ed [of one of the actors] said to me once, deadpan, 'We enjoy humor too.'" See Chaves, "zAmya," 138. Emphasis in original.

interrupt, come "onstage," and *join*—to discover, together, ways we can act more powerfully.[151]

Everyone was nervous. The troupe was nervous, Maren was nervous, I was nervous. We walked into the soup kitchen—the Catholic Charities Opportunity Center, where many of us had performed before, and where some still came as "clients"—and the noise, social disconnectedness, and general feelings of malaise reminded us how challenging this space could be.[152] As we set up, and I started my introductory talk (a few performances into our run, the zAmya actors would take over this duty), most of the people sitting and talking and drinking coffee at the tables—black and white and indigenous, young to elderly, and in various states of health, cleanliness, and sobriety—did not seem to want to be bothered. We pressed on. Our cast of five actors performed valiantly, projecting their bodies and voices over the din. Slowly, as the play went on, some people inched nearer: they stopped talking, turned their chairs around, even moved themselves closer to our impromptu stage.

Finally came the scariest moment of all: when we turned to the audience and asked them to come up and participate. At first, no one came. We kept playing ourselves a little longer, then asked again. A few people started looking interested. One guy's friends, sitting at the table with him, started egging him on to come up. We joined in. He

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[151] Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners will recognize this as Forum Theatre—essentially, Legislative Theatre (see Chapter Three) without the lawmaking parts. A play is performed, the (unhappy, oppressive) ending is discussed, and then the play is repeated again—only this time, the spectators are encouraged to stop the action, come up onstage, replace the protagonist, and attempt a different choice of action, to bring the play to a (happier, less oppressive) conclusion. For a brief introduction to Forum Theatre, see Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 139-142; for more detail, see Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian Jackson, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 241-276.

[152] For another account of zAmya performing in this same soup kitchen, including a much more detailed description of the space and its challenges, see Fink, "Making Space," 199-202.

got up; everyone applauded. Many people followed. Many more joined in the discussion. Before long, people were talking, discussing, arguing with each other from across the room, about the issues of criminal justice, family issues, relationships with the police, and drugs that our play raised. In subsequent performances, some people walked up onstage, not just to play a part in the play, but to hold forth on their perspective in front of the gathered public. We had done it. We had turned this soup kitchen, however momentarily, into a free space, an actual forum.

One particular intervention, from a man named John, particularly stuck with me.[153] John was onstage: a young, clean-cut and clean-shaven man in his late 20s or 30s wearing a green-and-white visor and a tattoo of a snake wrapped around a crucifix. He had stepped into the role of the protagonist, at the crucial moment of the play, slumped over on a table (in that very soup kitchen) and about to give up all hope. I was onstage, too, playing a bit role: a volunteer worker at the soup kitchen, who comes over and asks if he's all right. In the scripted play, he doesn't respond, and my character walks away. But John responded. He answered my character's questions and wanted to get information from me. I stopped the action and asked the audience for help: I'd never worked in a soup kitchen, I told them; what should I say to him?

John cut me off and launched into a speech.

What I had done—he meant my character, I think—was to go up and listen to him. No one does that. "We all need to be heard." The services are fine—we get good food here, and good services upstairs—but no one listens to us. Again, "we all need to be

[153] A pseudonym. "John's" speech stuck with me; I tried to write it down later that day. My story comes from those notes.

heard." There's stuff that connects us, all of us that are here in this room. We're all here for a reason, because of stuff that's happened outside. No one's walking around, with lots of money in their pockets, saying, "I'm gonna go to Catholic Charities." We're all here, once again, "looking for a place to be heard."

When he stopped talking, we all noticed the absence of sound. That room, always loud and chaotic, was almost silent. People were listening, nodding as John talked. There was a palpable sense of connection among the people in that room, the likes of which I had never felt in that space before. *This is it!* I thought. *This is the moment of solidarity!*

And that was it. The moment passed. There was more interaction, there were more interventions by more people in the audience—variously insightful, thoughtful, and funny. One of those interventions, by a guy who had been very reticent to participate the last time we came, turned into a beautiful poetry reading. But that magical flash, that gripping instant of solidarity, was gone. Never to return. Never to be acknowledged again in the session, as if it'd never happened. The noise in the room picked up again; "real" life was back. We were near the end of our time. The soup kitchen staff needed us to leave so they could serve lunch; the troupe member leading the session brought it to a close. A few minutes later, while we were standing outside having our usual post-performance evaluation meeting—I, ever the good Alinskyan, insisted upon it—Maren brought up that moment with John. She had felt that momentary surge, just like I did. The rest of the troupe did, too. She called it "one of those triumph moments."

But I feel like I have to ask, what, ultimately, was it good for? What is *any* of this kind of work good for? Were we doing effective public work? We seemed pretty clear on our self-interest, but were we serious about building power, and developing agency? These are essential questions; still as I ask them, I feel the pinky-sucking presence of Dr. Evil. I find myself wishing I could stand with Chaves, who believes "theater's efficiency cannot be measured by the extent to which its participants get permanent housing, or get laws passed to help the poor into affordable housing; theater's efficacy lies in the extent to which it creates a space for those who have been oppressively narrativized to begin to tell their own stories."[154]

Yes, I want to say—but then what? We started at weeklong by telling our own stories, too; trainer after trainer had insisted on how important it was to know our stories, to tell our stories, to share our stories. But that wasn't the end of it. We then needed to *use* these stories, to build power—the kind of power that *could*, and *must*, get those laws passed, and get those people into housing, and work toward a culture where *all* of our stories are heard *and* we all have the material things we need. Otherwise we, the privileged organic intellectuals who work in groups like zAmya, can turn into those service providers who, in Alinsky's typically un-minced words, "come to the people of the slums under the aegis of benevolence and goodness, not to organize the people, not to help them rebel and fight their way out of the muck—NO! They come to get these people 'adjusted'; adjusted so they will live in hell and like it too."[155]

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[154] Chaves, "zAmya," 166.
[155] Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 59. This sentiment is also the reason I always feel a little strange about Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners and other public theater workers who do work in prisons. Yes I understand that the system is what it is, and that better to have good, productive lives in prison than bad,

Maybe what Chaves is saying is, the role of *theater* in public work is to create the space and let those stories be told and heard—then it's time for other kinds of public work, like organizing, to step up and do *their* part. I can accept that, especially if building power and winning campaigns is not in the self-interest of the people doing the theater. (Some people just want to make great theater, and that's just fine. No need to call them out, Dr. Evil-style, for not doing more.) But for many members of zAmya, as for the members of Combatants for Peace and Jana Sanskriti, I think building power and winning campaigns *is* in their the self-interest. They just don't necessarily know how, or where to start.

It's these kind of people, I think, who lose out when "organizing" culture is so insular, and "service" culture doesn't provide a path to power. The people of zAmya have so many of the dispositions necessary for public work—to confidently go into a hostile space and make themselves heard, to tell their stories of self in ways that intersect with the stories of those around them, to build communities that can withstand all kinds of material and spiritual poverty. They could do it. But not the way they're set up right now. They'd probably need a staff organizer, and some new funding sources. And a longer-term commitment to projects, and to sites and communities, than just a few isolated performances. And a commitment by troupe members to build relationships and power—which would mean the kind of hard cultural shift I talked about before.

But it could happen. We discovered untapped power at Catholic Charities that day: muted, masked, repressed, but *present*. I had thrown a little bit of power and self-

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destructive ones—but there's a little part of me that's still sympathetic with my first reaction, many years ago, when I first heard about people doing Theatre of the Oppressed in prisons: "The guards allow that?!"

interest training into my rehearsals with the troupe, and they were into it. I had even started building a relationship with an unlikely ally, the soup kitchen's intimidating security guard—who asked *me* to do a one-to-one with him, and drove nearly two hours to meet me near my house. It turns out that he was an immigrant, who had once been homeless himself. He was deeply interested in our work, and he offered detailed and very thoughtful criticism of our play, some of which we were able to incorporate into future performances. I asked him, toward the end of our conversation, whether he might be interested in working with zAmya himself. He said he would.[156]

This kind of relationship represents one possibility—of so many—for zAmya to grow, and to build. The pieces are all there. They're not assembled right now. But they could be.

If the people of zAmya decide they want to.

Which they might not.

And that's fine.

Teaching: Getting Real

For an organizer coming out of the Popular Front, the term "public education" might be redundant. Public work *was* education, and education *was* public work. This

[156] Like the shamans in the Hmong village where Conquergood worked, Kasey scrutinized our play for the ways he found it inaccurate. He had clearly given this a lot of thought. "I don't want the wrong message to be sent," he told me several times during our meeting. This, to give a little context, was the same white (or white-reading; he came from Lebanon and had a strong accent) security guard that had horrified us a few weeks earlier, when we had seen him roughing up a young black man outside the Opportunity Center, seemingly for no reason. I wanted to ask him about this, but it didn't feel right in our first meeting. (Maybe I was just too scared.) I was about to *just leave* a week-and-a-half later, so there was no second meeting. I left his contact info with Maren, but I haven't heard anything since. Then again, good cyberpunk millennial that I am, I haven't asked. I've left, moved on to other places and projects. (Not sure how I feel about this.)

conviction was felt across the many influential organizing traditions the Popular Front would spawn, from Alinsky-style broad-based community organizing to the movement-based organizing of the black freedom movement.

Ella Baker, one of the great unsung leaders of that movement from the 1930s through the 1960s, "was the teacher-activist in every sense," according to biographer Barbara Ransby. Mary King, one of the many organizers Baker trained, recalls: "With Socratic persistence, in her resonant and commanding voice, she would query, 'Now let me ask this again, what is our purpose here? What are we trying to accomplish?'...'Ask questions, Mary,' she would say." Prathia Hall, another of Baker's trainees, remembers her as "a consummate teacher, always opening us to new understandings….It was never the pounding, 'you must do this, you must do that,' but by raising a question and then raising another question and then helping us to see what was being revealed through the answer was her mode of leadership." Nor did all this questioning take away from Baker's effectiveness as an organizer. "She was the one who taught us to organize," Hall said, "to organize in such a way that when we left, the people were fully capable of carrying on the movement themselves."[157]

Alinsky, for his part, seems to say something very similar:

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[157] See Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 358-360. In this last quotation, we see Baker refusing the idea that there's a tradeoff between good teaching (dialogic, listening-based) and good organizing (effective, goal-oriented). Baker's approach to organizing seems to address the concern expressed by Myles Horton, another of the great educators of the freedom movement: "If you're into having a successful organizing campaign and dealing with a specific project, and that's the *goal*, then [it doesn't matter] whether you do it yourself or an expert does it or some bountiful person in the community does it, or the government does it without your involvement because that solves the problem….Solving the problem can't be the goal of education. It *can* be the goal of organizations. That's why I don't think organizing and education are the same thing" (Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road By Walking*, 119). Horton, like most people who have spent a lot of time with organizers (myself included), no doubt encountered many who made this tradeoff, and is expressing understandable frustration. But organizers like Baker demonstrate that there is another way—at least sometimes.

> In the last analysis, the objective for which any democratic movement must strive is the ultimate objective implicit within democracy—*popular education*….The very purpose and character of a People's Organization is educational….In a People's Organization, popular education is an exciting and dramatic process. Education instead of being distant and academic becomes a direct and intimate part of the personal lives, experiences, and activities of the people….Knowledge then becomes an arsenal of weapons in the battle against injustice and degradation. It is no longer learning for learning's sake, but learning for a real reason, a purpose. It ceases to be a luxury or something known under the vague, refined name of culture and becomes as essential as money in the bank, good health, good housing, or regular employment.[158]

Like Baker, Alinsky argues that through the work of organizing, you can do really good teaching: teaching that's exciting, dramatic, and directly liked to people's self-interest, to the real needs and struggles of their "real lives." But implicitly, he's also arguing something else. You can see it in his use of negatives: education is "no longer learning for learning's sake," "it ceases to be a luxury," "instead of being distant and academic." Yes, he's saying, the teaching that happens in People's Organizations is great—and the teaching that happens outside those organizations, and specifically in schools, is awful.[159]

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[158] Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, 155, 173. This quotation bookends Alinsky's chapter on "popular education," one of the great overlooked twentieth-century texts on teaching, in which Alinsky writes about ordinary people who become veritable experts in everything from class analysis to the legislative process to pediatric nutrition, all through working on issue-campaigns in their own self-interests. Alinsky also implicitly uses this passage to indict schools; like the Lutheran pastor advocating "nonviolent" action, this is another case of Gricean implicature. When Alinsky writes—"It is no longer learning for learning's sake, but learning for a real reason, a purpose. It cases to be a luxury or something known under the vague, refined name of culture"—he is clearly referencing an unnamed *other* entity that *does* do learning for learning's sake, without reason or purpose, for the sake of luxury or refinement. Though Alinsky never names this entity, it's not too hard to figure out what he's talking about.

[159] Like the Lutheran pastor advocating "nonviolent" action (see note 109), this is another case of Gricean implicature. If he just wanted to extol the virtues of teaching within People's Organizations, he wouldn't have needed all these negatives. By putting them in, he flouts the maxims of quantity (don't say more than you need to) and relation (don't say things that are irrelevant) to imply something he's not saying explicitly: that school sucks.

Having worked for many years as a classroom teacher, I'm tempted to agree. I sometimes think that learning in school is kind of like falling in love at a speed-dating event: it works for some people, but for most, it just feels too forced. Learning, organizers like Alinsky and Baker argue, is best understood as a *by-product* of other kinds of activity. When you work alongside others, with the goal of making change in your life and world that's in your mutual self-interest, you'll end up learning a lot along the way. (And you'll *want* to be learning; again, it's in your self-interest.) But when you sit down in a classroom—often with little choice in the matters—with the goal of *learning*—"for learning's sake," or because you need to get the credits for a degree, or for some other bloodless reason—where's the buy-in? The self-interest? The incentive to care, to work, to actually learn at all? Wouldn't it be so much better, Alinsky seems to ask, if *all* education happened in people's organizations?[160]

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[160] Alinsky's implied question gives us occasion to pause and ask, what exactly does it mean to make a given kind of work (such as teaching) "public"? To what extent does it just mean "adapting broad-based organizing practices," such as getting "clear" about self-interest and "serious" about power, for use in the classroom, the rehearsal room, or wherever (Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work," 649)? That is, to what extent is *organizing*, and specifically Alinsky-style organizing, the paradigm that other kinds of public work must follow? To a very large extent, Alinsky and Chambers would no-doubt argue: "Broad-based citizens organizations like those of the IAF," Chambers declares, "are twenty-first-century civil-society institutions *par excellence*" (Chambers, "Roots for Radicals," 63; emphasis in original). This is a reductive position. Besides the obvious existence of other traditions of organizing, like Baker's, there are also whole other public-work traditions within art-making and teaching themselves, which owe no particular debt to Alinsky. The folk-school traditions come immediately to mind: schools like Highlander (Horton's school) in the United States, and many others around the world. (These folk schools are often linked to organizing work, but as Horton describes, they are committed to ensuring that the goals of an issue-campaign don't get in the way of the education.) I focus on the Alinsky tradition, here, because it's one of the best-documented and most active traditions of organizing in the contemporary United States: many other traditions have either died out or been co-opted into the "service" frame—as we've seen with the work of Gramsci and Freire, and as I'm told may be happening at Highlander. The practitioners of Alinskyan organizing, maybe precisely because they have remained so (monastically?) *separate* from this mainstream market, have managed to keep their organizing tradition more-or-less alive and intact, and to develop a language—used, among other places, at weeklong—to *teach* this tradition effectively to the uninitiated. That's why I use it here, somewhat simplistically, to stand in for organizing, and the distilled essence of public work, as a whole. I do not mean to suggest that Alinskyan organizing is the be-all-and-end-all of public work, or that it has all the answers. Paul Marincel himself admitted, at weeklong no less,

Possibly. And possibly not: if organized ideas are indeed a component of power, it's easy to imagine schools as critically-important power bases. In any case, such questions are (if you'll pardon the pun) academic. In the legal, cultural, and economic world-as-it-is, school exists, and will continue to exist at least into the near future. Most people will spend over a decade of their lives in them, as students, and many will stay and spend the rest of their lives there, too, as schoolteachers. So with that reality as a given, how—we are left to ask—can we teachers do public work in school?

There are a lot of different answers to this question, and we'll explore several of them below. The effective ones, in my experience, tend to follow the same basic theoretical premise: the problem with school is that it feels *fake*. It feels like it has nothing to do with the rest of students' (or teachers') lives, with the "real world." In Alinskyan terms: it's not clear in its relation to the self-interest of both students and teachers (why am I writing this paper? why am I grading this paper?), and not serious, in relation to the power exercised by and on both students and teachers (what's the point of all this again?). It's precisely this lack of clarity and seriousness that makes so many

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that "we're doing a lot of organizing but losing a lot of things." Harry Boyte, in a similar vein, will often tell the story of Terry Pettus and his fellow houseboat-dwellers on Lake Union in Seattle, who in the 1980s faced eviction by the city government. Had these houseboat-dwellers organized in typical fashion, uniting and collectively confronting the city government, they would have lost: they didn't have enough power. So they turned to practices of popular education instead: they worked not against the city but with it, offering the lake and its inhabitants as a public resource and asset to the city and its other citizens, and holding "a kind of protracted workshop on Seattle's public values that at least for a period of time tamed and guided the headlong rush of the city toward unbridled high-tech development." In this case, as in many others, the public work of teaching was able to accomplish a goal that the public work of organizing could not have. See Boyte, *CommonWealth*, 145-147, 152; Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road By Walking*, especially 115-128; for more on the folk school tradition, see also Myles Horton, *The Long Haul* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), and *Living and Learning Democracy: Non-Formal Adult Education in Sweden in South Africa*, ed. Marie-Louise Ström (Cape Town: Idasa, 2007).

students tune out, and so many teachers burn out.[161] To do public work at school, we have to make it *real*.[162] It needs to be clear and serious, aware of both the extent and limits of our mutual self-interest and power (what we can do and what we can't), and committed working together to push those limits to the furthest extent possible.

Efforts to do teaching as public work tend to come in two flavors: efforts to make change on the institutional level, to make our schools function more like free spaces, and efforts to make change on the pedagogical level, to make our classrooms function more like free spaces. Change on the institutional level, first of all, means understanding—and organizing to make decision-makers understand—that what we're doing right now isn't enough. "The usual calls for more service learning classes and student volunteer groups have their natural limits in reaching our student body," explains public work scholar and Denison University president Adam Weinberg. "We need to look for new places on our

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[161] Matthew Crawford observes: "I think there are a lot of kids in school feeling like what they're offered is frankly not worthy of their full attention. If you're studying for standardized tests, it seems like a perfectly natural reaction to check out mentally. The material is not presented as intrinsically valuable, but as a means to an end, passing the test—just another hoop to jump through. Whereas if what you're doing is, let's say, building a tube-frame chassis for a race car, then suddenly trigonometry becomes very interesting" ("Work and Dignity," 42). This kind of fake-ness often starts early in our education, when our first-grade teachers tell us we really need to learn x or y, *because we'll need it in second grade*. And then in second grade, *we'll need it in third grade*. And so on, as middle school prepares you for high school and high school prepares you for college and college prepares for…the "real world"? (Another old Jewish joke: "For a Jewish mother, fetal development ends upon graduation from medical school.") By that point, we've spent a full ten to twenty years being told that our work is only important in some imagined future—a feeling some of us then find hard to shake, and end up going through much of our lives feeling like the "real world" is always somewhere else. Not exactly helpful for building dispositions toward agency.

[162] Public work scholar David Hoffman, as part of an extensive study of student culture, interviewed five students for a total of over three-and-a-half hours. "In those interviews I used the words 'real' and 'really' a grand total of seven times, often in the context of expressing that I 'really' appreciated their volunteering to participate. The students, on the other hand, used the words 'real' and 'really' 314 times….civic agency and the experiences that gave rise to it *felt real* in a way that many of their previous experiences had not." See David Hoffman, "Fostering Civic Agency by Making Education (and Ourselves) Real," in *Democracy's Education: A Symposium on Power, Public Work and the Meaning of Citizenship*, ed. Harry C. Boyte (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2014). For a much fuller and more technical treatment of the same argument, see David Hoffman, "Becoming Real: A Hermeneutical Phenomenology of Undergraduates' Civic Agency Journeys" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland—Baltimore County, 2013).

campuses to engage students"—specifically, those students *not* disposed to service and volunteer work, and who are all too often told that those are the only two ways to be public agents.[163] Finding these "new places," adds University of Southern California teaching fellow Maria Avila, will involve "a concept of community that includes the community within institutions of all kinds, not just the communities and neighborhoods outside academic institutions" [164]—versus now, where there's "the community" (or "the real world," or "the biomass") on one side and us academics on the other, and every market incentive encourages us to stay apart.[165]

This kind of institutional change is not easy. Not only on an organizational level, but also on a cultural level. I've been a graduate student now for almost seven years, and I know the fear my colleagues and I feel so often about whether our work is legitimate, whether we're worth anything, and whether we'll ever get jobs. To abandon the work of

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[163] Weinberg, "Preparing Students for Work as Citizens."

[164] Maria Avila, "In a Culture That Values Activity Over Democratic Practices, Can a New Culture of Civic Professionalism Flourish?," in *Democracy's Education: A Symposium on Power, Public Work, and the Meaning of Citizenship*, ed. Harry C. Boyte (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2014).

[165] Weinberg explains: "incentive structures within our institutions…have mostly pushed faculty to be less engaged with our students and local communities" (Weinberg, "Preparing Students for Work as Citizens"). And Albert Dzur elaborates: "Universities prize their self-image as collegial organizations, yet they now have highly unaccountable vertical management structures. Relying on private search firms, boards of trustees and regents choose presidents and provosts with no authentic input from faculty, students, or community members. Once ensconced, top administrators are evaluated using procedures less transparent and public than in business firms. Faculty and student opinion is rarely seriously consulted on major administrative measures. The absence of a vibrant democratic culture is evident, too, in the classroom and in daily faculty-student non-interaction. Though research and disciplinary specialization are commonly blamed, the deeper problem is social distance: faculty members' inability to see and act with students as fellow citizens, collaborators—if only neophytes—in a common public project of understanding and improving shared social, political, and economic structures….most contemporary American colleges and universities systemically fail to live up to these norms, which are overpowered by forces present in all modern organization—bureaucracy, routinization, legal accountability, risk management, and market definitions of efficiency and productivity." Faculty and administrators talk about community engagement and citizenship, of course, but as is the case for work that's not a (market-valued) priority, "There is never enough time" (Dzur, "The Democratic Roots of Academic Professionalism"). Dzur, Weinberg, and Avila are writing about higher education, but the same arguments apply, with minimal tweaking, to the K-12 world.

hermetic research and publishing—which we know is valued—for the work of public engagement—which we're worried might not be—is really scary. Even for people who really want to, like me, and like many of my colleagues. For most of us, it's not something we can do alone.

Fortunately, new markets and new interpretive communities are starting to form. At a handful of K-12 schools, colleges, and universities across the country, often the workplaces of the public work scholars I've been citing, there are school-wide public work programs in various stages of development. The Public Achievement program, run out of Augsburg College in Minneapolis, teaches principles of organizing—and provides practice!—for K-12 schoolchildren in many states and several countries.[166] And the "coaches" for these Public Achievement teams often come from the growing number of colleges and universities with public work programs of their own, such as the Action Research Teams (ARTs) at Northern Arizona University (NAU):

> What are the impacts of the ARTs on NAU students as they engage with deeply political issues democratically developed with community partners? Many have stated that this work has simply changed their lives. In response to a question concerning their sense of agency in the face of challenges to their communities, a first year student who had been a Public Achievement coach for elementary students in a low-income minority neighborhood lifted his forearm straight up at a right angle from the table upon which his elbow rested, and spoke: "You know, before this experience, all the problems in the world just seemed like walls that were impossible to move or get around." Then, gesturing toward his forearm now lowered to the table, he said, "But now, after seeing what a team of kids can do with a little coaching—they learn to work collaboratively together to identify, research, and act on an issue—everywhere I see challenges, I'm starting to see pathways." There is no more import thing that a student can say than this.[167]

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[166] See note 97.

[167] Romand Coles and Blase Scarnati, "Transformational Ecotones in Higher Education: Craftsperson-Ethos and Northern Arizona University's CRAFTS Movement," in *Democracy's Education: A Symposium on Power, Public Work, and the Meaning of Citizenship*, ed. Harry C. Boyte (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming 2014). See the other articles in this volume, including the others cited here,

Not all of us are lucky enough to work at schools like NAU. Many of us, like me, are the odd (wo)men out in our departments, with most of our colleagues seemingly content with their non-public work. Sometimes, over the long haul, this can be changed; but sometimes it can't, at least not with the amount of organized people, money, and ideas we have right now. For us, the major public work we can do on a day-to-day basis is in our own classrooms. There are clear limits to this kind of work—we should not delude ourselves into thinking our teaching will enact revolutions—but there's also some very real potential inherent in a group of people coming together in a space on a regular basis, for an extended number of months, with no other expectation than to learn from each other.

In my many years of considering the limits and potential of classroom-teaching as public work, I find myself coming back again and again to a rarely-discussed but near-ubiquitous pedagogical experience: driver's ed. My own experience, I think, was pretty typical. It was taught in a drab, windowless room in the basement of the local AAA. Our teacher was Mr. Looby. He was an ex-cop—who had once visited my first grade class, and whom I, with my six-year-old's ability to leverage power through relationships, once convinced to let my dad off from a traffic ticket on his fortieth birthday—and he taught like it. He stood at the front of the room and lectured. We sat in rows and took notes. He wasn't a bad lecturer, all told, but he was absolutely not interested in learning from us. When he asked us questions, they were always Socratic; he'd keep pushing until he

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for more examples of such institution-wide public work initiatives. They are still relatively rare, but their numbers are growing!

got the answer he wanted. He had the knowledge, power, and authority; he was the teacher, giving it to us, and we were the students, receiving it.

I would never teach this way. I don't think I could even make myself do it if I tried. It represents, in so many ways, everything I think is wrong about teaching. It seems to be exactly what Paulo Freire would call the "banking concept" of education, where the teacher has all the knowledge (in the bank), and the students come to class (with their empty bank accounts) to "withdraw" some of that knowledge. The problem with the "banking concept," simply, is that it leaves no room for students to have any agency. It's service through and through, with the teacher as the active provider and the students as the passive consumers. The approach Freire proposes instead, commonly known as "critical pedagogy," is based on what he calls the "problem posing" approach: we teachers present our students with a problem—a real problem, which we ourselves don't have the answer to—and we learn together, we from our students' skills and knowledge and they from ours, as we work together to solve that problem. Problem-posing educators tend to set our classrooms up in circles, not rows; to sit among our students, not stand in front of them; and to ask questions, not make statements. In the best case scenario, uncommon but possible, problem-posing teachers and students can turn their classroom into a free space.[168]

Mr. Looby, needless to say, didn't do any of this. But—and here's the point—he was an extremely effective teacher anyway. I learned a whole lot, got a perfect score on my driving test, and even to this day, while dealing with a tailgater or navigating a tricky interchange on the Jersey Turnpike, I'll hear Mr. Looby's voice reminding me what to

[168] See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 2.

do. So what gives? Well for one, he's just a naturally gifted teacher. He has a solid sense of rhythm, pacing, and humor. But the other, bigger reason is that the self-interest of everyone in that classroom was crystal clear—and all the same. He wanted us to know how to drive. *We* wanted us to know how to drive. No negotiation or relationship-building required. (We experience these kinds of uncomplicated acts of pedagogy every day. When I get off the highway, roll down my window, and ask the guy on the street whether the Waffle House is *to the right* or *to the left,* I don't want him to do a one-to-one with me or engage me in Freirean, problem-posing dialogue. I'm hungry.)

The kind of teaching that happens at weeklong is very similar:

> The IAF structures its national training around teaching what the IAF claims is the "correct" way to organize. Participants come to learn, not to discuss as equals. In that sense, training is quite an appropriate term for the educational sessions. IAF training is not a "sharing experience," as it can often be in other community-building or participatory democratic settings. IAF organizers at national training are not seeking to elicit the contributions of participants to reach a deeper level of shared understanding. That is not to say that no conversations occur. IAF organizers use the Socratic method in teaching, so that there is constant interaction between and among participants. But the educational process is more akin to taking a college course with a professor who uses interactive methods of teaching, than it is to a study group among equals. Organizers may sometimes overstep their authoritative role. Some training participants appear to resent what they see as arrogance among IAF trainers. But the vast majority of IAF participants accept the IAF's authority to teach. Otherwise, they would not be attending the sessions, and the local organizations to which they belong would not pay for these services.[169]

This kind of teaching works at weeklong, like at driver's ed, because everyone's self-interest is the same. Everybody's there to build leadership and organizing skills, and everybody gets that next week, trainers and trainees will be working side by side on

[169] Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, 225.

organizing campaigns that represent the epitome of critical pedagogy, posing problems and working together to solve them out of clear and shared self-interest.

School, alas, is a more complicated case. Here, self-interest is neither so clear nor so shared. If you've worked as a classroom teacher for any length of time, you know what I'm talking about. We teachers—who, given the current economic and political situation, are bound to be in it for the love and not the money—usually have a strong self-interest in teaching our students things, in their leaving our classes with new knowledge and new skills. We "critical" teachers, further, we want to guide our students through meaningful experiences of relationship-building and problem-solving that will increase their ability to think, act, and reflect. We teachers who are looking to do *public work*, on top of all this, want to create a situation—a free space—where students can understand and exercise their own agency, their ability to act in public and work collectively to shape their world.[170]

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[170] Public work, then, is *related to* but not exactly *the same as* critical pedagogy. They share a lot of the same goals and commitments, but I see at least three big differences. (Of course, these may vary based on how exactly how one defines "critical pedagogy.") First: public work cannot take place, entirely, within the four walls of a classroom. It must work, in some way, to create a democratic culture not just *in* the (constructed) free space of the classroom, but also *through* it. Second: public work, unlike some critical pedagogy, is not about "empowerment." (Like Trevelle at weeklong, the public work tradition rejects the assumption that one person can *empower* another—basically, a service relationship.) Public work, rather, is about people being clear about their own self-interests and serious about building power together. The best a teacher can do for a student, or a student for a teacher, is to work to make a free space where they *both* can build power, together. Third: public work requires us to be clear on everyone's self-interest, and to put that self-interest at the center of the work. Critical pedagogy isn't always so clear about that. According to many critical pedagogues, the way to teach a given academic subject *critically* is, basically, to turn it into social-studies: you make science class "critical," for example, by studying environmental racism, or AIDS policy around the world. The problem with this approach, from a public-work perspective, is that it doesn't necessarily speak to the self-interest of a student who wants to do *science*. (One imagines the voice of Dr. Evil: "A *critical* science project?") A public-work approach to science, on the other hand, might put science students into dialogue with local residents and community groups, to see what *scientific* questions are affecting their lives, and how they could all investigate those questions together, using the practices of *science*. For a thorough and thoughtful introduction to "critical pedagogy," for better and worse, see Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Our students, on the other hand, might just want an A.

Usually not. Usually they're looking for all kinds of things, including some things they might not (yet) be aware of. Like most people who haven't been to weeklong, and even some of us who have, they're still figuring out their self-interest.[171] But unlike at weeklong, or driver's ed, we can't assume we know their self-interest, or that it's the same as ours. Especially in the all-too-common situation where they're there against their will—because they're under sixteen, or they have to fulfill a graduation requirement, or whatever. To do public work in this context, part of that work—the first and maybe the most important part—has got to be to get to know our students.[172] And to get real with them: to get clear on what their self-interests are (as opposed what we might like them to be); to get clear with them about what *our* self-interests are (which are just as important as theirs, if we're to have a relationship based on agency rather than service);[173] to get serious about what is and is not possible in this classroom (including

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[171] There's an obvious danger of lapsing into Thomas Frank territory here: of believing, as I did in the epigram to Chapter One, that our students are "dumbfucks…who who THINK they know what they need but honestly have no clue." The trick is to remember that if they're not always in touch with their own self-interest, neither are we—with theirs, or with our own. To teach, as public work, means to probe all of our self-interests together, even as we work together to *work* and *act* in them.

[172] Freire took months, before any educational effort began, to do research on the culture he was going to work in, including lots of relational meetings. (See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 3.) Most of us don't have the resources to do that. But we can take it as an ideal, and do as much as we can, in that direction: we can meet with our students, give incentives to them to meet with us, and structure classroom activity and assignments in ways that allow us to learn as much as we can about them, where they come from, what they're about, and what makes them tick. Finally, sometimes the most difficult part, we can be present and honest with them, in a way that allows them to get the same knowledge of us.

[173] It's easy for us teachers—like all workers in a service-based field—to forget about our own desires for dignity, community, purpose, and real-ness. We help neither ourselves nor our students by doing so. Boyte has observed that teachers "feel increasingly cut off from local communities" (see Barker, "The Colonization of Civil Society," 15). The recent, neoliberal move toward de-skilling teachers and set-in-stone curricula, combined with the cyberpunk obsession with technology to solve every problem—both often backed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—often "makes the teacher feel like a functionary" (Crawford and Rose, "Work and Dignity," 44). Teachers, no less than students, are subject to loneliness. Teaching, even with all its opportunities for student-interaction, can be uniquely lonely: you are almost always working *by yourself*, rarely with colleagues. Teaching, as public work, can and must address

our power to impose our self-interests on them, and how we plan to use it); and, given all these realities, to find some common ground to start building on.[174]

The good news is, this common ground is almost always there. As in broad-based community organizing: the Arendtian impulse, if nothing else, unites us. It's still so rare for a teacher to take students' self-interest seriously, let alone to work with them to express their agency (if not exactly build power), that for many students it's a revelation. Even gestures as simple as taking the time to learn each other's names, putting the desks into a circle and sitting down in the circle with them, allowing the class to proceed based on their ideas rather than a PowerPoint presentation, and giving them the opportunity to research and write about the things they care about (in whatever frame is necessary to teach the course material)—for some of our students, it'll be the first time they've ever experienced something like this. If my experience is any guide, a few will resist it, but a great many will embrace it.

The final step is to exercise that agency—to make things together. *Real* things. Things that matter to us, here, now. (Not things that just matter because they're preparing you for the "real world.") In writing-based classes, this means, above all, no "papers." Writing assignments, like all other assignments, need to let students deal with

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teachers' loneliness as well. Co-teaching is one way to start, if—as I have occasionally been able to do—we can find our way around most institutions' ways of dis-incentivizing it. Building closer relationships with students is another. There are risks here, of course, and professional lines we must be careful not to cross. But most of us are *so* far on the other side of that line, we don't even come close.

[174] The power part can be especially tricky, and it's especially important. An academic classroom is not democratic. Period. It involves an unequal power relationship between teacher and student. If we want to be serious, it's essential that we acknowledge it and talk about it openly and critically—even when (hopefully!) that means joking and laughing about it, too. But pretending it doesn't exist doesn't help anyone, and it can actually end up *dis*empowering our students. See Lisa D. Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (August 1988): 280-298; and Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?"

(at least some) material that matters to them; they need to know whom they're writing *for*; and they need this audience to *actually receive* the piece of writing, and if such a thing can be arranged, to respond to it. (In smaller, earlier writing assignments in my classes, that audience is usually the rest of the class; they post the writing to a blog or wiki, and others are required to read and comment on it. But there's still a big difference between writing *directly for* the rest of the class, and writing a blithe, faked "paper" that the rest of the class will happen to read. As with most parts of public work, it's all in the context.)

Finally: what about power? Other than the institutional power we have over our students—grades, etc.—is there room to *build* power with our students? This is uncharted territory. Certainly at places like Northern Arizona University, which has embraced public work across the whole institution, some serious power-building is possible. But just in a classroom? I remain suspicious. One does not simply build a power organization, in a matter of months, with a group of students who come in with all kinds of different self-interests.

But what *is* possible—and is, for me at least, both the greatest potential for teaching as public work and the reason why teaching remains so deeply in my own self-interest—is the formation of relationships. Deep, lasting relationships, which can change people in all kinds of ways, including ways that have profound public implications. Relationships that go beyond the typical "my teacher changed my life" stories, and actually provide the kind of lived experience of crossing cultural boundaries necessary to participate in a culture war-free future. At the risk of sounding sappy, I will close with

the story of one such relationship, which changed my own life, and which suggests what's possible.

It's the story of a young man named Mike.[175] I met Mike during my first summer at Appel Farm, when he was twelve and I was twenty-four. (Appel Farm, where we live with students 24/7 for weeks on end, and often see the same students year after year, is an environment much more conducive for this kind of relationship-building. We need more places like this.) Mike was from South Jersey. *Way* South Jersey: south of Philadelphia, south of some parts of Maryland, south of the Mason-Dixon line. Full of farmland, and not much else: the part that's actually the Garden State. He grew up here, poor and white, spending the first eight-or-so years of his life in a trailer. (He came to camp on a three-year full scholarship.)

Mike, to put it bluntly, was a menace. His father, who listened to Limbaugh every day, had told him to watch out for all of *those* kids—you know, the ones that'll be everywhere at an *arts* camp—and if one of them ever tried to "come onto" him…well, he knew martial arts. (He told me he'd told his son all this. I kept my professional composure.) Our bunk, of course, ended up being about as diverse as you could possibly imagine: it was Mike, plus three poorer black kids from Newark (two loud, one quiet), a couple of richer suburban white kids (one loud, one quiet), and yes, one quiet, well-off, openly gay Latino kid from Queens, who loved to knit and wear tight pink jeans.

You can guess the rest. Only it was probably worse. The first night, Mike was so homesick, and so scared, he sat on my bed after lights out, crying and hyperventilating and begging me to call his parents to come pick him up. (I sat with him, and tried to

[175] His real name. With his permission.

comfort him, but made no such call.) His pain continued, and he expressed it the only way he knew how. Almost every day there were fights. He said something to make one of the kids from Newark mad, or hit too hard in a pillow fight, and down it spiraled. He constantly insisted his bunk-mate (you know which one) was "giving him looks"—which he wasn't—and nearly cried when I wouldn't believe him. He got into more fights. He chipped a tooth. I wanted to quit. I wanted him to be thrown out. Neither happened.

So I stuck with him, more for lack of other options than out of any particular heroism or generosity on my part. And slowly, ever so slowly, we started to build a relationship. Out of total honesty. I couldn't have hidden how pissed I was at him, even if I tried. (And I didn't.) We started talking. What did we have in common? A few things, it turned out. Music, to an extent; he was a rock musician, and I was a classical singer, but it was something. And, of course, politics. He was as far right as you can imagine, and he was very open with me about it. I was as far left as he could imagine—and I was very open with him about it. We kept talking. By the end of four weeks, he felt the growing love beneath our differences. As did I. He told me all about his childhood on the last night of camp, sitting on my bed after lights out once again. When his parents picked him up—his father looking genuinely happy to see me—he bounded up to me and showed me his already-filled-out application for next year. (Oh boy, I thought.)

Sitting at the laundromat in Minneapolis that day in 2009, with my nose in my Freire, listening to those two men talking about how Obama was "telling people how to think" and Glenn Beck was on their side, there was nothing I could do. As Freire was in

the process of telling me: "Their view of the world reflects their *situation* in the world." In this case, that situation was being unemployed or underemployed, and not knowing exactly what or who was oppressing them, stripping away their dignity and agency, but they knew *something* or *someone* was. And they knew they didn't like it. And they were trying to do something about it—as we all do—with the habitus and the interpretive strategies they had. And I, with no relationship to them, and no understanding of their self-interest beyond what I'd read in Thomas Frank, was in no position to change any of that.

But with Mike, it was different. We had the time. Partially out of luck and circumstance. Partially because we made it. We kept up with each other. He came back to camp the following year and got kicked out for fighting. We kept talking anyway. Slowly, he started to change. I had no idea how much I was responsible for that. He clearly thought I had something to do with it; he told me so. He didn't change completely. But when he came back to camp for a third year, he was talking a lot more, and fighting a lot less. No: he wasn't fighting at all. And he was open to relationships with all kinds of kids, including the openly gay ones.

I came back to camp for a fourth summer, in 2011. (Nor was this my last; I'm currently preparing for my seventh summer, in 2014.) Mike wouldn't be back: his three-year scholarship was up. On the way down at the beginning of the summer, while driving through endless cornfields, I saw a placard nailed to a telephone pole that announced that the Tea Party Patriots of Gloucester County would be hosting a rally that Saturday at the Salem County Fairgrounds. I was already a student of American populism and

organizing, and I'd just taught a course partially about the Tea Party, but I'd never been to a Tea Party rally before. Come to think of it, I wasn't sure if I'd ever actually met a real-live Tea Partier before in my life. So of course I went. I drove the half-hour from Appel Farm to the fairgrounds, paid my $5, and parked my car.

I hadn't walked fifty feet before I saw Mike's parents. They seemed genuinely happy to see me. I was genuinely happy to see them. They told me Mike had already gone inside, and they gestured for me to come in with them.

I'm not sure if I'll ever forget that day. Not because anything shocking or outrageous or offensive happened. Quite the opposite. I found people's political positions offensive, in all the predictable ways, but as people they were friendly and welcoming and interested to talk. (I'm sure it helped that I was white; I don't remember seeing anyone there who wasn't. I'm honestly not sure how they would have received me otherwise. And I'm not sure how much Mike's parents knew about my political views; Mike certainly knew plenty.) We walked up and down the rows of booths, and I met the local NRA folks, the local constitution-protection people, and so on. When anyone asked me why I'd come, I answered—honestly—that I was interested in learning more about the Tea Party. I never talked too long at any one booth, but there always seemed to be more to talk about; I imagine, without too much work, we could find some significant patches of shared self-interest. We listened to a Texas preacher-turned-organizer give a fiery speech about how he'd built a local organization to oppose sex education in schools; Mike and his dad told me later they didn't really like the speech;

they thought it was too extreme. (They wished I'd been there earlier; apparently the Geno's Cheesesteaks guy had given a much better speech, on economic issues.)

There's no grand conclusion to this story. We parted ways that day; I went back to camp, they to their rural right-wing lives. We spent another evening together, later that summer, first just Mike and me having dinner, then later with his parents, having a lively and friendly debate about tax policy while sitting on the living room floor. We're still in touch, from time to time. Mike's now finishing his first year of college. He's nearly fluent in German, and he's thinking about majoring in sociology. We've got any number of things to talk about these days. I can imagine lots of ways he and I—and even maybe his parents—could find common self-interest, and could organize together around if need be. But I realize we haven't really talked "politics" in a while. For all I know, he might still be a right-wing Republican who enjoys Glenn Beck non-ironically.

And honestly, either way, I'm not sure it really matters.

EPILOGUE
Three Steps Toward a Workable Solution

> *…They are good at a certain kind of analysis but never have a workable solution in the last chapter.*
>
> —Ed Chambers, cont.[1]

Guilty as charged?

Guess it depends what he means, or you or I mean, by a "workable solution."

I think we got close, by the end of the last chapter. Still, it's not like there was a list of instructions anywhere. So in this short epilogue, I'll try to be a little more explicit. There's not much new material here. Basically, I'll be rephrasing sections of Chapter Four into a simple, three-step guide, a codification of a method I realize I've been following in my own work for years.

A guide to what, exactly? Well initially I thought of it as a guide to teaching. Which it still is. (You'll find many of the examples, and some of the assumptions, are teacher-slanted.) But as I stepped out of the classroom and into the worlds of choral singing, theater directing, and nonprofit consulting, I discovered it could be a guide to, well, pretty much anything—as long as the goal is to do it *as public work*.

So here they are: three steps, plus some commentary, written in an indeterminate style, somewhere between a doctoral dissertation, a consultant's report, a self-help guide, and a sketch.

May you, reader, and perhaps you too, Ed, find it a worthy "last chapter."

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[1] Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, 110. Recall from the Prologue epigram that the sentence begins: "Avoid Ph.D.s. They can't act. They get lost in writing books for one another…"

Step One: Get To Know Each Other

This is the most important thing.

All public work comes from relationships. Relationships with colleagues, collaborators, funders, students, supervisors, subordinates—anyone other than you who is involved with the work. (Your relationship with yourself is important too, of course; see the sections of Chapter Four on loneliness and self-interest training.) The single most important part of any work, at least if it's to have any chance of being public, is to build those relationships as strongly as possible. This must be a priority from Day One.

All of that may sound obvious. In practice, it's often not. It is very easy, especially when doing tasks that feel important and urgent, to throw the relationships out the window, or at least to put them off until later; there's no time right now. All too often, tasks trump relationships, and efficiency trumps capacity-building. This is the urge we've got to resist. Public work is not about efficiency. It's about long, slow, profound change. To do public work we've got to be *people-oriented*. The people and the relationships come first, always.

This doesn't mean we don't get the tasks done (we do). Or that we don't get the tasks done well (we usually get them done better) or quickly (it depends). What it does mean is, we don't operate in crisis mode. We take the time to listen, and we don't steamroll people, no matter how urgent the situation seems. We take time: the time it takes to build the relationships, to develop them, and to let the work, tasks, and issues flow from them—not the other way around.

Lead from the relationships should be a slogan for everything we do. ("Issues follow relationships," Chambers wrote.) Keep it as a fortune cookie; check it against everything you do. If you're not leading from the relationships, see how you might be able to adjust what you're doing in order to lead from the relationships. One challenge I struggle with, in this vein, is my tendency to come into a classroom and immediately talk for ten or fifteen minutes about things that seem *so important* to me—before I have any idea where my students are at. Far better, in some way or another, to structure some kind of question, discussion, or activity where I get to hear everyone else a chance to talk and express where they are, what's on their minds, etc., first. Then when I talk, it gets to be in the form of a *response*: I now know where they are, and I can talk directly to their needs and questions and issues. People also tend to listen much better that way, in my experience: I've demonstrated that I care, and I'm following *their* lead, not the other way around.

Getting to know each other also means taking some risks. It's not the easiest or most comfortable thing in the world, to go into a classroom full of reticent Minnesota college students and tell them to get up, move the chairs around, and participate in a silly, movement-based game so we can all learn each other's names. But I do it. In almost every course I teach. And it works. It establishes a tone. It moves the parameters of what's expected, and what's possible. And most importantly: it actually means we all know each other's names. I cannot possibly stress how important that is, to know everyone's name. It changes everything. Everything after that feels better, closer, more comfortable.

A useful (if limited) way to think about relationship-building is by thinking in terms of the three particular forms of one-to-one interaction that Alinskyan organizers use at important milestones. The first is the *one-to-one relational meeting* (often just called a "one-to-one"). One-to-ones are inquiry-based: we're not looking to "get" anything out of them. We're just looking for a better knowledge of a person—including that person's self-interest—and a better relationship with that person. One-to-ones are the basic building block of all serious relationships. Whenever possible, use them that way.

The second is the *proposition*. This is when, after having established a relationship with a person (though at least one one-to-one), we're asking that person to do something, to make a commitment, to take on a particular role or responsibility. Propositions are prepared in advance: we come in a *plan*, we make a specific *ask* of the person we're propositioning, we share our *vision* of the person's potential and how saying yes to our proposition will help that person fulfill that potential, we pledge to *partner* that person in fulfilling that role or responsibility (in whatever way is appropriate), and we ask that person, gently but firmly, for a *commitment*.

The third, finally, is the *agitation*. This is when there's something getting in the way of that person doing what we know that person could be doing. Like propositions, agitations are strategically planned and prepared in advance, with a standard structure. We present the person with three judgments and a proposition: (1) where s/he is *now*, (2) where s/he *could be*, (3) what's *in the way*, and finally (4) what we think s/he should *do*. Then we let the person respond and "own it"—including the decision either to accept or to reject our agitation.

These three forms of engagement aren't appropriate in every situation, but they are useful to think with. When doing a serious interaction with someone we're working with, it's sometimes helpful to ask: is this a one-to-one? a proposition? an agitation? none of the above, but something else? Making that decision can help us get clear and strategic about exactly what we're trying to get out of the interaction, and how we're trying to get it. If it's a one-to-one: what are we learning, about the person's self-interest? Are we really listening to the person? Where can we probe further, to listen and learn more? If it's a proposition: do we have a strong enough relationship with the person? Have we planned it out? Have we gone through all the steps, and been clear about each? If it's an agitation: all the questions we'd ask for a proposition, plus, how is agitating this person in both of our self-interests? Are we keeping our own feelings in check, and keeping it about the other person?

Finally: the more we build relationships, the more we can build *on* those relationships. Part of that is about propositioning and agitating people into growing and doing more. Another part of it is using the relationships we have as a springboard for other relationships. Chambers always asks, in a one-to-one, for other people he should be talking to. This is how to build capacity: to build relationships, and strengthen them, and use them to build more relationships, and so on.

Step Two: Make Things Together

It almost doesn't matter what you make.

I mean of course it does—and depending on the situation, it might matter a *lot*—but what I mean is: there is value in the *making*, itself, apart from any intrinsic value that the thing you make might have. There is value in the experience of *you* and *me* coming together and *working together on our world*, to *add to that world something that matters*, at least to us. The more of this kind of work that's in our lives, the more public and less lonely those lives are likely to be.

When we make things together, we are all producers. (By definition.) Again this may sound trite, but think about how rare it is that we actually get to do it. The dominant model, for so much of our lives, is not *collective production* but *individual consumption*. This goes for entertainment—we sit passively in front of the TV or movie screen or the computer screen (even in Web 2.0, most of what we actually do is still consumption of stuff made by others, and monetized by others still). And for politics—we consume news, we consume advertisement, we consume talking points, and we occasionally go into an isolated booth to choose whom we'd prefer to consume from. And for education—individual students, at separate desks, consuming information from lectures and textbooks, and told not to talk too much. Or even the newer, "activity"-based models of K-12 instruction, where students are supposedly doing things and working with others, but the lessons and outcomes are tightly scripted and planned—by someone else. (Often not even by the teacher.) Kids are no more stupid than we are, and often less. They'll know if it's bullshit.

There's nothing *wrong* with consumption—as long as we're okay with the status quo. But if we're looking to *change* something, if we don't *like* the kind of schooling and

politics and entertainment we're being fed, the only way to do that is through production. And unless you're lucky enough to be fabulously wealthy—i.e., with enough organized money to constitute a significant power base on its own—you'll need to produce *collectively*.

Plus, collective work often ends up being a lot more fun and personally fulfilling. A classroom based on the principle that *we're all making things together*—whether those "things" be pieces of writing, other projects, interventions, or even just interpretations of texts and theory—is far more fun and fulfilling, as well as more pedagogically effective, than a classroom based on the principle of I-the-teacher have something and you-the-students are going to consume it. Note that this does *not* necessarily mean lecture = bad or discussion = good. A "discussion" where the teacher always knows the answers s/he's looking for, and doesn't consider others, is not an act of collective production. And a "lecture," given in a context where it's responding to expressed interests or needs, is a critical part of the work of collective production. (Just make sure you, the teacher, aren't the *only* one who gets to lecture!)

Healthy, sustainable public work is based in what the Marxists call *praxis*—theory/practice, action/reflection—and what the Alinskyans call research-action-evaluation. Same thing. It's an ongoing cycle: we make something together, then we think together about how it went, then we incorporate those thoughts into the next thing we make together, then we think together about how *that* went, and so on. Again, for these purposes, it doesn't matter what that *thing* we're making is. Even when we're just making *the interpretation of a text*, when we understand what we're doing in that way,

rather than just "reading and discussing something," it transforms the experience—into something where agency is possible, and probable.

Step Three: Get Real

This is the part about being clear and serious. About knowing what's possible and what's not, in any given situation, and then working based on that knowledge. The two main factors that determine what's possible and what's not are *power* and *self-interest*.

Sometimes getting real can be depressing. When we understand power—that the people with more organized people, money, and (institutionalized) ideas behind them tend to get their way, and the people with less don't—suddenly it becomes hard to think about doing work that's going to *change the world*, or about being a *revolutionary* teacher or writer or artist. When we understand self-interest—that people are going to do what *they* care about, and what *feels right* to them to do, and there's no use telling them what they care about or what they're feeling is wrong—suddenly it becomes hard to imagine our neighbors or political leaders making decisions *because it's the right thing to do*, or our students putting their hearts into our classes *for the love of learning*.

But it doesn't have to be depressing. It can actually be liberating. First of all, it liberates us from silly false expectations. *Of course* we're not going to change the world if we just come up with the right in-class exercise—it'll never happen, it *can* never happen, so we don't have to worry or fret about it. We won't be heroes; we can't be heroes; we don't need to be heroes. If the leaders of the black freedom movement tried to

end segregation all at once, they would have failed: they didn't have the power. So they didn't. They "cut"—out of this big problem—the smaller issue of segregation in the Montgomery bus system. That, they had the power to tackle. By realistically analyzing what they did not have the power to do, and acting on that analysis, they made real and really important change.

Second, it liberates us from the academic and para-academic myth that there's a "real world" out there somewhere, that we and our work aren't part of. This is the world. Right here. This is it. (Same thing when people talk about "the people," which never means the people here. Here we are.) Alinsky and Chambers talk about the "world-as-it-is" and the "world-as-it-should be." Cynics believe the "real world" is just the world-as-it-is. Naïve people, who are often cynics in their own way, believe the "real world" is just the world-as-it-should-be. They are both wrong. The real world includes *both* of these worlds. It is defined, as Chambers says, by the *dialectical tension* between them. This means that there will always be limits on our work, but there will also always be opportunities to push those limits. My students *will* be taking too many credits at a time and working ridiculous hours on top of it, and they *will* want to get a decent grade in my class with as little work as possible. At the same time, if I design a course that both holds them accountable for the work I expect them to do, and speaks (at least in some ways) to things they care about and want to know, those students will often put in a whole lot of work, learn a ton—and have fun doing it.

That's the one last part. Having fun, and having fun together, is an essential part of any good public work. They teach you that at weeklong: one of the essential steps to any public action—the last—is to "celebrate."

As I'm about to do, right now.

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APPENDIX
A Doctoral Dissertation in Thirteen-Plus-One Facebook Updates

In the following pages, you will find the evidence of a little side project I conducted while writing this dissertation. Between September 2013 and February 2014—the period during which I also wrote the first draft—I wrote and posted thirteen public Book Updates to my Facebook profile. (Plus one extra, tangentially-related not-quite-Book Update for Christmas.) I tried to keep rough pace with the writing of the chapters, so the Book Updates would come out at approximately the same time I was writing about the same subjects in the chapters themselves. Together, these thirteen-plus-one Book Updates chronicle the progress of my argument, from the beginning of Chapter One through the end of Chapter Four, in condensed and (I hope) readable form.

Why did I do this? Pretty much out of naked self-interest. I had set myself an intense, rigorous writing schedule, and after two years of trying to write this book and producing virtually no text at all, I wanted to make damn well sure I'd do it this time. These Book Updates were a way to hold me publicly accountable for seeing the project through, and a way to continually remind me that this project was, in fact, *public*; it wasn't just about me. They also provided me a way to indulge (and test) my pretense that the issues I was writing about were important, that they needed to be discussed publicly, and that people actually wanted to hear and talk about them. (I reproduce a large and representative sample, but not all, of my readers' comments below. They are an archive in and of themselves. It is particularly interesting to see which Updates receive a lot of

comments and likes, and which not so much. Unsurprisingly, given the audience and medium, Chapter Three wins hands-down.)

Writing these Updates was also a useful and challenging exercise for me, to see if I could re-tell the same story I was writing about here, in a much different format: faster-paced, more colloquial, less scholarly, more direct, and above all, shorter. As you can imagine, it had its ups and downs. I reproduce these Updates as archival material; they are mostly un-revised first drafts; I can't necessarily stand behind everything I say here. At the same time, I am proud of the work I did. In some places, I think, I express my arguments here in the Book Updates better than I do in the book itself. And there were several instances in which, after writing a Book Update, I would go back to the corresponding section of the book and revise it based on the insights I'd had while writing the Update.

One final note: I reproduced these updates (and a smaller number of comments) in a thirty-page "tl/dr" document (Internet-speak for "too long / didn't read") that I distributed to people coming to the dissertation defense. The idea—we'll see how well it works—is to have as informed an audience as possible, so we can dispense with a lot of the summary and get right into the interesting and difficult questions.

Enjoy.

Ben Fink
September 3

BOOK UPDATE #1: ON METHOD

So as some of you know, I'm writing a book this year. I could call it a dissertation -- that would also be accurate -- but then I wouldn't want to write it. Dissertations are a private hazing ritual, required by an institution and read usually by about four people. Books are public, at least in ambition. In order to keep myself honest about the public nature of my work, I will be posting periodic updates on what I'm doing and writing about. I'd be very interested in hearing your thoughts on any of this, and you will no doubt see some of those thoughts show up in the book. (Properly cited, of course. Because I heart intellectual property laws.)

I started today. Well actually I started about two years ago. But I started the earnest, systematic work of putting the thing together today. My goal is to have a (very) rough draft done by Christmas, and a defensible draft done by April.

I'll get into the content of the book in future posts, as I start writing it. For this first post, I want to talk about method -- how we do what we do. I have never written a book before. The longest thing I've ever written, play adaptations aside, is a forty-four-page thesis paper. So this is a new thing for me. I've tried various ways to write, over the past two years, and they've all failed. I tried all kinds of different outlines -- didn't work. I tried just sitting down and banging it out -- didn't work. I tried talking it through and recording myself and then writing from there -- didn't work. I got all sorts of suggestions from all sorts of people about all sorts of methods. Most often I got told that "everyone has their own method, and you just need to find yours." Subject-very agreement aside, no doubt true. Yet utterly unhelpful. So I went into today pretty scared. "White. A blank page or canvas." What was to stop the blank screen of death from staring me down into submission again?

I'm convinced that some of our most important epiphanies are the ones that, in retrospect at least, seem completely obvious. And that's what happened to me today. That epiphany was, in brief: lead from what you know (not from what you don't), and what you CAN do (not from what you can't). Sure I haven't written anything as long or involved as a book before. But you know what I have done? Directed a whole ton of plays. Really difficult plays. With kids. With very short rehearsal periods. And I think I'm pretty good at it. (Camp people, feel free to chime in if I'm being inappropriately immodest.) So, I asked myself, why don't I write this book as if I were directing a play? That would mean: start with big conceptual play (in theater, source-work). Then do some reflection (table-work). Then write a very rough draft of each chapter (compositions and rough staging). Then go back and edit the hell out of it (final blocking). Most important of all, keep it fun. Always. If you're not having fun, do something else.

And that's what I did. I was dreading looking at the blank screen of death, so I barely touched my computer all day. I sat on the floor and wrote conceptual outlines -- lists, really -- of each chapter, with colored markers on big pieces of easel paper. I consolidated my notes from the past three years. At the end of the day, when I cleaned up, I felt like a kid putting away his toys. I had budgeted four hours of work, but I couldn't stop -- I kept going, until I had over eight pages of easel paper covered in color-coded notes. Some of which tomorrow, on another piece (or several) of easel paper, I'll turn into an outline of Chapter One. And then I'll start writing...because with all these notes and outlines hanging on the walls around me, I am not scared of the blank screen of death anymore. This is the wisdom of theater teacher Jan Mandell: can't pull ideas out of thin air? Then make the air thicker. And the wisdom of English teacher Michael Kuhne, paraphrasing Geoff Sirc: follow the fun.

Thea McLean, Robin Brown, Anneva Noelle Knapp and 19 others like this.

Sarvananda Bluestone Ahhh. Memories of writing the dissertation/ book. To be sure, history is a bit different than...wait a minute. Aren't you writing a kind of history? Anyway, my methodology is the ultimate in anal compulsive. But then I never write at my computer (which didn't exist in 1970). I do all of my first drafts in fountain pen. There is something very basic about the use of the hand, the tool (pen) and the glistening ink. // (That's since I can't "return" without entering). I do all of my notes on computer--before I used a typewriter. Organization is, for me, the key. Categories, sub categories, topics, etc.. The more information, the better. (Good to have a good data base or else you waste time thinking about what you have. Remember Albert Einstein: "Never try to remember what you can put down on paper." I have a wonderful data base that has every meaningful piece of information and the notes for three books, endless plays, addresses etc. that I can access at a flick of the finger) //After I have taken endless notes, I go through them--read them--and take notes on my notes. I read my notes on my notes and take notes on them. (Funny things start happening in the brain without any effort). Then I write an OUTLINE. It's based on what I have read and reread. It's a strict outline. I have little cards corresponding to the outline numbers at sub numbers etc. // Then I go through all of my note cards (I print them out individually) and place the notes in the corresponding outline category. When it is all finished, I breathe a sigh of relief and start to write. I DON'T HAVE TO SPEND TIME THINKING ABOUT ORGANIZATION. I just have to think about how I am going to say what I have to say. Let's talk.

September 4 at 5:48pm · Like · 1

Sarvananda Bluestone (I have written two books, one dissertation and at least two plays with this method)

September 4 at 5:49pm · Like

Ben Fink Thanks, Sarv. That's a fascinating method, and I totally see how it works. My issue, as you know from having worked with me for so long, is that I'm a hopeless improviser. For me, writing a strict outline would be a waste of time -- the minute I start actually writing it out, I'll start going in a different direction. Which is why I do better, I think, with rougher lists and looser outlines. Makes the actual process of writing take longer, for sure. But I think that would happen anyway. I've long toyed with the notion of writing drafts out longhand. Might have to try that. The problem is I type so much faster than I write. But maybe that's not an advantage...anyway, to be continued...

September 4 at 10:05pm · Like

Raysh Weiss A great piece of advice (which I must credit Zuri with) is approaching this as you would creating a syllabus--you're doing this same thing: you are constructing a narrative. You wouldn't believe how energising and natural the outlining process feels after I started thinking of it in that light.

September 4 at 12:32am · Edited · Like · 4

Andrew Hakomaki Granger 😃

September 4 at 1:54am · Like

Ben Fink
September 10

BOOK UPDATE #2: ON "US" AND "THEM"

The first chapter of the book, like every chapter thereafter, starts with a tale of a fail. A personal fail. (This is the point. It's a very critical book, but it's a critical of my friends, my colleagues, and most of all myself, with the goal not to tear us down but to understand and learn from our mistakes.)

This tale of a fail took place a few years ago, while I was sitting in a laundromat in Minneapolis, waiting for my clothes to dry (and reading, of all things, Freire's PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED) and listening two guys -- 30s or 40s, working-class, one white, one Latino -- bash the hell out of Obama. He was "telling people what to think" about health care. Versus Glenn Beck, who was letting people speak their minds.

I sat there, for almost an hour, listening to this, and felt like there was nothing I could do, nothing I could say. And I don't think I was wrong. Sure I could have tried to get into a conversation with them, ask them good problem-posing questions, etc., but they didn't seem in the mood. And I was pretty professor-ed up in my jacket and slacks. No, the fail wasn't my inability to act heroically. The fail is ours, collectively, letting what we call "politics" disintegrate to such a place where I, sitting with my Freire, and they, standing by a row of dryers mere feet away, might as well be from different planets.

What is this book about? It's about that fail. It's a study in rhetoric, pedagogy, and organizing that tries to answer two questions. First, WHY CAN'T WE TALK WITH EACH OTHER? And second, WHY DO PEOPLE LIKE THESE TWO GUYS WORK SO ACTIVELY AGAINST THEIR OWN INTERESTS? (In this case: against their own cheaper, better health care?)

My first move: to answer these questions right, we have to answer them together. First, because it's always "us" -- the pundits, politicians, academics, and related professional-middle-class commentators like myself -- who are always defining "them"...including "their own interests." Second, because the logic of Culture War (US vs. THEM; fight!) has come to define what "politics" means to us, and we define our own interests accordingly. Third, because it's very likely that "we" don't act in "our" own interests any more than "they" do.

Why do we take non-profit do-gooder jobs over better-paying corporate ones? Or do volunteer work? Or give to charity? Or buy fair-trade goods? Or care about the poor / oppressed / underprivileged / marginalized / [pick-your-term] at all? Or even choose to have children? All of these things make us lose money. Often, a LOT of money. We do them because...because they make us feel good. Or, more elementally, because they FEEL RIGHT.

So that's the next question. How did certain things come to FEEL RIGHT to certain groups of people, in certain places and times? Because in a lot of cases, I'm going to argue, it was no accident.

Lindsay Murphy, Amanda Costello, Abigail Lynn Frerichs and 25 others like this.

Miriam Fehlker Is that a quote fom a book?
September 10 at 3:04pm · Like

Sarvananda Bluestone Sounds like an exciting book. There are so many directions this could go and they all would probably be right. Have you checked out some of the early work of Wilhelm Reich? I am thinking particularly of the "Mass Psychology of Fascism". Can't deal with "politics" any more without dealing with pathology. And can't deal with pathology without realizing that we are all, as my brother once elegantly put it, "all fucked up." Would love to talk with you about this. Certainly would love to read it.
September 10 at 3:32pm · Unlike · 2

Caroline Mannheimer From what I've seen/experienced in my 48 years of life, I would have to say that guilt is a huge answer to your last questions. Except that of having children and that depends on whom you're asking-- but I'd say we as human beings are, unless we truly give it thought beyond finances, hard-wired to procreate. There are, of course, many other reasons; ego, looking for love, accidental, religious upbringing, etc. but if I were to boil it down to 2 answers they'd be: guilt and instinct.
By the way, I LOVE "tale of a fail"! Wish I'd thought of it
September 10 at 3:45pm via mobile · Like

Brianna Judd I will definitely read!
September 10 at 4:19pm via mobile · Like

Alex Slivinski Please make it into a comic like Maus or Economix.
Asking a little too much?
September 10 at 5:53pm · Like · 2

Betsy Barnum Your book is a lot more interesting than mine! Well, I actually don't think that, but I'm probably the only one who would't, looking at the two side by side!
September 10 at 8:47pm · Edited · Like

Tommy Williams Please come teach at my school
September 10 at 10:37pm · Like

Andrew Hakomaki Granger Not a fan of Obama AT ALL, at this point, but Glenn Beck is cut from the same cloth, and in my opinion part of the same dog and pony show. basically pulling the wool over the eyes of the people. the reason you couldn't talk with those guys is because the "system" has succeeded in dividing you into different camps against one another. In my view we have been divided and conquered by a media machine that is bought and paid for, and works to subvert the interests of the masses so they can be exploited.

why do people work against their own interests? in the case of your friends at the laundromat the answer is probably simple; they've been duped. duped into believing an "authority" over their own critical thinking and info gathering abilities.

but if we think about the case against Obama it is easy to see how people are turned against him, the steady erosion of civil liberties under this administration, from NDAA to Homeland security, the failure to fulfill on any of his campaign promises, bailouts for banksters, the constant state of war we are in...

September 11 at 1:10am · Like

Ben Fink
September 23

BOOK UPDATE #3: ON KANSAS

"Why do people work against their own interests?" wrote Andrew Hakomaki Granger in response to my last post. "In the case of your friends at the laundromat the answer is probably simple; they've been duped." This is a popular answer. And an intellectually and emotionally satisfying one. We on the left side of things have entertained it for some time -- in fact, it's the essence of the 1968 fusion of Marx and Freud: "You have false consciousness!" Of course, it's usually the other people who have been duped. WE understand our self-interest. It's THEM over there who don't. Some of us, more masochistically-inclined, might say we've ALL been duped, that NONE OF US acts in our self-interest (which leads me to wonder, in that case, what self-interest is at all).

In this book, I make the opposite argument: that we ALL act in our self-interest. All the time. If it appears that some people don't, that's because we don't sufficiently understand their self-interest. Now hold on a second. Am I saying that we all always act as we should, or even in ways that benefit us? Of course not. Many of us engage in all kinds of self- and other-destructive behavior. But we do these things because, for one reason or another, we have come to understand them as in our self-interest. Not because we (or they) have been duped, but for real, objective, understandable reasons. The challenge -- the challenge I take up in this book -- is to understand those reasons. And then to see what we can do to change them.

Case in point, and the central case-study of the first chapter, is Thomas Frank's 2004 book WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS? This is maybe the best example of the "they've been duped" argument that's ever been written. It's well worth a read, but in brief: Frank, a native of Kansas, goes back to his home state to try to figure out why so many of its poor and working-class citizens keep voting for the Republicans -- the party that has destroyed their towns, outsourced their jobs, and handed their money over to the rich in the form of massive tax cuts. His answer? They've been duped. Specifically, they've been convinced by self-serving politicians and pundits that the REAL issues that matter aren't these "economic" issues, but rather the "social" issues. The true villains, in other words, aren't the greedy corporate overlords but the elitist liberals, who oppress them with secularism, science, smut, and most of all, abortion. So working-class Kansans organize themselves and build impressive mass-movements...that end up empowering their oppressors.

It's a powerful and well-made argument, which captivated a generation of angry liberals...myself included. There are just two problems with it: (1) it's useless, and (2) it's incorrect. It's useless because it seems to say there's no possible way we can do anything to change the situation. And even if we could, it wouldn't work: the solution would be in terms of "how WE can free THEM from their false-consciousness" -- thus confirming the

stereotype of elitist and condescending liberals. (I don't think I'm dumb. And I wouldn't want to listen to someone who called me dumb. You?) It's incorrect because when you read the book and analyze Frank's description closely, you see that his working-class Kansans are merely doing what we all do: we act in ways that allow us to get by and feel decent about ourselves in the cultural situations we find ourselves in. That often has nothing to do with economic self-interest. Rich undergrads at Duke drive BMWs and buy expensive condos. Rich undergrads at the University of Chicago take public transit and live modestly. The difference is the culture: one values displays of wealth, and one doesn't. But in both cases, the self-interest is the same: do the things that make you valued in the culture you're in.

Self-interest is indeed about maximizing your value, as economists would have it. But value isn't always about money. It's also about cultural capital (to use sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term). Cultural capital isn't counted in a bank; it's felt in our bodies (Bourdieu calls it our "habitus"). When we've got a lot of cultural capital in a given culture, we feel comfortable, well-liked, supported -- good. When we don't, we feel out of place, disconnected, alone -- bad. Which cuts all ways. Yes, some poorer Kansans support Republicans, because that's what's valued in the cultures where they developed their habitus. And for the same reason, some richer Kansans support Democrats (and thus incur massive tax hikes) -- because they've developed their habitus in cosmopolitan areas, and they just couldn't vote for someone who's pro-life.

(And for the same reason, I'm currently jeopardizing my own health. For the first time in eleven years I'm living with my parents, and without good health insurance. I've had a bad cough for weeks. I know I need to get it checked out. My parents agree, and they said they'd pay for a doctor if I want/need. So it would seem like going to the doctor would be totally in my self-interest. But I've been having a really hard time making myself do it. My habitus is putting up an awful fight. It just feels really wrong -- either to "waste" hundreds of my own dollars, or to rely on my parents' "charity." (Yes, yes, I'll make myself go to the doctor...soon. I just bring this up to illustrate the point. Please don't comment with worries about my health!))

So what's the point of all this? The point is, if we want to defeat the culture wars and make meaningful social, political, and economic change, we've got to ask a different question. We can't ask, "How have these people been duped, and what can we do about it?" That's a dead end. We have to ask, instead, "How have these cultures, in which so much self-destructive behavior is so highly valued, been BUILT?"

That is the question that the rest of the book will try to answer.

Anna Kunin, Andrew Hakomaki Granger, Robin Brown and 15 others like this.

Sally Jo Sorensen Thank you, Ben: "I don't think I'm dumb. And I wouldn't want to listen to someone who called me dumb. You?" And please go to the doctor. Look forward to the book.

September 23 at 12:14pm · Like · 1

Jasper Sonne Excellent Approach!

September 23 at 12:37pm · Like

Noah Bassel Read Corey Robin if you haven't already. His writing can be a little disjointed at times, but I think he has a good handle on part of the appeal that conservative ideology can hold (I.e. How "Reagan Democrats" see right wing policies as being in their interests).

September 23 at 12:39pm via mobile · Unlike · 1

Betsy Barnum I'm all ears! I love the respect and lack of elitism of your thesis, and the countargument you are making to the usual analysis (well represented by Frank), and which seems embedded in just about any Marxist interpretation. (Not that I reject Marxism! But it does have that element.) Looking forward to the next installment.

September 23 at 1:39pm · Unlike · 2

Genevieve Waller Excited to read your book (especially as a Kansan)! I've thought a lot about the abortion issue in Kansas and how changing cultural attitudes toward sex might make the issue less black and white for people...

September 23 at 1:42pm · Like

Sarvananda Bluestone A thought creeps unbidden into my consciousness: maybe the answer for radicals (I am not a liberal) is collaborative problem solving. You think. Allow people to answer and to develop the solutions to their own problems before we, the enlightened, overedcated leftists, give the answer. Of course, that means we have to listen.

September 23 at 6:06pm · Like · 1

Ben Fink Agreed, Sarv! I'll have much more to say about this, later. But briefly: I think this is what Alinsky and others in the broad-based community organizing tradition are trying to get at. And Paulo Freire and the critical pedagogues. And Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams and the (early) cultural studies people. (So, with reference to Betsy's comment: those in the Marxist tradition who took the dialogue part of dialectics seriously.) Of course, they all succeeded only sometimes. And their descendants, perhaps even less so. Still, we may have what to learn from them.

September 23 at 9:44pm · Like

Andrew Hakomaki Granger I think we might be saying the same thing here Ben...

if you look at this last question you pose:
"How have these cultures, in which so much self-destructive behavior is so highly valued, been BUILT?"

It feels like an opening up of part of the first:
"How have these people been duped..."

because I'm suggesting as you are that many aspects of these cultures are "no accident" I use the word duped because i believe that often the self-destructive and debilitating values held in oppressed cultures are put there and/or reinforced by those who would exploit them. (Religion has many powerful examples of this) They have been "duped" by their prevailing culture because they did not create it out of choice, they have been presented with a set of values and act in accordance with them as a reaction... Not because of personal weakness or being "dumb" but because culture envelops us... when you're swimming its hard not to get wet.

That said i look forward to where you take the final question --- How is culture, esp self-destructive culture BUILT? and how have our cultures been Built specifically?

I think that asking this question as you've done is important, as is trying to find the answer


September 24 at 10:56am · Unlike · 1

Yann Burrett It's a well made argument, but I gotta say I don't find myself agreeing with it. It's contingent on the idea that people know what their preferences and best interests are. It goes against all the evidence in the field of behavioral economics, memory construction and advertising. Even as far back as Epicurus people realized that human beings are extremely bad at knowing what they want. my preferences, desires and motives are all malleable. Even my memories are constructed after the fact. And while I like to think of myself as the captain of the good ship Yann, the truth is I'm just a passenger with a silly uniform.

September 25 at 11:39am · Like · 1

Sarvananda Bluestone Maybe community and cooperation are the basis of self interest. They are, after all, the prime aspects that define us as human.

September 25 at 7:44pm · Like

Ben Fink Yann: as with Andrew, I think we're actually in agreement. I'm familiar with the recent arguments in behavioral economics (thanks for the Ariely; very useful), as well as moral psychology and cognitive science (e.g., Daniel Kahneman's thesis that we generally think using fast intuition and emotion ("System 1") rather than cool rational analysis ("System 2"). All of this is in the chapter. So let me clarify my terms. I am NOT saying that people "know what their preferences and best interests are," at least not in any rational, cognitive sense. Quite the opposite. What I'm saying is, except in those rare situations where we actually sit down and rationally try to calculate costs and benefits, we generally just do what feels right. THAT is our self-interest, as we generally perceive it: we want to "feel right." The question is: how did the things that "feel right" (for given people, in given cultures and situations and moments) come to "feel right"?

September 26 at 8:32am · Like

Yann Burrett Does that not suggest that the split between what you call "duped" and what you call "self interest" is largely semantic?

September 26 at 8:33am · Like

Ben Fink Not sure exactly what you mean by "semantic". It's a question of method. There are two different approaches to the same problem: the "duped" approach (which assumes, contra all recent evidence, that we should be rational cost-benefit-calculating creatures, and we're just bad at it) and the "habitus" approach (which assumes that self-interest is perceived intuitively -- what feels right -- rather than rationally -- what I have calculated to be maximal).

September 26 at 8:38am · Like

Yann Burrett I guess what I mean is that "duped" suggests that someone is actively seeking to fool you into making decisions you wouldn't be making otherwise. The habitus approach in no way contradicts that this may happen, and as we know that the fields of marketing and lobbying rely on the dupe effect, I'm not sure how there's much of a distinction there. Even without that level of pre-meditation, people's feelings of "what feels right" are altered and manipulated by others all the time, often without any kind of conscious effort by either party.

September 26 at 8:41am · Like

Ben Fink Okay I see what you're saying. Yes, there are ABSOLUTELY people who are actively working to create situations in which certain things "feel right" and other things don't: organizers. (Including the intellectual subset of organizers, "organic intellectuals," which includes lobbyists and marketers.) I guess my issue with "duped" is in a lot of ways semantic. Usually when we use "duped," we assume that there's one subset of the population who are duped (either the dumb Kansans or the dumb media consumers), and another subset of the population who are not (either the smart advertising execs or the smart critical theorists). That divide is what I take issue with. I don't think it exists. (Either we're all variously "duped" or none of us are.) And I think assuming it exists is counterproductive. (It creates culture wars, which keep the 99% fighting amongst each other.)

September 26 at 8:51am · Like

Ben Fink And Sarv: community and cooperation, perhaps. The way I'll be putting it: the experience of making the world we live in, collectively with the people around us. This may well be a universal human need. Not necessarily part of "self-interest" as I've defined it, because a lot of people don't even KNOW it feels right...because they've never had the chance to DO it...because the world they/we live in provides us very few OPPORTUNITIES to do it. And out of this lack of opportunity to collectively make the world we live in, so much suffering comes. (We perceive, rightly or wrongly, that we don't have much ability to participate in making the world. So we find other outlets. They're often not pretty.)

September 26 at 8:52am · Like

Yann Burrett Then yes, we are in complete agreement. The problem is that "duping" is omnipresent but seen as something that happens only to other people. In the same way that people who agree with one's political, religious, whatever views are smart, compassionate and well rounded, and people who disagree with them are idiots. Or as Dr Airlee put it in one of his TED talks, "people are really bad at being rational. Not you, you're fine. Everyone else."

September 26 at 8:54am · Unlike · 2

Ben Fink
October 4 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #4: ON ORGANIZED IDEAS

If you spend any time training or working as a broad-based community organizer (i.e. roughly in the tradition of Saul Alinsky), you'll encounter the central concept of POWER. The whole point of organizing is to build power. "But," interrupts the stereotypical straw-man liberal, "power corrupts! Power is inherently oppressive! Power is the thing we're fighting against...we need to RESIST it!" Bullshit, say well-trained organizers. Without power, you can't make any change...or do anything else for that matter (other than whine). With it, and only with it, you can get things done. If you're serious about the changes you want to make in the world, you'll spend your time building power.

Power, in the traditional formula, comes in two forms -- and only two forms: (1) organized people, and (2) organized money. Period. No wishy-washy liberal fantasies. If you want power, get a whole lot of people and money together. But in recent years, explained Pamela Twiss at a training I attended, there's been an "esoteric debate" within the field of organizing. Not about whether you need organized people and organized money -- you definitely do. But, she and others argue, you need something else too...namely, as Liz Loeb exclaimed from the back of the room: "Organized ideas!"

Organized Ideas. That's the title of my book. (The subtitle, "Defeating the Culture Wars," was explained in previous installments.) It's a concept that's easy to misunderstand, especially for people (such as myself, sometimes) who are otherwise uncomfortable with power. It doesn't mean you can change the world by writing a book or publishing an article or becoming a "public intellectual," as goes the liberal/academic dream. It actually means the opposite. It means that people's ideas, their most deeply-held beliefs, are a product of how those people are organized. Of the communities we're organized into. If you're a part of a community that reads all deviance from the Bible-as-interpreted-by-Jerry-Falwell as sinful, you're going to hate Michael Moore and Barbara Ehrenreich, no matter how good their arguments are. Same goes for everyone else -- we're ALL members of these kinds of communities (literary theorist Stanley Fish calls them "interpretive communities"), which have -- literally -- taught us how to read.

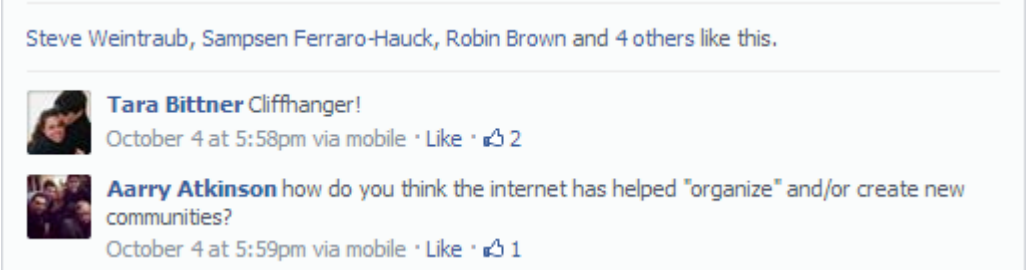
So, to link up with where we ended last time: interpretive communities build cultural-capital markets. Our habitus -- our sense of what "feels right," including what IDEAS and IDEOLOGIES feel right -- has been developed on the markets built by the interpretive communities we are, and have been, a part of. (We're all part of multiple interpretive communities, and different interpretive communities tend to have different and often conflicting ways of reading the same thing. That's why this is so complicated.)

Now here's the key part: interpretive communities don't occur naturally, or happen spontaneously. Like all communities, they exist because they've been ORGANIZED. By

the labor-intensive work of people and organizations with power: organized people, organized money...and organized ideas. (It's cyclical: the more power you build, the more power you have to build even more power. Some organizers have likened it to Marx's M-C-M' cycle.)

This is the major argument of the book. It may seem simple and obvious -- in some ways it IS simple and obvious -- but we also forget it, all the time. When we get mad as hell at Ted Cruz's constituents -- the ones who've decided it's a great idea to keep the government shut down for as long as it takes to destroy the Constitutional system of checks and balances (at least for as long as the current non-white/American/legitimate is in office), even if it costs them their own jobs -- it's easy to throw up our hands and think that they're hopelessly deluded, totally irrational, forever on the other side of a permanent culture-war divide. But that's not true. However strong and deeply-held their ideas are, they're not natural or inevitable: they are the product of organizing. A whole lot of organizing.

Which means, of course, that given enough power (people+money+ideas), they can also be dis-organized. And re-organized. But to do so, we've got to figure out how they've been organized. To do what organizers call a power-analysis. And that's where we're going next: to do a power-analysis of one of the most powerful and dangerous organized ideas in the contemporary world, an idea that I call "cyberpunk neoliberalism."



Ben Fink The internet itself? Not at all -- it's a medium of communication, and it can't organize any more than a printing press or a movie theater can. (Sorry, I know I'm being a smartass. But the way some people talk about "the internet," it's as though it has a godlike force and will of its own.) To answer the question seriously: has the internet changed the ways people organize interpretive communities? Yes, to an extent. The internet has basically changed two things (that are relevant here): the ways we can communicate across distance, and the number of people we can communicate with in a given amount of time. When things "go viral," be they cat videos or the Tea Party, you get interpretive communities formed without the usual constraints of geography and word-of-mouth. So thanks to the internet, it's a lot easier to find an interpretive community that'll validate and confirm and perpetuate any idea you might have -- for better (revolutionary democratic ideas within repressive regimes) or worse (the idea that Obama's birth certificate is fake). But the internet -- or rather, the cultural practices that structure the way we use the internet -- has some very strong biases: toward things that are fast, individualistic, and entrepreneurial. In other words: toward capital and the dominant culture of neoliberal capitalism. So if you're organizing an interpretive community with interpretive strategies that are in sync with capital and capitalism, the internet can do a lot to help it grow. But if you want to organize an interpretive community in opposition to capital and capitalism, the internet will be of somewhat less help. That's why most organizers I know still rely on face-to-face meetings. The work involved in building a habitus that can oppose the dominant culture is work that usually can't be done through a screen. (Much more on this to come in future installments.)

October 6 at 1:07pm · Like · 3

Liz Loeb Yes! What Ben said! ☺

October 6 at 1:21pm via mobile · Like

Tara Bittner I think social media can make people lazy and uncivil in their causes, too. They get this false sense of having done something important by reposting a picture or writing a rant rather than actually getting on the phone with their Senator's office or walking in a peaceful march. This approach makes it easy to be rude and sometimes hateful towards people of opposing worldviews because they are facing a box in front of them and not an actual person who has feelings and beliefs. I have been reading your updates since you've started posting them, and they are very interesting, even to a right-of-center like myself!

October 6 at 4:37pm · Like · 1

Ben Fink Totally agree, Tara. It's all about deferred agency -- in a cultural/political/economic environment where there seem to be (emphasis on SEEM) so few opportunities to take meaningful action to make change, how do we live with ourselves, given that many of us want to feel like we've got some kind of agency? Internet slacktivism, of the time you describe, is one of those ways. Not only does it make people more likely to be rude and hateful; it also makes them/us less likely to actually DO anything.

October 6 at 7:55pm · Like · 1

Robin Brown (1) 'more and more 'liberal' identity politics is looking like an enemy or problem. Fine with that. (2) there is no singular 'Internet'; as Ben rightly says, it's an instrument. And it's radically subdivided. Nobody reads 'everything' and intelligent search engines compound that segmentation. What drives selection, again, is identity formations. The scary stuff my smart country friends post (about Obama, guns, the coming apocalypse...) is read by millions and invisible / incomprehensible to the academics and media critics.

October 7 at 9:39am · Unlike · 1

Robin Brown FYI: and ad for 'body armor' just appeared on the sidebar of my Facebook. Hmmnmnmn. Wonder how their intelligent search engine / content aggregator decided THAT?

October 7 at 9:57am · Like

Ben Fink Maybe "Obama, guns, and the coming apocalypse"? Or "country"?

October 7 at 10:01am · Like · 1

Caroline Mannheimer Ben, My 2¢ is: you had me until you strayed from an unbiased and objective viewpoint. But that's another discussion. I wanted to propose to you that you're over simplifying it. Plenty of people do NOT go along with the community in which they were raised--myself included. However I agree, whole heartedly about power.
I was in a theater workshop this weekend in which the person teaching said "powerful people, or PEOPLE THAT ARE GOOD AT BEING POWERFUL, wait 3 seconds before they speak" and it struck me. People that are good at being powerful. Some people have power thrust upon them and they suck at it. They inevitably lose said power but if they manage to keep it for any length of time it's usually because they have smart, cunning, manipulative people around them, propping them up.
It's just funny though how I'd just been thinking about not just to have power but to be GOOD at having power (ie. keeping it). Because I don't look at having power as a bad thing either--it's a necessary element for true change.

I miss your northeast intellectual self and our conversations. We don't agree on all things but we always found common ground. The current Administration and Congress could learn something from us, eh?

October 7 at 10:50am via mobile · Like

Ben Fink Hey Caroline. Miss you too. Two things: first, I'm not necessarily talking about the community (or communities) in which we were raised. Sometimes, as you say, people bolt from them and very intentionally enter other communities. But there'll be a community (or communities) there, either way -- we can't make meaning without one. And the community in which you were raised will still be part of how you make meaning, even in the ways you rebel against it. (Think of the profound differences among Jewish-raised atheists, Catholic-raised atheists, evangelical-raised atheists, and atheist-raised atheists.) Second, I don't ever claim to have an unbiased or objective viewpoint. Just an honest one.

October 7 at 1:30pm · Like

Ben Fink
October 22

BOOK UPDATE #5: ON SOLIDARITY

Another tale of another fail. Or two fails, actually. Three years ago, in the fall of 2010, Robin Brown and I were teaching Introduction to Cultural Studies to Gina Musto, Alex Slivinski, and 198 other undergraduates at the University of Minnesota. And we had a brilliant new idea for an assignment. (Or so we thought.) We split the class into pairs of students with differing views of labor politics. We showed them all a fiercely pro-labor documentary film about a brutal, deadly labor dispute (Barbara Kopple's HARLAN COUNTY, USA). And then we told them to try to convince their partner, in writing, to interpret the film in the way they themselves did -- basically, to change their partner's mind about labor.

We expected the film, with its gripping, graphic descriptions of industrial poverty and suffering at the hands of greedy bosses, to divide the class sharply into pro- and anti-labor interpretive communities: one siding with the workers and with the film, the other with the bosses and against the film. We expected a culture war. Wrong. What we got instead was, basically, consensus. A weird, muted, passionless consensus. It wasn't that they were anti-labor: they almost all felt sympathy and a certain amount of outrage at the workers' squalid living conditions, and they were no fan of the bosses. And they weren't really pro-labor either: they were very skeptical of unions and strikes and prolonged collective action. No, the overwhelming majority of students -- regardless of their positions on labor politics (we asked and controlled for this) -- reacted to the workers' suffering by asking: "Why don't they just leave?" As in, yes, this mining job seems to suck -- so why waste nine months on a strike that'll leave you starving and, at best, only get you this sucky job back? Why not leave, go somewhere else, maybe go back to school, and get a better job? (Fail #1.)

Oh goodness did my outrage fly. Not at my students, thankfully -- hi Alex and Gina and my many other former-student Facebook friends who might be reading this! -- but vented to my friends and colleagues, any chance I got. Just get up and leave. Forget the community you've spent your whole life building. Forget the fight you've spent your whole career working to win. Just leave. I was appalled at my students' insensitivity, at their unchecked privilege, and above all, at their lack of any sense of solidarity. Have we become so obsessed with individualism, so addicted to the romance of mobility (in all senses), that we no longer see ourselves, and our self-interest, as connected to the people around us, who are in it with us?

Well, yes. And that "we," I would soon learn, includes me. I learned this a couple years later, when the graduate assistants at the Minnesota lost a union vote -- after a campaign that'd lasted many years, and that I'd been involved in. (Admittedly, in a pretty minimal way.) I was crushed, disheartened, depressed. I felt like we'd all been collectively slapped

in the face and told our labor wasn't worth anything. And so what did I do? Did I regroup, stay connected to my fellow grad workers, and keep working to build solidarity? Nope. I just left. Greetings from West Hartford, Connecticut, where I'm living rent-free with my wealthy-enough parents, working as an independent research consultant, in solidarity with no one, and -- honestly -- much happier for it. Feeling empowered, even. If my students were insensitive, blindly privileged, and unable to feel any deep sense of solidarity with fellow suffering workers, than so am I. (Fail #2.)

Okay, so once we're done flagellating ourselves for our sins (which is always very helpful), we can ask: what makes us all feel this way? To answer this question, I want to propose we look at ourselves the same way we looked at the Kansans in past posts: we're just people, doing what feels right. And what feels right, as always, depends on what market our habitus has been formed, which itself depends on what interpretive communities we've been organized into.

And there's a lot of organizing going on. Unions, themselves, are interpretive communities -- powerful ones. (Thomas Frank, in the Kansas book, cites an AFL-CIO study of the 2000 election: white males voted 2 to 1 for Bush. White males in unions voted 2 to 1 for Gore. Same goes when you control for lots of other demographics.) Unions, of course, are on the decline. Along with lots of other kinds of interpretive communities that encourage solidarity, that encourage us to understand our self-interest as bound up with the self-interest of our neighbors, our co-workers, our communities. And not by accident. What we are witnessing, in my classroom, in our union drive, in so much of contemporary American culture, is the result of an extensive, eighty-year-long organizing campaign to seek out and destroy all interpretive communities -- as small as small businesses, as large as nations and governments -- that stand in the way of the final triumph of capitalism over every aspect of our lives. That organizing campaign, to which we'll turn next time, is called "neoliberalism."

Nolan A. Croce, Spencer Schwartz, Zosia Anne and 31 others like this.

Marla Zubel This is so right on. I hadn't thought about it in these terms before (i.e. "interpretive communities"), and I especially like where you take it in the last paragraph. As far as solidarity goes, thank you for your phone call last week. I've been terrible about returning calls/emails lately, in part because I've had a nasty cold. But I look forward to catching up, and was really happy to get your voicemail, comrade.
October 22 at 3:57pm · Edited · Unlike · 1

Alex Slivinski I'm not saying it greatly pleases me that our response got such a rise out of you, but... it IS pretty funny now.
October 22 at 4:29pm via mobile · Edited · Like · 4

Jean Chapdelaine As always, you show your humility as well as your genius. Now I'm concerned about my selfishness vs community rating.
October 22 at 4:21pm · Like

Ben Fink Alex, you're such a jerk. And I love you.
October 22 at 5:27pm · Like · 3

Joe Michaud-Scorza Thanks for sharing ☺ Neoliberal agenda has gutted so many aspects of our country's former self that kept blue collar workers protected. This is what will inevitably happen when such an economic tactic is put to use in a society full of people who don't understand (or care about) its implications. Do you think it's possible to have a society that is so well educated/experienced that it might incorporate a neoliberal stance in an ethical fashion? This idea reminds me of a Joel Salatin quote "We don't need a law against McDonald's or a law against slaughterhouse abuse--we ask for too much salvation by legislation. All we need to do is empower individuals with the right philosophy and the right information to opt out en masse." Buckminster Fuller said, "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."
October 22 at 5:48pm · Unlike · 1

Betsy Barnum I like where you're going with this.
October 22 at 5:53pm · Like

Anna Kunin Aren't, like, Facebook groups an adequate replacement for interpretive communities? Get with the digital age, old man.
October 22 at 5:57pm via mobile · Unlike · 3

Robin Brown So much wonderful stuff here, but the core insight that we HAVE been 'organized' for 80+ years is so important. It's easy to imagine the political landscape as a sort of ecosystem that 'evolves' subject to a lot of random events. Nuh Uh. The Koch's are awful and big, but not new. All's one needs to do is to read old right-wing propaganda to see that the same tropes and appeals are identical over decades. Not by accident. If it can be organized into being it can be organized OUT.
October 22 at 10:13pm · Unlike · 1

Robin Brown And Anna: FB groups ARE 'interpretive communities.' How community is mediated is important, but not definitive.
October 22 at 10:14pm · Like

Eric Schindler Why was it the case that you were forced to leave once you lost the union vote? Were you really making so little money that you had to drop out of your Ph.D. program in order to survive?
November 15 at 6:48pm · Like

Ben Fink
November 7 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #6: ON NEOLIBERALISM

Why do we -- my students, my friends, myself, and very possibly you -- run away from our colleagues, co-workers, and communities and into the arms of our oppressors? What makes it so hard for us to join together with the people around us, who suffer the same oppressions we do, and work collectively to fight those oppressions? Why do we feel the need to see ourselves as so cut off from the people around us, working like hell to succeed in perpetual competition with them? Even when it just seems to make us poor and lonely?

In short: the dominant interpretive community we live in, the market where we've formed our habitus, leaves us very little choice in the matter. It feels good -- cool, powerful, real -- to see ourselves as mobile and independent. And it feels bad -- outdated, powerless -- to see ourselves any other way. (For examples of what I mean, see Book Update #5.)

This is not an accident. It's not just "the way things are." It's happened this way because of a whole lot of organizing work -- to organize people, money, and ideas -- that started some eighty years ago. This is the political campaign called "neoliberalism." It started in the 1930s, when some conservative economists in Europe and the U.S. started organizing to oppose state intervention in the economy -- all the rage at the time, at the height of the Depression. It got institutionalized in the 1940s, when Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, author of the Glenn Beck favorite THE ROAD TO SERFDOM, met a very rich and very Roosevelt-hating furniture salesman from Kansas City (you can't make this s#!t up) in Chicago.

It took only a few years for the two of them -- with their organizing skills and a whole lot of Kansas City furniture cash -- to turn the University of Chicago into a center of radical right-wing economics, philosophy, and law. And from there, they went global: they organized the international Mont Pelerin Society, an annual worldwide meeting of economists, businesspeople, and policymakers, which over the next couple of decades would develop neoliberalism into a full-fledged worldwide campaign. One of its most famous products was Chicago economist, pundit, and Pinochet aide Milton Friedman, whose 1962 neoliberal manifesto CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM has never gone out of print.

Fast forward to the early 1970s. The global economy was in crisis. And the neoliberals, after 30 years of organizing, were ready to strike. Mainstream economists didn't have any answers. But the neoliberals did. Within only a few years, they'd taken control of governments around the world, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the lead, and implemented their radical agenda: eliminate every interpretive community that stood in the way of boundless corporate growth, from unions (which were busted with a

vengeance) to community organizations (which were systematically defunded) to entire national governments (which were toppled and replaced). "There is no alternative" to radical free-market capitalism, Thatcher said. Which was increasingly true...because they MADE it true.

Why didn't we resist? Why didn't we put up a fight against our communities getting destroyed? Well, many people did. (This was when lots of present-day progressive organizations, from Citizen Action groups to NPR, got their start.) But not enough. The change happened so fast, backed by so much organized money and people and ideas, and in a time of so much crisis, that most people felt powerless to do anything about it. (A familiar feeling, having just lived through the shutdown.) And of course, the neoliberal campaign had lots of talented propagandists like Friedman.

But all of this, in itself, isn't enough to explain why neoliberalism has so thoroughly dominated our culture. As powerful as the neoliberal campaign was, it owes a lot of its success to a seeming coincidence. Just as neoliberals were taking power in the early 1980s, a new subgenre of science fiction was emerging, which would reshape the way we understood technology, our work lives, our communities, and ourselves. This new subgenre, cyberpunk, would prove to be neoliberalism's most effective (if unwitting) propaganda tool. Cyberpunk would convince us, more than any neoliberal propaganda, that there is truly no alternative. And more than that: it would convince us to love it.

Noah Bassel, David J. Valdez, Evan Druce and 14 others like this.

Noah Bassel I'm not a big fan of Milton Friedman's politics, but I think he's a more complicated figure than some on the left give him credit for. Milton Friedman's ideal America offered a guaranteed minimum cash income to all citizens (what he referred to as the negative income tax, and the intellectual impetus behind the EITC); in other words he was far more compassionate than many of his supposed disciples. Also, while his popular writings were often intellectually sloppy and contained more than a few sleights-of-hand, many of his economic writings are widely respected even now. I do agree, though, that his associations with Pinochet (it was actually his students who acted as aides to the regime rather than Friedman himself, but that's probably beside the point) raise some awfully serious questions about his supposed commitment to "liberty"; questions that his followers have never really been able to answer in any satisfactory way.

November 7 at 3:14pm · Like

Jamie S Green Hey Ben, very interesting stuff here! In Britain there was an organised fightback to the Neo-Liberal agenda of Thatcher. In the 70s the working class in the UK was the most powerful it had ever been - In 1974 the Labour Party, after a wave of successful resistance to tory cuts and privatisation, won on an election on the platform of ' fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families".

In Britain our Keynsian model of economics failed because capitalism couldn't keep up with the demand of workers and, as you point out, the right-wing gave us answers, promising the market would fix everything. To do it ofcourse Thatcher had to break the unions and spent ten years doing so to the point that Britain's 14 million strong trade union movement had been reduced to about 6 million with only 14% of the private sector unionised.

The most fascinating part is that even now neo-liberalism has been proved wrong, the global left seem impotent to provide any answers - here in the UK currently the conservatives are freeing up the marketing more, shifting more public money into private hands and now capitalism is on life support from the public sector. Where's the left in all of this? I ask myself this every day ....

I'd like to read your book when you're finished writing though!

November 7 at 3:16pm · Like

Ollie Bernstein Fun read, but super subjective. I personally find Friedman to be spot on in his philosophies. You seem to dress neoliberalism up to be some kind of evil conspiracy, when its advocates honestly do want a better system to substantiate personal freedom and well being.

November 7 at 5:19pm · Edited · Like · 2

Jason Small A rising tide lifts all boats. Remember where this country (and others that have followed its lead) has taken the world in the past 80 years, as you update us through technology unfathomable at the time when its building blocks were being birthed through a neoliberal economy. Unbridled greed and profits drive unbridled imagination and entrepreneurship.

November 7 at 4:02pm · Like · 2

Maylea Ma Thanks for sharing Ben! Ironically given your subject, reading this and the comment exchanges, I feel like I'm back in the UofC in a dorm. Thanks for bringing that feeling back.

November 7 at 7:51pm via mobile · Unlike · 1

Betsy Barnum Ummm...what if I never heard of or read any cyberpunk sci fi? Does it still affect me? Also I think the neoliberal takeover has been so successful in part because it happened so slowly--like a coup d'etat that took 40 years instead of happening overnight.

November 7 at 8:45pm · Like

Ben Fink Thanks for all of your comments! I really appreciate them. Let me offer a few responses. Ollie: neoliberalism is a conspiracy. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing -- every intentional act of organizing, from a communist revolution to a neighborhood block party, is a conspiracy. Whether it's evil or not is a matter of interpretation. The important point is, it didn't happen by accident. The way this history is often told, including by leftists, it's as if Hayek and Friedman wrote some good books (and they ARE good books), which just sat there on the shelves until one day world governments picked them up and said "hey these are good ideas!" That's not how it happened. Neoliberalism, no less than any other political campaign, took power through organized action. Noah: agreed. Friedman, like Hayek and all other great thinkers, is way too complicated to be reduced to "good" or "bad." I'm talking here, though, not about their individual work as scholars but about the collective work of the organizing campaign they were a part of -- a campaign that often oversimplified their work, just like I do. Jason: there is no question that neoliberalism has contributed a lot to the growth of technology, which helps (or at least has the potential to help) all people. My big issue with neoliberalism is how it tries to destroy everything that's not part of it. You and I, I think, both believe in the freedom to choose. If you want to elect a capitalist government and live as an entrepreneur, fine. But if you want to elect a non-capitalist government or live in a collective, that needs to be fine too. And when neoliberals run the government, it's not fine -- they will actively try to bust you, defund you, shut you down, or even kill you. It's all happened, many times. Betsy: yes, cyberpunk still affects you even if you've never picked up a cyberpunk novel. The Internet and all the technology around it, as I'll explain next time, is literally a literary formation -- the stories of Gibson and Stephenson were a huge influence on the programmers that created it all. And these stories, whether their authors knew it or not, were radically neoliberal. Jamie: "the left" is a tricky concept in the contemporary U.S. That said, it's a very important part of the story -- and I'll be getting to it soon.

November 8 at 5:39pm · Edited · Like · 2

Ollie Bernstein I absolutely agree in the sense that any gathering is a conspiracy. My main emphasis is on the "evil" part. Of course you don't like it, but I personally disagree with portraying the other side as unfeeling. I do support biased journalism and analysis, but as a supporter of "neoliberal" ideologies, I'm able to see how there are truly good intentions behind them. I think you summed it up well- difference in interpretation.

November 8 at 5:40pm · Unlike · 2

Jason Small I remember a history lesson or two about this national socialist party that was elected in the 30s... How did that work out again? Oh right... they did exactly what you just outlined neoliberalism does. So are we just comparing granny smith to red delicious? ☺

November 8 at 7:43pm · Like · 1

Ben Fink
November 14 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #7: ON CYBERPUNK

Okay, so it's no surprise that the job market sucks. We supposedly came out of the recession years ago, and still no one can find a job. And when you do find a job, it's likely that it won't be full-time, won't pay like it used to, won't provide decent benefits (which is where so much of the healthcare hubbub comes from in the first place), and won't offer much job security. "Precarious labor," some academic types call it. Temps. Adjuncts. Contract workers. My job. Maybe yours too. This is the new normal. Where you get less and your boss keeps more.

What might be surprising, though -- as it was for me -- is that this new reality didn't just happen. It wasn't the inevitable result of "market forces." It was carefully planned. The editors of Business Week laid it all out back in 1974: "It will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow -- the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more. Nothing that this nation, or any other nation has done in modern history compares in difficulty with the selling job that must now be done to make people accept the new reality." And as neoliberals like Thatcher, Reagan, Deng, Pinochet, and even Clinton took power, that's just what they did. Sure, they used a lot of violence (both physical and economic) to redistribute wealth upwards. But violence without consent will only get you so far. You've got to make people accept it. Or better yet, like it.

Ironically, the most effective neoliberal propaganda didn't come from the neoliberal movement at all. It came from science fiction. Specifically, from cyberpunk, a subgenre of SF that was coming into existence just as neoliberalism was coming to power. Cyberpunk authors, as far as I know (and please correct me if you know more; I'm no expert), don't have much of a political agenda -- they range from being apolitical to being vaguely anarchist in that kind of Pirate Party, information-wants-to-be-free kind of way. What they're interested in is technology. And the way technology is going to change the way humans are going to live and interact with each other. More than anything, they're interested in the Internet. In fact you could make a good argument that cyberpunk writers invented the Internet, at least as we know it today. The concepts of "cyberspace," "microsoft," and "the matrix" come from William Gibson's 1983 novel NEUROMANCER. The idea of the Internet as a place where everyday people go for fun and consumption, as opposed to a secured database accessed only by experts and hackers, came from Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel SNOW CRASH. Many of the programmers and entrepreneurs who made these ideas a reality admit to being big fans of Gibson and Stephenson -- and some of the Internet's most revolutionary programs, including Google Earth and Second Life, are direct steals from their novels.

Gibson and Stephenson didn't just dream up a bunch of new futuristic technology. They dreamed up a whole whole new futuristic world for their technology to live in. Think

BLADE RUNNER. (Dick's story is from an earlier moment in SF, but the movie is very cyberpunk.) Think about the dark, steamy, neon-lit cityscape; the general lawlessness; the fly-by-night speed of business, pleasure, relationships, everything. This is a world where everything is run by huge corporations. Where every union has been busted. Where every regulation has been lifted. Where every government has been drowned in Grover Norquist's bathtub. Where every problem has a technological solution ("there's an app for that"), and everything without a technological solution (massive poverty, unemployment, exploitation, environmental destruction) is no longer considered a problem. To me, it sounds like a dystopia. To a neoliberal, it is paradise.

And whatever our political beliefs, when we read cyberpunk, it's hard not to love it. How do they do it? How do Gibson and Stephenson make a commie like me love a neoliberal utopia? It's all in the characters. Sure, we see the masses of starving, hopelessly oppressed people -- but only for a moment, as they're being driven past, stepped on, or shot at. The protagonists, the people we care about, are all young, über-hip hackers. They are WAY too cool for backward things like community and family and long-term relationships, let alone politics. Who needs a union, after all, when you have the power to jack into the matrix, transfigure yourself into pure data, penetrate the walls of the world's most powerful corporations, and single-handedly bring them down? Not that they're looking to bring down capitalism -- they're working for other powerful entities, who stand to benefit from these corporations' downfall, and who reward our protagonists with the first big paycheck in their lives. Cyberpunk is basically Horatio Alger with a lot more sex, violence, and implants. Our heroes are enterprising individuals, who start off as poor nobodies, and through hard work and talent alone, they become fabulously rich. Of course, as in Alger, there's also a lot of luck involved. And after the task is done, they don't just lose their jobs; they also lose their connection to the people they've been closest to for a long time and might even love. Sometimes they even seem to almost maybe get a little sad about it. But...on to the next job.

We are living in the world cyberpunk dreamed up. All the thrilling, boundless technology; all of the political decline and massive corporate control; all of the low-wage, low-benefit, low-stability work; and all of the basic, existential loneliness. Neoliberalism made sure there was no alternative to this world. Cyberpunk made us love it.

And I do mean "us." Even those of us who consider ourselves very liberal, leftist, progressive, transgressive, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, whatever. Because most of us have formed our habitus on a market that's no less cyberpunk-neoliberal than the rest of society: the market that I will call "academia and para-academia."

Spencer Schwartz, Nolan A. Croce, Aarry Atkinson and 22 others like this.

Anna Kunin as a science fiction fan, favorite installment yet.
November 14 at 5:06pm · Unlike · 1

Andi Cheney I got my hackles up about the cyberpunk stuff, but this makes total sense and my brain is kinda blown. Yes. This. So much sense. And exactly what drives me bananas about cyberpunk (plus the frequent misogyny).

November 14 at 7:20pm · Like

Andi Cheney Also it's all linked to cowboys and the untamed wild and individual bullshittery.

November 14 at 7:24pm · Like

Julie Fredrickson This is excellent. As a kid that grew up loving Gibson and Stephenson and subsequently became if not aligned at least parallel to the solutionist tech culture. I blame it all only love of Cayce Pollard

November 14 at 8:56pm via mobile · Like

Eric Schindler Although I have not talked to you in a year and I do not want to return to camp, I have been reading these book updates, and although I disagree with most of it, I have been finding them interesting and thought provoking. First, I do not see how we live in anywhere near the Cyberpunk dystopia portrayed in those novels. That seems like as much of an exaggeration as saying Obama is Socialist. Sure, there is a small percent of the population that lives in not-so-nice areas and has not-so-nice things (and that is nowhere near as bad as in a pre-Capitalist (feudal) society), but this system guarantees most Americans way more than enough to live. Although things have shifted toward more economic freedom in recent decades, I highly doubt Reagan and Thatcher were evilly scheming on how to oppress and exploit the middle and lower classes. Although the job market isn't that great right now, it isn't clear that it is part of a long-term trend. Now, although the rich have gotten richer, there's little evidence that the median American had less than he or she did 40 years ago. And about unions, we all - not just the bosses - like it when things are cheaper. However, you're going to go on to say that I was taught to love Capitalism by a subgenre of science fiction as well as my interpretive community. You'll probably say that Capitalism destroys our sense of community, and the we need to be Commies in order to care about each other and all get along. THIS IS MY MAIN POINT: Economic systems are not going to change the fact that humans are naturally going to be in self-interested, over-competitive, and uncaring, and it will continue to have negative effects on society until a great advance in the social sciences. No one really understands the mind and behavior like people do physical and biological science. Once that big advance happens in social science, particularly Psychology, this subject would no longer be as in-the-dark as it now, which is like medicine before germ theory. Given the limitations of Psychology and Political Science (wait a minute - aren't you in the field of Comparative Literature, not Political Science?), Capitalism is the best system to benefit the entire population. The Communist utopia you want has already been tried; it's called the Soviet Union.

November 15 at 7:25pm · Like

Aarry Atkinson Eric its in our self interest to be less self involved and uncaring. i think you confuse self interest and competitiveness with the primal concept of human survival- human beings have evolved concepts such as democracy to take us from a state of tyrannical barbarism- over time concepts like democracy have transformed to serve the ideology of the time. We are at point of transition- with all the knowledge available via the internet and the increasing feeling of dislocation from capitalism and the political system- what we need is revolution- a revolution of consciousness is already beginning...what follows is new ideas and paradigms regarding the way we can live.

November 15 at 8:11pm via mobile · Like · 1

Ben Fink
December 4, 2013 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #8: ON CONFERENCE FAILS

Back in 2009, I was the de-facto stage manager for a unique piece of theater. On an afternoon in late May, about fifty actors, artists, activists, and academics from around the country and world, led by Julian Boal (and including Kelly Howe, Katherine Burke, and Sonja Kuftinec), descended on Minneapolis City Hall and performed political theater in the council chambers, for a diverse audience that included four City Council members. The council knew we were coming -- but they didn't know we would radically rearrange the space, shifting the focus from the front to the back, from the council members to the people. And they didn't know we would be performing a piece that directly criticized their recent attempt to close the city's Department of Civil Rights -- which many local communities of color saw as an attack.

The session was a success, in so many ways. We transformed the space. We brought lots of people into the seat of government, who otherwise never would have come there, and created a space where they had a voice. We threw the government off guard, and made them confront the public in unusual and unexpected ways. And we all left the performance feeling excited and energized and ready to do more.

But nothing more ever happened. No follow-up meetings, no more theater sessions, no accountability, not even a real evaluation meeting. The Department of Civil Rights ended up staying open, but through no further effort of ours; we didn't even know about it until months later. Or should I say, I didn't know about it until months later. By then, there was no more "we" left. The group that had organized the performance was long gone. We had finished our task, and -- cyberpunk-style -- gone our separate ways.

Why? Well, on the most obvious level, because we never set out to organize a movement. We were organizing an EVENT -- specifically, the annual conference of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed. This performance was one of the headline events of the conference. That's where all of our energy went. Once it was over, many people went back to their homes around the world -- and those of us that stayed were burnt out and ready to move on to other things. Sure, some of us had talked some about solidarity and long-term relationships and sticking together, but it just didn't feel right. Or at least, it didn't feel necessary. And so it didn't happen.

What I want to argue is, this is no coincidence. For academics, doing things that lead to long-term solidarity, organizing, and agency NEVER seems to feel right. Even for those of us (like me) who work outside academia, who are committed to fighting oppression, and who know that this kind of action is what we need to do to get there. We think about it and talk about it and write about it, but something always gets in the way of DOING it. I'm out to find out what that "something" is.

I found a clue when I read the tale of another conference fail, from back in 1986 at the Modern Language Association (the big conference for humanities academics). Apparently, at a panel called "Criticism and Social Change," a well-known feminist and Marxist critic gave a talk about how she had successfully organized to make real change, to promote women scholars in universities across the country. It was concrete, confident, and pragmatic. And. No. One. Clapped. (After a long moment of awkward silence, the next speaker was introduced.) If you've ever been to an academic conference, you'll know this is unheard of. Say any old s#!t that sounds vaguely right, and people will clap.

Which is the point. The things she said did NOT sound even vaguely right. They sounded foreign, alien, even vaguely threatening. To the point that her audience, supposedly interested in "criticism and social change," did not know what to do...and ended up acting horribly. In essence, they were just like us, who stayed in Minneapolis after the performance at City Hall and did nothing with all the energy and power and relationships -- the potential agency -- we had built.

Are we all just hypocrites? That would be the easy answer. But I don't think it's right. I don't feel like a hypocrite. And I don't think my friends are, either. No, once again, I think we need to look to the market we've been organized into. It's tempting to call this market "academia," but it's bigger than that. It also includes all the places where people trained in academia tend to end up -- including think tanks, nonprofits, arts organizations, activist groups, and wide swaths of the mainstream media and blogosphere. These are the organizations I will call, collectively, "para-academia." The market of academia and para-academia, I will argue, is why so many of us, even so many of us who are self-consciously "radical" or "activists" or "political," will gladly work on a single, subversive performance (or paper, or march, or whatever) but will actively resist taking agency, or even seeing ourselves and others as organized at all.

Brianna Judd, Robin Brown, Nicole Bellwoar and 6 others like this.

Katherine Burke YES. Totally agree. Would you care to share this on the PTO website?
December 4, 2013 at 4:21pm · Like

Ben Fink Sure! Just message me and tell me how.
December 4, 2013 at 4:22pm · Like

Katherine Burke I'll get with S Leigh Thompson and we'll make it happen.
December 4, 2013 at 4:30pm · Like

S Leigh Thompson · 13 mutual friends
On it!
December 4, 2013 at 4:51pm · Like · 1

Julian Boal Ain't it called social division of labour? (if I understood your text right).
December 4, 2013 at 5:23pm · Like · 2

Aarry Atkinson enjoyed ben! hope youll elaborate on what is is about the nature of these markets that lead to a resistance of agency.

can completely relate to the symptoms- a fuller diagnosis would be appreciated
December 4, 2013 at 5:30pm · Like · 1

Chas Gillette Thats always the problem with winning: when the minority <group, party, perspective> unite to become the majority they quikly loose focus and splinter back to their special interest groups they came from. You win the battle and everyone goes home!
December 4, 2013 at 9:35pm · Edited · Unlike · 2

Katherine Burke This makes me want to consider more how we can use the PTO conference to support local movements. Are you planning to come to Omaha 2014? If so, let's talk.
December 4, 2013 at 9:37pm · Like · 1

Alexander Santiago-Jirau If we are to do something...let's not make it another "event" as Ben suggests.
December 4, 2013 at 10:24pm · Like · 1

Katherine Burke Right - I'm talking about how to use these "events," which inevitably happen at festivals, conferences, rallies, to spur action.
December 4, 2013 at 10:27pm · Like

Ben Fink Julian: I might not understand exactly what you mean by the social division of labor -- but yes, if we were intellectuals strategically aligned with a power organization, that would be a different issue. But we're not. We either imagine ourselves to BE the power organization, or we imagine ourselves forever severed from where the "real power" is (in the "real world"). Both are harmful myths. Katherine, et al: wish I could come to Omaha, but the trouble is conferences keep getting scheduled in the middle of the summer, when I'm in Jersey running a youth theater program and usually can't get away. More than happy to be in touch and strategize from afar, though. I think the key is to DO that social division of labor -- to get serious about the potential and the limits of a one-off conference event, which probably means, as you say, to enter into a strategic relationship with a local organization/coalition that's serious about building power. Let's stay in touch.
December 6, 2013 at 9:58pm · Like

Ben Fink
December 16, 2013 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #9: ON CALL-OUT CULTURE

So, we all know there are a lot of things that suck out there in the world. Some of those things (death, taxes, cliches) are pretty much here to stay. But many others, we could do something about. It's doesn't HAVE to be true that a small number of people get freakishly rich while most of us have trouble finding a job, affording our housing and transportation and healthcare, and otherwise getting by. It doesn't HAVE to be true that huge numbers of people suffer and die from preventable diseases, preventable wars, preventable poverty, and preventable under- and malnutrition. It doesn't HAVE to be true that our government only responds to about 1% of us. If these things are true, they're only true because people -- organized people, and money and ideas -- worked hard to MAKE them true. And there's no reason we couldn't organize, likewise, to make different things true.

Some people, obviously, are doing this. But there's a lot more of us -- including, usually, me -- who aren't. Who, when presented with the opportunity to organize and build collective agency, resist. (See Book Update #8 for examples.) It's not that we're lazy. After all, we all work hard to build things that matter to us. We build friendships, and relationships, and bikes, and blogs, and bands, and artworks, and films, and theater companies, and Magic decks, and fantasy football leagues, and Ninja Turtles action figure collections. All of this building takes time, and effort, and usually money. We rarely get paid for it, and when we do, the money's hardly ever worth it. We do it because it's worth it on its own. And it's not that we don't care about improving the world. We spend a lot of time volunteering, giving to charity, and treating others kindly and selflessly. Like organizing that Legislative Theatre session in Minneapolis. That took TONS of time and resources.

So what stops us from building power? Well, a few things. Most basically, most of us don't know where or how we could do it. The places where it's happening -- even if they're just down the road -- are off our cultural radar screen, in a different interpretive community entirely. Political activism, as we academics and para-academics understand it, means doing individual acts that resist The System (the man, the dominant, the Ideological State Apparatuses). Most commonly, it means doing call-outs. We call out the government or the banks for their dishonesty (at a protest or on an online petition). We call out our awful friends-of-friends on Facebook for posting sexist things. We repost Jon Stewart calling out Megyn Kelly for saying Santa Claus is white. We write papers that problematize/trouble/de-center the dominant colonial narrative of thisorthat. It all follows the same form: we identify something that's factually/morally/politically wrong -- it all kinda feels the same -- and we publicly declare that thing's wrong-ness. And at the same time, of course, our own right-ness.

This feels great. We feel confirmed in who we are and what we stand for. We feel like we're speaking truth to power. We feel like we're righting a wrong, liberating the oppressed from their bondage. Umm...not quite. Language, on its own, is not that powerful. But we academics and para-academics, very at home with language and NOT at home with power, often forget this. Especially when it's in the negative: if someone says or does or posts something prejudiced or otherwise wrong, that person is BEING OPPRESSIVE -- and unless we call it out, we are, too.

Let's assume, in a given instance, that we have the truth -- that we're right, and the people we're calling out are wrong. That may get us a good grade on a paper, or a lot of likes and retweets among our friends. It will not, in and of itself, set anyone free. But it just might make the people we call out never want to talk with us again -- much less organize and build power and collective agency with us.

(To my fellow teachers: just imagine what would happen if we called out our students every time they said something objectionable. We would have no relationship with them, no foundation of trust, and could not teach them anything. This happened, when I taught English as a second language in Germany. When I first got to the school, my students were terrified to speak English. It didn't take me long to find out why: my well-intentioned colleagues would correct them every time they made a mistake, thinking that if they didn't, they would be reinforcing bad habits. I, on the other hand, just let them talk: I responded to them conversationally and corrected only their worst and most repeated mistakes. Soon they were talking much more confidently -- and with many fewer mistakes.)

Most people, it turns out, don't like being called out. We may respond, "fine, I didn't like them anyway." But if we dismiss everyone with sexist, racist, homophobic or otherwise impure tendencies -- as a lot of "safe spaces" require -- that doesn't leave us a lot of people to work with. If we take our own theory literally, and believe (as I do) that we all are affected by the oppressive and unequal culture that we live in, then we couldn't work with ANYONE. Generally, in practice, it means we work only with those people who have mastered a very specific language for talking about and around oppression. This is the language of social-justice bloggers and anti-oppression workshops, the language of "PGPs" and "POC" and "intersectionality" and "historically marginalized communities." You don't have to be David Horowitz to be put off by this kind of language. It's exclusive at best, and downright aggressive at worst. It creates a counterculture, where it's really easy to assume that we are factually, ethically, and politically superior to the rest of "society," whose people and culture we call out. In this way, we perpetuate a culture war. (This, I think, is what conservatives mean when they talk about "liberal elitism" -- and I don't think they're wrong.)

And even within this counterculture, it makes organizing very hard. Once we've turned every issue into an evil -ism, -phobia, or -archy, evil manifestations of The Man, to be resisted and called out by righteous individuals...we end up spending a lot of our time

calling it out, including in each other. I've seen classes, trainings, even whole organizations fall apart over endless fights about "the sexism in the room," "the racism in the room," etc. It's one of the reasons why I stepped back from Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed. In a culture where you're always anxious about being called out, it's really hard to build trust and solidarity. Which makes it extremely hard to work together across differences.

Or to build much of anything at all. Once you've built something, it's immediately under suspicion. Whose voices are being silenced? Whose stories are not being told? Whose interests are not being represented? How long until the thing you've worked hard to build is called out, ransacked, torn to the ground? Not even because our colleagues would WANT to do this. But because they feel like HAVE to: if you don't call out the sins, the logic goes, you're complicit in it. All the cultural capital on the academic and para-academic market comes from staying on the caller-out side, not from building something that can be called out by others. Which explains, finally, what we did in the Legislative Theatre session: we did a one-off act of resistance that called out the oppression implicit in the state power structure of the City of Minneapolis -- and we left it at that.

A final note: in writing all of this, I do recognize that I'm a white male of significant economic means. Feel free to call me out for my unchecked privilege if you'd like. Just know that privilege, including my own, will be the subject of my next installment. It is a concept that's extremely important and extremely misunderstood. And if we can understand it better, I will argue, we might just find a way to overcome call-out culture and start building power and agency together.

Bill Volk It often seems that when something objectionable happens, people don't take offense to it as much as they take offense to others for taking offense to it for the wrong reasons. It becomes a game of who can be offended for the most sophisticated reasons, a tennis of umbrage.

December 17, 2013 at 12:10am · Like · 5

Ben Fink Pretty much. This is the market we find ourselves on: the more and more sophisticatedly we can express outrage and call others out, the more cultural capital (cred, recognition, opportunities, status) we get.

December 17, 2013 at 12:46pm · Like · 1

Bill Volk Umbrage tennis would make a pretty fun party game, maybe. The players choose a subject, something current and well-known but not necessarily important. The first player "serves" by offering an indifferent or coldly practical opinion on the subject. The second player returns the serve by expressing some kind of direct offense to the subject. All subsequent moves must somehow invalidate the previous level of offense and substitute a new, stronger level. Fouls include repeating an argument, failing to discredit or accuse the previous player, or accusing a player of changing the subject. Notice how the moral stakes seem to increase even as the debate gets further away from the original topic. A player who loses in six moves is easily seen as a monster compared to a player who loses in one.

December 18, 2013 at 1:47am · Unlike · 2

Will Bonney Ben, I'm not sure if you saw this piece by Mark Fisher with "Vampire's Castle" in the name. I mention it because I almost collapsed your argument into his which is an attack on a strawman named identity politics on behalf of an allegedly universalist Marxist politics built around class which is alleged to be part of reality in a way that race supremacy or patriarchy isn't. I would be curious about how you see your argument as different than his. From my angle it looks like what you're calling "call out" culture isn't limited to any specific politic vocabulary - one could as easily belong to a marxist call-out cult (as I did) as an intersectionalist one or for that matter an anarchist one. The point is that the political action fundamentally takes the form of decrying, denouncing, and dismissing. My other question is how you avoid the "hate hate" phenomenon yourself except (i.e, calling our call-out culture?) My proposal would be (1) more conscious debating, (2) value pluralism and (3) aversion of rhetorics like "immanent critique" that sneak in calling out via more allegedly sophisticated means.

December 18, 2013 at 8:15am · Unlike · 1

Hannah Kushnick this really resonated with me because i'm pretty perpetually struggling to figure out what to DO about the things that i feel strongly about. like, those of us who have had the opportunity/inclination to hone our critical-thinking skills are rull good at dissecting things and problem-spotting (and correspondingly a little afraid of putting ourselves out there to be critiqued, as you say), but--why your post really speaks to me--it feels pointless and unsatisfying to be refining and re-refining my ideas in a little piddly vacuum of internet reading. i want to DO something, but i don't know what to do--i don't know which outcomes are most valuable or most feasible and therefore most worth pursuing, i don't feel informed enough to form detailed opinions about a lot of issues that matter to me, and i'm stuck about how to go about getting involved in civic life in a meaningful--effective, useful, valuable--way.

December 18, 2013 at 1:04pm · Unlike · 2

Ben Fink I don't know the Fisher piece, but I've seen a lot of similar take-downs of "identity politics" -- and you're right, that's not what I'm talking about. The call-out is a mode of expression that Marxists and poststructuralists and plain old liberals (not to mention conservatives and apolitical "critics") all use. I think a lot of it comes from our common experience in school, where we learn that the point is to get the right answer -- by ourselves, in a vacuum. And yes, I'm calling out call-out culture: I'm a good little academic, too. (To write a book, I think, you have to have hubris enough to believe that you have at least SOME right answers, and that other people should hear them.) But it's not the only way. How do you avoid call-out culture? You build things. With people. Out of shared self-

interest. That is, you see the people around you as collaborators to build with (however flawed), not as sinners to be called out. You don't need to know that much, or be that informed; you just need to be open to building relationships with other people, and learning from them, even as they learn from you. Of course, this isn't easy. (Ben, Hannah, Evan, Bill -- we know this well.) It's much less immediately satisfying. It's group-based. It takes a long time. It will often fail. And, as far as I know, it's usually the only way serious change gets made. (Much, much more on this in posts to come.)

December 18, 2013 at 11:33pm · Edited · Like · 1

Betsy Barnum Ben, this is very thought-provoking. "Silence is acquiescence" may be a false dictum, at least one that doesn't need to be applied in all situations. Or maybe it's that we too often apply it in the wrong situations, when what we're really doing is setting up barriers to any kind of joint effort by defining ourselves by how we disagree or differ with others. (sometimes it is just plain old judgmental ego that pushes that agenda...)

December 18, 2013 at 10:03pm · Unlike · 2

Ben Fink Exactly. It's the assumption that our differences -- the things that keep me from ever fully understanding you (not to mention those silent subalterns over there) -- are more important than the experiences, desires, and self-interests we have in common. For us to make things together, that has to be reversed. We should, of course, recognize and acknowledge our differences, and not assume we can ever fully understand the other (isn't "fully" understanding anything a Cartesian pipe dream anyway?). But there's no reason those differences should stop us from building a relationship and making things together, based in our shared experiences and desires and self-interest.

December 18, 2013 at 11:48pm · Like · 2

Joe Michaud-Scorza Great note thanks!!! "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." -Stephen R. Covey

December 18, 2013 at 11:55pm · Like

Mark Hauck I am going to throw this in to an entirely different realm. So much of this conversation reminds of the calls to humility, grace, forgiveness, "works" or "Mitzvah", and compassion found in the deep pools of spiritual tradition. Simply speaking is not enough-- and that's where forgiveness and grace come in because you will do whatever you do imperfectly as will everyone around you. The exhortations to do and be rather than simply have the right words is a surprisingly common and overlooked thread through many religious traditions. I have been excoriated on several occasions by my liberal colleagues for DOING things: bringing clean water to a village in remote Thailand was exporting western values and practices (a notion the people I was working with would have found simply laughable), adopting a teen (yes we are doing it again) is reinforcing an oppressive child welfare system that targets poor and minority families (tell that to the kid who had the shit beat out of him and has been sitting in institutions for 5 years because there is no place else for him to go). Both criticisms have a grain of truth to them, and raise questions that need to be kept present in our minds, but they are not the whole truth and they do nothing to change the material conditions of people who are far less concerned about a post-colonial critique of development programs than they are about having clean water. So you muddle through, hopefully growing in wisdom and capacity for creating a better world, and relying on the grace of your neighbors, your co-laborers, of history even, to forgive the shortcomings you bring to the task. But the only salient point in the end is that you showed up to do the work.

December 19, 2013 at 8:33am · Edited · Unlike · 3

Ben Fink This is a beautiful thing. Thank you, Mark. (And best of luck with the new adoption!) The grain of truth in the call-out critiques is, I think, that the actions of an individual (however righteous) are not the same as political change. Giving water to a village in Thailand will not stop the problems of industrialism and imperialism, and adopting a teen will not stop the problems of class and race inequality. But you knew that already. You are doing these things not as some putative political gesture, but because these things are worth doing, on their own.

December 19, 2013 at 11:47am · Like · 1

Mark Hauck Absolutely Ben! (And thanks for humoring my outside the discipline remarks). You can preach with the fire of political righteousness in the belly and still feed a hungry crowd out of compassion and know that neither action is sufficient alone. Transformation must be both personal and collective/political, and having "good words" is the first step toward seeing and working to create a different world in both spheres. (Which is why I love good critical analysis). And sometimes it's the little chinks that undermine the bigger structures. Empowering Ban Bai Yat Sai with a clean and consistent water source led to the creation of a seed distribution center in the village to support a financially feasible move away from opium production--which was terribly enslaving and led to wretched economic manipulation and human rights abuses all around--the seed distribution led to an agricultural training program for young people, reducing their need to leave the village for Bangkok (one of the chief worries of the elders) where they worked in cultural isolation, exploitive environments, and squalid conditions. The key was that we all knew that the conditions and actions were complex and worked to name the complexities as we moved through the process (and we still missed a lot). From my point of view, a grounding in critical theory and analysis becomes powerful and deeply meaningful in the broader world outside of academic inquiry when it illuminates the reality that every choice has multiple possible meanings and outcomes and that change must move across multiple spheres (and it probably won't all move at the same time). At the risk of being offensive, cataloging umbrage seems like such a small way to use such a powerful intellectual capacity and defies the humbling nature of standing in the face of complex intersections of thought. The danger I see is the tendency too often to isolate a particular outcome, argument, or critical vantage point as the only possible route or goal for personal and political activity (in a fundamental way this is a major critique of Missionary movements, yes?). It is almost impossible to control change and transformation and funnel it into a predetermined, perfected, and most politically and culturally complete and enlightened form. Again, tapping in to a spiritual tradition, "The Wind blows where it wishes..." Good, insightful, challenging words (theory, arguments, critiques) are essential and excellent tutors along paths that are larger than our personal, or even collective, capacity to control and manipulate and fully understand.

December 19, 2013 at 12:41pm · Unlike · 3

Betsy Barnum This article just crossed my path today--expressing some of the same ideas you are working with. Just thought I'd pass it on in case it is of interest, Ben: http://feministing.com/.../on-cynicism-calling-out-and.../

On cynicism, calling out, and creating movements that don't leave our people behind

feministing.com

Lately, I've been thinking about the ways that the movements for social justice of which I am a part deal with mistakes folks make publicly. I've been thinking and talking with my friends about how quickly we shun and publicly shame our folks that are in a different place from us politically, how ou...

December 21, 2013 at 9:33pm · Like · Remove Preview

Ben Fink Thanks, Betsy. I'm very much in sympathy with this, as you can imagine. I think we need expand more on the idea of "organizing in solidarity," mentioned here in passing. The fact is, call-out culture is a symptom, and the disease is the "anarcho-liberalism" (Tim Brennan's term) that's defined the academic and para-academic market in the age of cyberpunk neoliberalism. On an anarcho-liberal market, the greatest and highest thing we can ever be is righteous, sin-less individuals. Get a bunch of people trying to be righteous, sin-less individuals in a room together, and you'll very quickly get a version of Hobbes's war of all against all. This is the reality we need to change. And it's a reality that articles like this one, I worry, don't question; they only ask that we fight our Hobbesian war with less deadly weapons, or a best, make a truce. Which is still a world away from coming together to make things out of mutual self-interest. Having said that, it's definitely a step in the right direction.

December 21, 2013 at 11:02pm · Like

Betsy Barnum Ben, I think the writer of this piece probably doesn't have a deeper critique yet. Perhaps evidence that some time spent in more academic study getting exposed to a wider context of theory is good or even essential to be able to shift the frame more fully. See, the world is waiting for your contribution!

December 22, 2013 at 1:44pm · Like

Ben Fink
December 24, 2013 · Edited

NOT (EXACTLY) A BOOK UPDATE: ON RENT

Christmas is, for me, a lonely holiday. It's always been, as long as I can remember. It's like watching the whole world throw a party that I'm not invited to. I've long thought that learning to deal with this experience is a rite of passage for every Jewish kid. (And, I imagine, for other kinds of non-Christian kids, too.) My sister Jessie used to get sad: "why can't I be a part of it?" I, on the other hand, used to get mad: "why won't they acknowledge OUR holiday?!" (The token menorah in the mall parking lot just didn't cut it.)

I've learned to deal with this loneliness in different ways. I do a lot of choral singing, so I tend to find myself in churches and Christmas concerts a lot; this helps. (Oh Evan, how I miss our shared concertgoing.) I go to the mall at least once in December -- not for too long, and usually not to buy anything, but just to be there; my parents were indulgent enough to go with me this year. I used to go (with Courtney and Shaylie and..Raysh (we went once, right?)) to the beautiful Midnight Mass at St. Agnes Catholic Church in St. Paul, featuring a full orchestra and chamber chorus performing Mozart's Coronation Mass. (For anyone in the Twin Cities without plans tonight: highly recommended.)

Then there's this one other Christmas ritual I have. I'm a little ashamed of it. Forgive me, fellow musical-theater snobs: I listen to RENT. In its entirety. Usually several times. It started several years ago, with just the "Christmas Bells" montage (still, I will argue, the best "Tonight-Quintet" knockoff since "One Day More"), and it quickly grew into the whole show. Why, you ask? I wasn't sure. It wasn't nostalgia -- I didn't LIKE the show as a teenager. I thought it was overwrought, humorless, and pretentious. (Rebellious. Kids. Living. Bohemianly. Making. Art. Having. Sex. Doing. Drugs. Fighting. The. System.) And I pretty much still think so. In the language of my book, it's the glorification of an anarcho-liberal, para-academic counterculture that thrives on calling out the rest of "society," which it's convinced it's better than.

And yet it...speaks to me. It fills me with a kind of longing, for something I don't have. It shows me, so painfully clearly, what I want and don't feel like I have: a world that's mine. Not mine in the singular -- as in mine and no one else's -- but mine in the plural: a world that all of us, who live there, collectively make and live in together. It never made sense to me, when I was fifteen, why Mark wouldn't go home and spend Christmas in a warm house (as opposed to a disgusting, power- and heat-less loft) with his loving family who wanted to be with him (as opposed to his hedonistic, drugged-out maybe-friends...yes I was (am?) a tad conservative). But now it makes perfect sense. His parents' house wasn't his. He had no role in making it. Nor could he, nor would he want to even if he could.

Yes, the Christmas he and his friends made in the East Village was childishly

countercultural, oversexed, and otherwise self-indulgent. It was also all their own. It was completely, utterly affirming of them as people, of them as a community, of their individual and collective work as artists and political activists, and of the life and space they were all making (birthing?) together. It was, basically, the perfect Christmas.

That's what I want. I wonder if that's not what we all want. I used to call out the suburban soccer moms wearing RENT T-shirts as hypocrites. I don't do that anymore. Maybe they're just looking for the same thing I am. And maybe they're aware of how tragically far away they are from it. I'm not saying they're miserable, or even unhappy -- I wouldn't call myself either one, I don't think. But in our quiet moments, and especially on this silent night, we can feel that something's missing. Something we all need, and none of us have. Something that a cheesy rock musical from the '90s gives us a glimpse of, and an opportunity to momentarily, vicariously, experience.

I've had it, for quick moments. With Evan and Clayton and Alison and Mia at 5401. With Katy and Lola and Sarah at Tanglewood. And, sometimes, at Appel Farm. (I miss you all, very much.) So I know it's possible. It's just hard. My book, so far, has basically been an explanation of why it's so hard, of all the things that get in our way. But now, as I enter the new year and the last chapter and the final four book updates, I'm changing direction. I'm starting to write about how we can overcome these things, and build our own world anyway. It's going to be the hardest part. Definitely the scariest. I may sound naive, uninformed, clueless. But that's what second drafts are for.

Merry Christmas to those who celebrate. Happy holidays to those who don't. And best wishes for the new (Christian-qua-secular) year to all. You are wonderful.

Nolan A. Croce, Courtney Gildersleeve, AuCo Lai and 50 others like this.

Jules Darg Thanks for this, Ben. I have been thinking about this a lot lately. We celebrate Christmas in a low-key way, but I think about how hard this time of year is for so many - far more than we realize sometimes. There is so much isolation and heartbreak. Even if you are invited to this particular party, it can still be lonely in the crowd. People need to feel connected and that they matter. Enjoy your Rent... there is a reason why so many people connect to this show, and you nailed it. That's why I like New Year's... a time to start fresh and make it better out there. Wishing wonderful you a wonderful New Year!

December 24, 2013 at 4:36pm · Unlike · 2

Ben Avak it's important to remember that even amongst the nominally christian xmas is a fierce test of one's successful integration into a family structure or tribe. it's a special moment of solidarity within the family, but it's also the family against the world. it thus reflects the same dynamics of the union and the nation. from experience the holiday stress recedes as soon as you invite all the orphans by birth, chance, irreconcilable difference, din or principle... if you find yourself in berlin again youre very welcome!

December 24, 2013 at 6:26pm · Unlike · 3

Aarry Atkinson I've always felt like the guy looking through the frosted glass at the party on the otherside too ben. and my family celebrate christmas.
if your family situation doesn't adhere to the picture postcard you see in commercials- everyone clinking glasses and joyously regaling each other with anecdotes of christmas's passed, you invariably feel lonely

December 25, 2013 at 6:18am · Unlike · 2

Jules Darg And there you go. We may not all be in the same room together, but we are in heart together creating a community of support. And that is worth celebrating.

December 25, 2013 at 11:08am · Unlike · 2

Ben Fink
December 29, 2013 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #10: ON PRIVILEGE

"I'm a white woman who lives a comfortable life in the suburbs. What right do I have to come in to this place, their place, and then drive home to my safe neighborhood?...My biggest fear is white privilege, which I struggle to see and deal with on a daily basis...I may have good intentions, but I am naïve. I've been told before to check my racism. Who, me?"

So asks Katherine Burke, in a brilliant piece she posted to the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed website a couple of months ago. (You can read the whole thing here: http://ptoweb.org/2013/11/katherine-burke-considers-the-beginning/. Highly recommended.) If you, like me, are a privileged white person who is interested in doing "social justice" work alongside "oppressed communities," Burke's questions probably sound familiar. What makes us think we can do this work at all? How could WE, with all our privilege, ever hope to be able to work with THEM, with all their oppression? These are hard questions. So hard that they keep a lot of people from doing the work at all. And those that remain often feel they have to be constantly looking over their shoulder, and into their navel, for fear of getting called out for unchecked privilege.

But these questions don't actually have to be so hard. Allow me to explain.

A few years ago, as the protests raged in Wisconsin, there was a joke that floated around the Interwebs. It wasn't actually very funny, but it made a point. It went something like this: a public-sector worker, a private-sector worker, and David Koch (the oil billionaire and Tea Party funder) sat around a table, with a plate of 75 cookies in the middle. David Koch quickly took 74 of the cookies for himself. Then he took the last cookie, handed it to the public-sector worker, and told her: "Watch for that private-sector worker. He's after YOUR cookie!"

The moral is simple enough. David Koch could have taken that last cookie for himself. But then he'd have had two pissed-off workers on his hands, who would most likely band together and take his cookies from him. What he did was a lot smarter. By giving one cookie to one of the workers, he turned them against each other. The private-sector worker would spend his time fighting the public-sector worker, because she got something and he got nothing. The public-sector worker would spend her time defending herself, and the one cookie she has, against the public-sector worker. And David Koch would make an easy getaway -- and go gorge himself.

This is the story of privilege in America. It's been around ever since white people first showed up on its shores. Back in colonial Virginia, the rich white plantation owners were scared that their poor black, white, and indigenous workers (slaves and almost-slaves)

might all band together and revolt. So they gave the white workers a cookie. Now they could whip their fellow non-white workers, just like the bosses. And when they themselves got whipped, they could keep their shirts on (oh happy day!). Long story short: it worked. The white workers switched teams: they joined together with the bosses (their fellow whites...who still paid them nothing and treated them like s#!t) against the non-whites (their fellow oppressed workers). White privilege and racism were born.

The key point: these white workers were STILL oppressed. They were still dirt poor and treated horribly and had basically no wealth or rights. And now, with their "privilege," they could no longer join together and build power with other (non-white) people who shared their oppression.

I am all kinds of privileged. I'm a white, able-bodied, straight(ish) male from upper-middle-class suburbia. I've had all kinds of advantages that people of other races, genders, abilities, sexualities, and socioeconomic classes often don't. And yet I'm still worried about finding a good job and affordable housing, getting decent healthcare, and living in a supportive community. All worries I share with people a lot less privileged than I am. All things that we all need. And all things we could be working together to get -- it's all in our shared self-interest.

What stops us? The way we understand privilege. We understand it as the opposite of oppression. It's not. It's a form of oppression. It oppresses us by keeping us apart and it keeps keeps us all powerless...while David Koch takes all our cookies.

How to work with people with different levels of privilege? Simple: find the places of common self-interest, and work from there. It's not that we should ignore the differences in privilege; we just don't need to obsess about them. (White people obsessed with our privilege tend to be scared of our shadows -- not helpful. White people unaware of our privilege tend to take over the whole space and not listen to anyone else -- also not helpful.) We just need to get to know the people we work with, and get to understand our common self-interest, and work based on that common self-interest. Then we'll be doing real solidarity work -- the kind of work Lila Watson talked about: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us begin."

Haylee Anne Kitties Hi Ben, I'm glad you're taking the time to discuss privilege but I have a few thoughts. I think it would do very well for your research to get the perspective and dictation of privilege from those who are more actively affected by it, meaning persons of color. Unfortunately, yes, white people obsess over it, and either don't fully acknowledge their privilege, or take on a roll of White Savior. Both of these are incredibly damaging and undermine the roll of POCs in society, because whites, in many cases, how a very different perspective (which is shaped by privilege!) Whereas POCs might have the right to dictate the terms of privilege, I wonder if whites may not, because as white privilege reigns supreme it makes it difficult for a white person to make a truly impactful comment on this.

December 29, 2013 at 9:13pm · Like · 1

Haylee Anne Kitties I'm gonna add here that unfortunately with my response that pretty much makes me in a White Savior like position as well.

December 29, 2013 at 9:47pm · Like

Haylee Anne Kitties Unavoidable and cyclical. But I would say that makes it even me important for poc inclusion on the topic.

December 29, 2013 at 9:47pm · Like

Ben Avak i like it, but i be careful about 'self-interest'. It is no mere accident that many unions have historically and recently promoted nationalist, racist and anti-immigrant agendas. Nor is it some kind of "mistake" or "false consciousness". Unfortunately, our economic order makes it advantageous for those of us in the world's centers of capital to discriminate to reduce competition for jobs even as we simultaneously undermine ourselves. the AMA's limitations on doctors is a case in point. solidarity, to me, is to go _against_ one's economic self-interest. 'common self-interest' only works insofar as it implies a rejection of the current economic order involving a market for labor power.

December 29, 2013 at 9:57pm · Like

Katherine Burke At the 2013 PTO conference Martha Prescod Norman Noonan (co-editor of Hands on the Freedom Plow) spoke about her experience with SNCC, Freedom Summer, and a life in the movement. The book recounts the experiences of dozens of women in SNCC, from all backgrounds, ethnicities, experiences, etc. Noonan's keynote and the book are lessons in solidarity, how my liberty is intertwined with your liberty, how we are all in this together. What is required, I am learning, is to immerse oneself in the world, in the work, with the people. To literally risk everything, leave your home, and join the fight. You can't parachute in, do a workshop, then go home, which is what so often happens in our capitalist society... a school pays you to come in and do a 45 minute workshop on bullying, you do a performance, then depart feeling like you maybe began to do something, but everything stops there because you don't have the time, finances, energy, understanding, or support to continue the work. Somehow, though, in order to surmount these challenges, we have to be there for the long haul, for good. We have to figure out a way to do this work in this world. http://www.amazon.com/Hands-Freedom-Plow.../dp/0252078888

Ben Fink Haylee: I'm not pretending to speak for anyone but my (white) self, but rest assured, this argument is based on a lot of conversations I've had with people of color -- and books and articles I've read written by people of color, and trainings and political events I've been to run by people of color. Katherine: first of all, thanks again for letting me quote you! To your point: some people can literally risk everything, leave their homes, etc., and more power to them. But that's a small minority. What about the rest of us? I don't think our only choice is the parachute-workshop approach. What kind of work can we do where we are, that's in our self-interest, and the self-interest of others nearby? We won't agree on everything, of course. But working based on where our self-interests overlap is the key to sustained, serious work. When we've got skin in the game, we come back. Ben: I don't just mean narrow economic self-interest. A lot of the best multiracial organizing, including SNCC, has happened through faith traditions: we have a deep self-interest in realizing God's love on earth, in various forms, which includes justice. But somehow, we've got to understand what we're doing as bound up with our own self-interest. If we don't understand what we're doing as in our self-interest, we burn out, go home, stop doing the work. At least most people do. (And we need those people.) The alternative to working in mutual self-interest is charity. Which means either masochism (taking pleasure in hurting ourselves) or arrogance (taking pleasure in being better than others). Neither is particularly helpful. They're both based on the assumption that we're gods, floating above reality, able to intervene righteously in the cause of abstract justice. Which is, like, the whitest thing ever.

December 29, 2013 at 11:47pm · Edited · Like · 2

Jason Small racism was not born in the southern states. racism had existed since one man saw another. another misconception perpetrated by liberal logic justifying white guilt

December 30, 2013 at 3:52am · Like

Ben Avak i agree, to me my deepest self-interest is 'as a human'. i think privilege theory is also about recognizing how the current order does construct interests 'as a white' or 'as a worker (vs. migrant/refugee); that are sadly different from our self-interest as humans. this means accepting that we have multi-layered conflicting self-interests. therein lies the universal. dialectics, baby, but hard to explain in a positivist/reductionist world.

December 30, 2013 at 4:57am · Like · 1

Ben Avak i guess that means that my understanding of solidarity (and i don't believe charity helps) is that it involves going against one's specific self-interest for a more general, human, self-interest. if it doesn't contradict your self-interest at some level then it's not solidarity. for example, a union that also fights for the rights of migrants, the wageless and other unions is doing solidarity. a union that only concerns itself with the relative economic status of its members is not.

the problem here is that liberal economics teaches us that selfishness is the highest good and the glue of our society.

December 30, 2013 at 5:08am · Like · 1

Katherine Burke Ben - I agree and understand - and it's possible to help from a position of privilege. Right now I'm trying to position myself so that if and when the shit hits the fan in Cleveland, I will be able to leave everything to join the fight. I'm part of the world right now, but still on the periphery of it. As time goes on I want to be more and more a part of it, until I'm in it up to my neck and even over my head.

December 30, 2013 at 7:51am · Like · 1

Ben Fink Jason: prejudice (the tendency to pre-judge others based on external characteristics, such as skin color) may have existed since one man saw another. But racism (the specific, systematic privileging of white-skinned people over non-white-skinned-people) was invented in colonial Virginia, to justify slavery. Doesn't have anything to do with liberalism or white guilt. Katherine: I still want to insist that it's not about "helping" (from a position of privilege or otherwise). If we're not working in our own self-interest -- toward our own liberation, as well as the liberation of others -- we end up burning out and/or doing charity. (Having said that, Godspeed!) Ben: agreed -- self-interest, as I mean it, isn't the same as selfishness. It's precisely finding those places where our own liberation is connected with the liberation of others. Which is really hard -- given, as you say, how we're taught that self-interest = selfishness. Finding our bigger self-interest requires a whole lot of work on ourselves. I'll be talking about this work, as it's done in the context of organizing training, in my next book update.

December 30, 2013 at 12:12pm · Like · 2

Ben Avak hmm, the semiotic confusion surrounding self-interest remains gristly, because where exactly is the 'self' in self-interest when we're actually speaking of common interest? on the other hand, the 'common' is composed of selves. i think we're culturally too hardened in our positivist/reductionist ways to communicate cogently about society and individuals as a complex system. you see similarly entrenched debates raging over the biology of altruism with the selfish gene camp arguing that selective pressure only acts on individuals, and the other camp arguing that selective pressure can act on groups. the truth or the universal lies in the contradiction. systems biology is all about accepting and working with this complexity. personally, i think 'systems biology' is a politically correct term for dialectical biology. now we just need to find the right language to apply this to the problem of self/common interest, but that's just my pet peeve. beware 'the self'!

December 30, 2013 at 2:50pm · Edited · Unlike · 1

AuCo Lai The idea that privilege can be a form of oppression, I imagine, will rile up a few folks. No one wants to feel threatened by their comfort. But how much of it really comes down to privilege in this case? And then, are we discussing class privilege? Race Privilege? Gender? We could just take the triple whammy and take on all three. Though, the argument can (and, to a degree, IS) made for the idea that race and class privilege are one and the same. It's true that most of the people with the Money (and I mean Money, not the petty stuff any of us deal with) are white. In fact, not only are they white, they're white AND straight AND male. Congrats to them, they won the social lottery.

However, I get the sense that they aren't the ones really questioning any of that. We, and yes, I am including myself. By "we" I mean those of us that have comfortably heated homes, and a choice in our transportation methods, jobs that only trouble us existentially (has anyone ever gotten black lung from working at their office?).

Before I get too ahead of myself, I just want to point out that I am a "person of color". Not only am I a person of color, but I am a woman. A variously queer woman. A non-white, variously queer, lower middle class, first generation daughter if strict and traditional immigrants woman.

I fulfill all the markers for an oppressed person in our society. And you know what else? I'll be damned before I am treated as some pitiable "oppressed person". Lumped into some category. It's funny. White people in America are all one cluster of people with a not terribly culturally specific identity. They're just... White. But the rest of us, the non-whites, we have the luxury of cultural identities. My cultural identity separates me from ALL the other different "Persons of Color". My cultural identity not at all that of a Latin American, or a Black American, or hell, even Indian American or Pacific Islander American. It's nothing at all like Native American cultural identity either.

So how do you reconcile that?! How do you "save" me? Or them? Because, let's face it. It's not us, the vast and pained and suffering chromatic, and you, the blessedly aware good white folk versus them. It's me and mine, versus them,versus you, versus everyone else.

But Ben made a point. Despite all his privilege (and, oh boy, does he have some privilege (which is earnestly and thankfully acknowledged)), he's STILL struggling to find what I am trying to find: a stable home/community, a stable income, some peace of mind.

It's a good point. We need to know the people we work with and their stories. It's not about beating the oppression or liberating yourself or anyone else from some general oppression. It's about people. And acknowledging people in a way that helps us all work together to pool our resources so that we might all get a shot at those baseline things.

I am the only non-white person to voice an opinion thus far, and yet I feel as though I've been spoken for several times.

I think what Ben said was pretty simple. And I appreciate that he spoke for no one but himself. I don't agree with everything he said, but if nothing else, at least he didn't say it for me.

You don't get to speak for anyone but yourself. And if you believe that someone has something to say, but isn't being heard, it's not your responsibility to speak for them, but rather to help them gain the means to speak for themselves. It's simple respect for peers.

December 30, 2013 at 7:06pm · Unlike · 2

Ben Fink
January 20

BOOK UPDATE #11: ON LONELINESS

Loneliness is a political issue. A really, really important one.

Loneliness doesn't mean being alone, at least not necessarily. I know I've spent some of the happiest, most fulfilling moments of my life alone, walking, driving, writing, cooking, even just sitting and thinking. What makes this kind of being alone -- solitude -- different from loneliness, is that it's a choice. We can be happy in solitude when we know we have a place to go back to, if and when we want to: a home, a community, a place in the world that accepts us as part of it, and that we accept as part of ourselves. Literally, as part of our SELVES: that part of us that's made by the people and things that are closest to us. The Hicksville that you can't take out of the girl. (They changed it to "Jersey" when RENT went on tour; take your pick.)

Loneliness is what happens when we DON'T have that place. When we're isolated from it, or kicked out of it, or when it doesn't exist anymore. When we're alone, not because we choose to be, but because there's nowhere for us to go...and we don't know when, or if, that'll ever change. When being alone, or even being among lots of people, makes us feel desperate and empty and helpless and scared. When we feel like we have no ownership or control over the world that we live in, not even over our tiny little part of it.

Loneliness, understood this way -- which I take from the German-American political philosopher Hannah Arendt -- explains a whole lot of our politics. It's especially helpful for understanding the ugliest parts of our politics, including what we sometimes call "culture wars." The argument goes like this: we live in a culture, and especially an economy, that's made a lot of us lonely, and a lot more of us scared of becoming lonely. This has going on for awhile, and it's getting worse. This is the victory of neoliberalism: towns and cities getting torn apart, skills that took a lifetime to learn going obsolete almost overnight and workers getting thrown to the wayside, job security is harder and harder to find, the house gets foreclosed, the rent skyrockets, and we all know we might have to "just leave" our closest people and places -- or have those people and places leave us -- at any moment. (And on top of all that, of course, is the cyberpunk part: we're supposed to LIKE it.)

In a world like this, as we feel less and less in control of our own lives and worlds, it's easy to understand why a lot of us are lonely -- and scared of becoming lonelier. It's also easy to understand our common reaction to that fear: to hold on really, really tight to that tiny corner of the world we still have. It explains why people are so invested in owning a home -- and will sometimes get lots of guns to protect that home. It explains why people are so invested in their religious, ethnic, regional, political, sexual, and other adjectival identities -- and will sometimes spend hours a day online calling out anyone who seems

to challenge those identities.

It also explains, to take one final example, why it was such a bad idea to try to integrate public schools by busing kids from their neighborhoods across town. Are there a lot of racist white people out there? Absolutely. But that's not the whole answer. It was Big Government going to people who already felt their world was slipping away from them and there was nothing they could do about it, and TAKING THEIR KIDS AWAY FROM THEM. It was a really stupid move, tactically. It was very unpopular. And it didn't work: our schools are still hideously segregated. (And, of course, it handed a whole segment of white Americans, gift-wrapped, to the race-baiting Right.)

None of us, regardless of our politics, wants to be lonely. We ALL want a place to belong, that's ours, that no one can take away from us, where we can work, alongside the people around us, to make the world we live in -- the ability to have agency, and to do what some scholars call "public work." However different we might be, that's something that's in pretty much ALL of our self-interest.

So...have we reached a moment of perverse optimism? Is it possible to do politics differently, out of our shared interest in not-being-lonely -- or put positively, in making a place for ourselves in the world that's ours? Yes. Yes it is. It is not easy. It is still very much being developed. But it is possible, and it is happening. It is the tradition called "broad-based community organizing." To which we will turn, next time.

Jack Kavanaugh, Ben Brown-McMillin, Austin James Beaulieu and 17 others like this.

Betsy Barnum This is tangential right now, Ben, but I still don't understand why cyberpunk sci fi has been so influential on the way people think about their life. I don't really doubt it, but I'd like to understand how that happened--how the ideas penetrated so deeply when so many people, like myself, have barely heard of cyberpunk. I don't expect a long answer, or any answer, up to you. Just wondering. I like your whole thing that you're doing here, by the way. Really a lot.

January 20 at 9:10pm · Edited · Like

Ben Fink Here's my basic argument, Betsy: cyberpunk emerged at a very particular historical moment, just as (1) neoliberals were taking over governments around the world, and (2) the communications technology that would soon become the Internet was emerging in its full form. Cyberpunk authors, consciously or not, put these two things together before anybody else did. They imagined a hypercapitalist world (basically a neoliberal paradise) where most human relations -- mediated by the ever-booming tech market -- were mediated by market forces and profit. And they portrayed this world as really exciting and liberating. They captured a Zeitgeist, at the moment it was appearing. Which quickly got picked up in the mass media (BLADE RUNNER being an early example), and by big corporations looking to sell their products (the "1984" Apple Super Bowl ad being an early example), and by every politician and pundit who's ever used "technology" as a reason why of course unions are obsolete and of course the market can, should, and will dominate everything. (Not to mention that a lot of the engineers who built the Internet in its modern

form were huge cyberpunk fans, and a lot of what was in these novels literally became part of the Internet. Google Earth and Second Life are direct steals; there are many more indirect ones.) So cyberpunk became the accepted language for talking about, and justifying, the combined push toward Internet technology and neoliberalism -- a language that has permeated our politics and culture, that you hear almost every day, even if you don't know where it came from.

January 23 at 10:47pm · Like

Joanna DeLaune School integration would have worked if there had also been housing integration at the same time. But there wasn't, so it didn't.

Really interesting about cyberpunk. Although, I don't think it's clear that the neoliberal technological "paradise" was supposed to be a GOOD thing. I mean, I'm thinking of Snow Crash, and I don't think it was meant to be a good thing there how everything was all atomized and privatized. It was kind of fucked up.

January 24 at 1:31pm · Like

Ben Fink Totally agreed about housing integration, Joanna. Then it would still be local neighborhood schools and control; the structure of the neighborhoods would have just changed. Of course, housing integration would have required more than just a legal mandate, given how institutionalized racism often operates through falling home values (and FEAR of falling home values). It would also have required -- and still DOES require -- on-the-ground organizing and community building as well. And I used to believe the same thing about cyberpunk. But then I went back and read the novels again. Alongside the nonfiction statements of their writers, especially Stephenson. If they're not 100% endorsements, they're definitely not dystopias or cautionary tales. At the very least, they say "this is how the world is / will be, so get used to it," but I think in a lot of instances, they're downright happy about it. Especially thinking about how erotic the descriptions of the technology are, and how they're so closely linked to stories of young cool hip people making lots of financial and sexual conquests.

January 24 at 6:09pm · Edited · Like · 2

Hannah Kushnick ben, i'd be curious to hear what you think about, like: if americans have always been super individualists but haven't always been at risk of loneliness (in previous historical moments), what were the magic ingredients, before now, that kept that individualism from necessitating or leading to being loneliness-prone?

January 24 at 7:35pm · Like

Ben Fink Hannah: I'd answer your question in two ways. First, to some extent we've ALWAYS been at risk of loneliness, at least as long as capitalist mass society has existed. (Arendt developed her understanding of loneliness in THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM, long before neoliberalism took power.) But it's definitely gotten worse. So, second: the not-so-magic ingredients were all of the "mediating institutions," all the places where Americans used to BELONG: the neighborhood organizations, the ethnic clubs, the fraternal organizations, the churches, the sports leagues, even the local pub -- the places where everyone knew your name, where you walked in and got immediately acknowledged and knew you belonged. The interpretive communities where people lived, and learned to understand themselves, as part of a permanent "we." All of which have taken a nose-dive in the age of cyberpunk neoliberalism, as "mobility" has become our economic, technological, and cultural obsession. Not that everyone WANTS to be mobile. Many of us would much rather be rooted. But then, you know, our job gets outsourced. Or we can only find temp work. Or we manage to root ourselves, but all the people we care about have (or choose) to move away. And so it's understandable that we start justifying it to ourselves, cyberpunk-style. Maybe I didn't want to stay in that dump anyway -- time to move on to bigger and better things. Old friends? Well, there's always Facebook.

January 24 at 10:08pm · Like

Ben Fink Oh, and of course another one of those "mediating institutions" was UNIONS. Which the neoliberals took a very active role in seeking out and destroying. And not just unions, either -- any local citizens' organization with any kind of progressive tendency. (And, really, any predominantly-black organization with any potential power or agency at all.) The Reagan administration literally went through the index of Harry Boyte's (excellent) book THE BACKYARD REVOLUTION, about the rise of citizen politics and local organizations in the 1970s, and systematically de-funded every organization in it.

January 24 at 10:32pm · Edited · Like · 1

Betsy Barnum That is evil.

January 24 at 10:56pm · Like

Ben Fink In a quite banal way, Arendt might add.

January 24 at 11:03pm · Like · 1

Betsy Barnum The worst kind.

January 24 at 11:03pm · Unlike · 1

Ben Fink
February 11 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #12: ON BROAD-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Have you read the YouTube comments lately? (Or Reddit? Or the responses at the bottom of stories on your local newspaper's website?) There's the occasional stroke of brilliance, but as Mack suggests, most of them are ignorant, selfish, offensive, and/or cruel. (And the spelling and grammar -- oh my.) Spend more than ten minutes reading these comments, and you'll find yourself struggling to maintain faith in humanity. Not to mention democracy. If people are that awful, you'll wonder, how could they ever govern themselves? And if you're like me, you may conclude: they can't.

This is humanity at its worst. Which is to say, at its loneliest. It's people sitting alone, behind screens, writing the most extreme and shocking things possible, because if they don't, they might get lost and forgotten in a sea of severed, anonymous humans. (It's the "human nature" of Hobbes and the Hunger Games.) But thankfully, humanity isn't always like that. When people are in less lonely situations, when we feel valued by and connected to the people around us, we act a lot differently. We go out of our way to support our friends, our families, and our communities. We understand their needs and hopes, their self-interest, as bound up with our own. We work together, out of that mutual self-interest, and make amazing things.

Lots of philosophers have spent lots of time trying to figure out which of these is the "true" human nature. I think it's a B.S. question. We all act differently depending on the situation we're in. If we want to make a world where people behave more generously and inclusively, we need to make a world where people can feel valued and connected. (NOT the other way around, as some people have argued.) But of course, to organize a world where everyone is valued and connected means to fly in the face of cyberpunk neoliberalism, that massive campaign determined to divide and conquer us for the sake of profit. This is not an easy thing to do.

To do it, first you've got to develop a deep understanding of your own self-interest -- what it is, exactly, that drives YOU to leave the comfortable confines of consumer capitalism to organize people into changing the world. ("I like to help others" won't cut it.) Then you've got to develop the ability to understand OTHER PEOPLE's self-interests, spend huge amounts of time building relationships with other people, find people who have a self-interest that overlaps with yours and the ability to be leaders, and get them to work with you. Finally, you need to work with those people to build power: to organize enough people and money -- and, through them, ideas -- to start chipping away at the cyberpunk-neoliberal stranglehold.

These are the basic principles of broad-based community organizing. You don't learn them in school. (I learned them by falling ass-backwards into a few interpretive

communities who practice them -- a theater group, a Lutheran faith community, a union, a network of rogue scholars -- and then getting shipped off to weeklong training, basically boot camp for organizers.) They're hard to learn, and harder still to practice. You need to find (or found!) an organization that practices them and shares your values (they tend to be faith networks, citizen action groups, and certain kinds of unions). And you need to have (or develop) a habitus that's disposed toward conflict, public action, and -- in various ways -- using people.

I've spent the last few years working to develop these dispositions. At the same time, I also have my doubts about them. In my experience, "organizing" can become a counterculture of its own, elitist and manipulative and even jock-like. Some organizers I know really do think that they, and they alone, are doing the "real" and "important" work in the world, and everyone else is a Kansas-style dupe. Beyond that, there are a lot of people who will never have these kind of dispositions -- it's just not who they are. Are we saying these people have no role in building a better world?

Of course not. And there is a small-but-growing movement, of which I am a part, of people looking to practice the principles of broad-based community organizing in all kinds of other work, from farming to engineering to teaching. This is the movement called "public work." And it is with a discussion of this movement that my book -- and these updates -- will conclude.

Karen Stevensen, Austin James Beaulieu, Laura Conner and 10 others like this.

Joanna DeLaune In my experience there are two kinds - classes, perhaps? - of organizers. One kind tends to be deeply rooted in their own community, with widely varying levels of skill/experience & focused on small scale local fights. The other kind is cultivated & hired by large organizations such as the DNC or international unions. They are highly skilled & trained (but narrowly), very mobile, deployed around the country, and lack roots in any community. These two groups tend to be at odds partly because their interests sometimes conflict and partly, as best I can tell, for cultural reasons and because they value very different things in fellow organizers and in their own work.

February 11 at 5:12pm · Unlike · 1

Joanna DeLaune Anyway I've mainly seen the elitist and manipulative stuff out of the second group (and their handlers/trainers).

February 11 at 5:13pm · Like

Sadie L Ben this is a wonderful post. I very much look forward to the availability of this book, for myself but also for a number of people whom I think are wonderful 'embedded' organizers, if you will, in a number of different occupational fields and fighting a very uphill battle to work in that regard.

The beginning of the post also struck a particular chord for me ... that is, the role of technology in community connections. I'd be interested to hear more of your thoughts on this. Social media is touted and embraced by a whole hunk of very cool and active people, but I also think there are significant (systemic) drawbacks ...

February 11 at 8:20pm · Unlike · 1

Ben Fink Joanna: This is an interesting question, about the two types of organizers. Here's the orthodox Alinsky answer, which I don't think is entirely wrong: there aren't enough of the first kind. If there were, we wouldn't have a problem: the communities would already be organized -- which they're clearly not. So anyone who's serious about making change can't retreat into the Maoist excuse of "the people must organize themselves." The Alinsky "iron rule" is: "Never do for people what they can do for themselves." But at least initially, there are things most people can't do for themselves: build power organizations, organize effective strategic campaigns. Which is why the self-interest thing is so important. If organizers from outside the community come in to "help," or to "give," they're dead in the water. They've got to find ways in which their self-interest is bound up in the self-interest of the people they're working with -- to become, at least in some ways, a part of that community. So the major distinction, I would argue, is between "external" organizers who do this effectively -- who really do work off shared self-interest -- and those who don't -- who maintain their separateness as an elite class, apart from the communities they're working with. Which is common. Sadie: Another interesting question. I'll quote the response I gave Aarry Atkinson back in October, when he asked a similar question: "The internet has basically changed two things (that are relevant here): the ways we can communicate across distance, and the number of people we can communicate with in a given amount of time. When things 'go viral,' be they cat videos or the Tea Party, you get interpretive communities formed without the usual constraints of geography and word-of-mouth. So thanks to the internet, it's a lot easier to find an interpretive community that'll validate and confirm and perpetuate any idea you might have -- for better (revolutionary democratic ideas within repressive regimes) or worse (the idea that Obama's birth certificate is fake). But the internet -- or rather, the cultural practices that structure the way we use the internet -- has some very strong biases: toward things that are fast, individualistic, and entrepreneurial. In other words: toward capital and the dominant culture of neoliberal capitalism. So if you're organizing an interpretive community with interpretive strategies that are in sync with capital and capitalism, the internet can do a lot to help it grow. But if you want to organize an interpretive community in opposition to capital and capitalism, the internet will be of somewhat less help. That's why most organizers I know still rely on face-to-face meetings. The work involved in building a habitus that can oppose the dominant culture is work that usually can't be done through a screen."

February 11 at 8:55pm · Like · 1

Ben Fink I would add/paraphrase: social media can mobilize. It can't organize.

February 11 at 8:56pm · Like · 2

Aarry Atkinson http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=qX-P4mx1FLU...

Tony Benn - 10 min History Lesson for Neoliberals
www.youtube.com
Tony Benn - 10 min History Lesson for Neoliberals I did not create or own this v... See More

February 12 at 3:21am · Like · 2 · Remove Preview

Sadie L Thanks for your response Ben, I'm very much on the same page. Ulises Al Mejias' book "Off the Network" really solidified some of those thoughts for me as to the structural logic of the internet in relation to capital, and consumerist culture. Your perspective specifically in relation to organizing is helpful. I'd also like to tag my friend Alyssa Dalos on this post as I think this content might strongly correlate with her interests at the moment.

February 12 at 10:13am · Like · 1

Ben Fink This is a beautiful thing, Aarry. (Andrew, I know you're a Benn fan too; check this out.) I don't know the Al Mejias book, Sadie; I'll take a look. One other, related problem of internet-based "organizing" is that it only appeals to people who are already convinced, who've already bought the brand. You always know when the *progressive* stuff comes up on your news feed -- the strident outrage, the social-justice language, which either turns you on or turns you off. It perpetuates the idea that organizing is only for "those kinds of people." And we need ALL kinds of people. A good broad-based organization is made up of mostly MODERATES, not self-identified progressives. It has to be. That's where most people are, like it or not.

February 12 at 11:08am · Like · 1

Ben Fink
February 25 · Edited

BOOK UPDATE #13: ON PUBLIC WORK

Poor Scott Evil. He was having a rough day. It was hard enough getting his father out of his underground lair and to a support group meeting. Even worse was when the group leader started talking with Scott, and his father wouldn't stop interrupting. When Scott said he wanted to be a vet, his father interrupted: "An EVIL vet?!" No, Scott said, like, maybe work in a petting zoo. "An EVIL petting zoo?!" "You always do that!"

It's not Scott isn't interested in evil. (Later on, as we know, he'll propose a more efficient way to kill Austin and Vanessa -- i.e., shooting them, rather than dropping them in a sea-bass tank and assuming they're dead.) It's just that what really drives him, what really matters most, isn't evil but caring for animals. Dr. Evil either doesn't see that, or refuses to accept it. For him, evil always has to come first. And as a result, he loses a valuable partner who could help him do better evil work.

Replace "evil" with "social justice," and you'll see the point. "I want to produce a play." "A SOCIAL JUSTICE play?!" "We're going to have a film screening." "A RADICAL film screening?" The intention is good, but it alienates a lot of people. Like...me. I deeply care about working for justice and dignity for all people. But this isn't what drives me, day to day. What drives me, what gets me out of bed in the morning and makes me want to do immense amounts of hard work for not much pay, is the basic joy I find in making things -- theater, music, writing, teaching -- with people. Of course, the things I make -- the theater, music, writing, and teaching I do -- will often serve the cause of justice and dignity (at least I HOPE they do), but the basic drive is in the work (making things with people), not the abstraction (being committed to justice).

The problem with a lot of "political" work is that most people are like Scott and me. We care about the evil, but what really drives us is our work at the petting zoo. And we're put off when "activists," "organizers," and other "political" people talk with us like Dr. Evil talks to Scott. They treat "politics" and "justice work" like it's separate from and/or more important than the work we care most about. To get involved, we're asked to put the petting zoo aside, or to stop caring so much about working with the animals and using it as just a means to an (evil) end. (Have you seen much "social justice" theater? It's often not very good.) This is a big reason many of us don't get involved in politics -- even when we care about the people and issues a lot. In the words of Luke Skywalker, it just feels "such a long way from here."

There's another way. In the practice of "public work" -- a new term for a very old tradition -- everything's grounded in the petting zoo. We work with animals; that's what we love, that's what we do, that's what sustains us. We know that it's IMPORTANT to work with animals and we want to SHARE this work, so we start inviting other folks in

the community to work with us...and start building relationships with that wider community. We want to work WELL with animals, so we make sure to hire good workers at good wages and have good equipment and facilities...and organize to make sure management makes those things happen. And suddenly...we're doing important political work. Not out of some liberal guilt or abstract sense of "justice," but out of a wish to do the work that we love, well. (Broad-based community organizing is ONE form of public work. It might be the most explicit form, that sets the terms. But as discussed in Book Update #12, there's only so many people who can be truly driven by this kind of work.)

Public work is slow and hard. It's a long-term commitment. It doesn't produce quick "wins" or results. It can't be the only kind of political work. But it's the deepest work, and it can produce the deepest results. I leave you with an example of this kind of work. Remember way back to the guys at the laundromat in Book Update #2, who were bashing Obama for "telling people what to think" but holding up Glenn Beck as an example of true freedom? There was nothing I could say to them. The culture wars had defined our relationship.

But now consider, by contrast, the case of Michael F. Owens. I met Mike when he was twelve (and I was twenty-four). He was in my bunk at camp. And he was -- I say this with love (and permission) -- a menace. He had grown up poor and white in southern New Jersey, which if you haven't been there, is pretty damn SOUTHERN. And here he was, in the middle of a bunk that embodied so many of America's racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, political, and class divides. Hilarity ensued. And by hilarity, I mean fighting. A whole LOT of fighting. Much of which he started. And so much pain and hurt, physical and otherwise. I was overwhelmed. I wanted to leave. I wanted HIM to leave. Neither happened. So I stuck with him -- at the time, if I'm to be honest, due less to affection than to lack of other options. We got close. We bonded over a shared love of music and politics (from VERY different perspectives) and a shared sense, in different ways, of being weird outsiders.

Five years later, Mike is sensitive, thoughtful, caring, deeply curious person -- and a dear friend. We exchange stories, opinions, languages. We went to a Tea Party rally together (and met some very interesting people). We still talk and visit occasionally. Have I changed his mind on important political issues? Not sure. Does he still quote Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck? Yep. Does he accept everything they say uncritically? No way. And we talk about it. We have a deep relationship, founded in years of doing pedagogy and the arts together. Whatever the issue, whatever the situation, whatever our positions, we know we'll be able to deal with it -- and talk about it -- and listen to and learn from each other.

Does this mean I've solved the Culture Wars? No. But it does mean there are other options, other possibilities, and we can do them. If things like culture wars, call-outs, and the Comments section are the effects of loneliness, public work may be the opposite: a

way toward living a less lonely life. It is a long, difficult process: to build relationships, understand each other's stories and passions and interests, and work together out of the places where those interests overlap. But when we do this work, it becomes possible to know, and work with, and build a world with...pretty much anyone. If there's a greater joy out there, I don't know it.