

Nature, Society, and Thought

**NST**

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**a Journal of Dialectical and Historical Materialism**

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### **Special issues of *Nature, Society, and Thought***

The *NST* Board of Editors sees special issues as a way to open our pages to a range of perspectives and subjects. We welcome innovative ideas at any stage of development. For this issue, The Red Collective brought cultural studies into sharp focus with incisive analyses in new areas, and struck us forcefully with their determination to put class back in the center of Marxist discourse.

Guest editors are responsible for soliciting papers, which they integrate around a specific topic and edit for content and general conformity with *NST* style. Papers do not undergo *NST*'s normal refereeing process, although the *NST* Board reserves the right of final approval. *NST* staff handles production editing, technical assistance to authors, and relations with the printer.

Readers may find some approaches more unexpected or uncongenial than in our regular issues. While not endorsing any particular opinions or approaches in special issues, we present them as stimuli for further discussion.

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## ABC of Class

**Teresa L. Ebert and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh**

Most Americans, when they are not thinking of themselves purely as individuals, regard themselves as part of the “middle class.” Their evidence is that they own a car or two; have a mortgage on a house; go on vacation; entertain themselves at home with DVDs and CD players; have medical insurance; and send their children to college. The reality that their cars and houses are actually owned by the banks; their vacations are often paid for with credit cards; their health care is rationed by HMOs; and their children’s education is financed by banks to which they owe many thousands of dollars when they graduate, does not seem to disturb their belief in this “evidence.”

But the evidence, in fact, shows that the “middle class” is an ideological illusion. In a feature for the Associated Press, Karen A. Davis writes that high-tech consultants and managers, who used to earn more than \$100,000 a year, discovered after suddenly losing their jobs that their middle-class lifestyle has completely disappeared. The former homeowners are now sleeping in homeless shelters and rubbing elbows with society’s castaways—the mentally ill, drug addicts, and other hard-luck cases. “We’re all equal here,” a former high-tech worker says (*Associated Press*, 15 June 2001).

The myth of the middle class is invented to obscure the fact that “we” are all wageworkers, and, therefore, “we” are “all equal here.” Or as Marx puts it, “middle and intermediate” strata of

social differences “obliterate [class] lines of demarcation everywhere” (1996, 870). Thus they give the illusion of ideological stability to the economically insecure and unstable life under capitalism. The lifestyle-line that separates the bottom from the middle class is more a psychocultural effect than an economic reality. The idea of “middle class” as social and economic standing is, in other words, a social tranquilizer. It creates a psychological state of mind that blurs the sharp economic lines of objective social divisions brought about by capitalism and dulls the pain of daily economic struggles for subsistence.

The majority of people are convinced—mostly by the media but also by their education, church, and the spectacle of shopping malls—that there are no classes in America. Everybody is equal. What shapes a person’s life is his or her own personal hard work, ambitions, and dreams. Class, in the common view, is an old-world, mostly European social hang-up that has no place in the new world of entrepreneurship.

Even when obstinate social reality forces people to acknowledge that classes may exist in America, Americans believe all classes are shades of one huge middle class that includes everyone. Class differences are merely shades of the same class. In other words, there is a one-class classlessness in America. This is the same as saying there are no classes in America. The one-class classlessness idea is part of a larger cultural work to convince Americans that there is no longer a working class in America because economic changes have transformed the source of wealth from labor to knowledge and created a “new economy” and a “postcapitalist” society. One of the main features of this new society is said to be that “Marx’s ‘proletarian’ [becomes] ‘bourgeois’” (Drucker 1994, 38–39). This is, of course, a recycling of the old theories of embourgeoisement (the working class moving up into the middle class) and is aimed at concealing the actual proletarianization of the so-called middle class. The embourgeoisement theory is based on the “new wealth” of the working class (their cars, DVDs, houses). It is a not-so-subtle turning away from class as a social structure—indicating the relations of people to ownership of the means of production—to class as an inventory of objects and income.

Focusing on the objects people own turns class into an empty, ahistorical concept, since what a class owns is a historical index and not an absolute, static list. What is owned exclusively by the privileged class at one time (a car, for example) will necessarily become a common possession of all classes as social production changes. But the ownership of these objects by other classes does not change the social structural relations of these classes. The working class still has to sell its labor power to the owning class. Even on the basis of an inventory theory of class, the owning class now owns different exclusive objects out of reach of the working class because, as we have suggested, the inventory of objects shifts with historical change. More importantly, one class continues to exploit the other and does so ever more intensely—CEOs (whose salaries are actually not wages but concealed profit) now earn up to 450 times the average worker’s wage (compared to 46 times more in the twentieth century).

The social differences that separate people from each other, most Americans believe, have nothing to do with class, but are part of people’s own individuality. “It has become an unspoken cultural axiom: anything less than financial well-being is a person’s own fault” (*New York Times*, 20 November 2000). Poverty is not seen as part of the working of the market but as caused by the culture of poverty.

Even though Americans every single day come face-to-face with the brutal realities of huge economic disparities contradicting their cultural belief in equality, they feel quite nervous thinking of themselves in terms of class.

People fear class because class makes people confront the actuality that social disparities are not individualistic and therefore exceptional or casual and accidental but are built into capitalism itself. Social differences are systemic, not eccentric. To admit the concept *class* requires people to acknowledge that the affluence of the few is the direct result of the wage labor of the many who live in dull and depressing houses and apartments; have unhealthy diets; send their children to mediocre and dilapidated schools lacking basic educational facilities; and survive on hope. Class critique links the plight of the poor to the comforts of the

rich. It displays, with a rigid clarity, the reality of the exploitation of people by people. It shows how Americans' beliefs in equality, democratic fairness, and economic justice are ideological stories told to preserve the interests of the ruling class.

The reality of class divisions in America delegitimizes not only capitalism but also the state and the state institutions protecting capitalism (the tax system, the military, schools, and courts). Class, therefore, must be discredited or at least marginalized in social discourses.

Since the objective economics of class differences cannot be denied, this reality is mystified and converted into cultural values. The mass media obscure the economics of class by translating class into cultural status, pride, prestige, and lifestyle. Class is an indication of the social relations of property. But in such books as the best seller *Class* by Paul Fussell, class is twisted into such habits and behavior as a sense of elegance, refined taste in wine, or an educated accent: "Regardless of the money you've inherited," according to Fussell, "your social class is still most clearly visible when you say things" (1983, 175). Class is distorted into *classy*. If class is simply a matter of elegance, taste, and good manners, then anyone, rich or poor, can acquire them. Class, in the mass media, has nothing to do with property; it is a question of cultural sophistication. In Paul Fussell's view, people are differentiated not by their economic access but by their taste, manners, and style.

In obscuring economic reality by presenting class as cultural prestige, capitalism not only deploys the mass media, which it owns, but also recruits elite social critics and academics who go much further in their service to capital and deconstruct the very concept of class, for example, in their cultural analyses.

In its various forms—such as feminism, queer theory, cultural studies, and film criticism—contemporary cultural theory (seen by many as the threshold of progressive thinking) usually takes a poststructuralist approach to class. It argues that Marxist class analysis is based on an essentialist notion of class—as if class has inherent components that set it apart from other things, and thus a clear referent (bourgeoisie/proletariat). Jacques Derrida, Paul De Man, and other theorists argue that *class* is a language sign, and

like all signs, its meaning is undecidable because it is derived not from its correspondence with an objective reality called “class” but its playful “difference” from other language signs. *Class* has no clear-cut referent, and thus is undecidable. These cultural theorists conclude (unlike Marxists) that no clear exploiters and exploited exist, because social and economic life is made up of hybrids, discourses, and tropic plays of difference. “Classes,” as Chris Jenks concludes in *Culture*, become “metaphors for particular language games and forms of discourse within a culture” (1993, 74); there are no longer any distinct oppositions, such as that between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Both the mass media and cultural theorists conclude that the social differences of cybercapitalism are too complex to be analyzed by “class.” “Class,” as Pakulski and Waters (1996) put it, is “dead.” People’s lives in advanced capitalism are no longer shaped by their work (production) but by their “lifestyle and taste” (consumption), as Anthony Giddens, Tony Blair’s intellectual mentor, declares (2002, 15). In fact, the best seller by David Brooks, *Bobo’s in Paradise* (2000), is devoted to portraying class as a lifestyle in consumption. Class, by such cultural reversals, is neutralized as an economic category and turned into a matter of refinement, subtlety, graciousness, urbanity, and connoisseurship of the delectable. As an expression of taste and lifestyle, this neutered class is actually seen as adding to the diversity and richness of social life instead of being a social problem that should be eliminated. Indeed, anyone who talks about eliminating it is laughed at. Instead, the problem of class is “solved” in popular cultural writing by means of personal stories in which class becomes the memories of the distant past of a now-successful narrator (Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* [2000]). Class, in other words, is diffused into an “affect”—a subjective identity.

The focus on consumption as an index of freedom and equality makes the source of social inequalities unclear. According to these views, two persons who choose to buy the same shirt at Macy’s, for example, are equal because of their seemingly equal access to goods and services. Equal consumption makes them equal. To many cultural critics this means everybody is now middle class,

or “we are all classless nowadays,” because our identity is formed in the social relations of shopping. *Shopping equality* now means *social equality*.

Left out of this consuming logic is the fact that if one of the two persons who buys the shirt at Macy’s has to work five hours to pay for it, and the other works only half an hour, they can hardly be equal. Equality is a question of production not consumption, because value is produced by labor. But this labor theory of value is rejected by mainstream economics, which is obsessed with “supply and demand”—what Mandel calls the “psychological and individual aspects of the problem” (1983, 22). In fact, all contemporary debates on class deny that labor is the source of value and that the social relations of labor determine one’s class.

Converting class into consumption leads, as we have already suggested, to the ideological conclusion that there is no longer a working class in the United States, that everyone is middle class. This idea, although represented as new, is only the latest version of the old social fantasy that the middle class will grow in proportion and importance while the working class will diminish in size and power. If the size of the working class has decreased in the United States (and that is debatable; it is certainly increasing worldwide), it is only because it is being exploited more ruthlessly—not because the role of labor as the sole source of wealth has in any way changed.

The antilabor, consumption theory of equality leads to equating class with income, which gives people a high level of consumption and therefore social status. The “middle class” is thus set apart from the working class by income and consuming power.

What really determines class, however, is not how much one makes but what is the *source* of income. Income that is solely made up of wages puts one into the category of worker, and income that is derived from profit situates one completely in the other social position of owner. One’s class is determined not by how much one makes but where one stands in the social division of labor, which puts people into one of two fundamentally opposed positions: those who sell their labor to live (workers) and those who purchase this labor and make a profit from it (owners).

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In his defense of capitalism, Max Weber (1992) has said the rise of capitalism is related to cultural values and not labor and has extended this theory to legitimate the idea of the “middle class” by marginalizing the two-class theory that shows the brutal aggression of capitalism over the accumulation of profit. Weber claims that class derives not from one’s place in labor relations (“production”) but from one’s life chances in the market (“distribution”). But the market simply distributes the already available wealth; how this wealth is produced and not how it is distributed determines class. The stock market may seem to produce wealth, but it is really just redistributing the wealth produced by the labor of the workers. This is readily demonstrated by the collapse of all the dot.com speculation based on paper profits rather than the actual production of wealth by workers. Nonetheless, *distribution* has now become one of the most popular theories on the left for containing class antagonisms and social inequality (Fraser 1997, 2003).

The existence of capitalism depends on its ability to accumulate profit. But profit does not come from buying low and selling high (market relations). The real source of profit is human labor power (not technology). The ideological illusion of the middle class covers up this truth, which Marx called “the innermost secret” and the “hidden basis” of the entire society in the “direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers” (1996, 778).

Human labor, as Engels explains, is a “commodity which has the peculiar property that its use is a source of new value.” The workers not only produce the equivalent of their own wages but also “surplus labor” for which they are not paid. “Surplus value”—not trade or technology or knowledge—is what produces profit. The lower the cost of labor, the higher the profit. This is why capitalists move all over the world to find the cheapest labor power possible. *Globalization* is a corporate theory that conceals the mechanism of profit. If technology or knowledge were, as many believe, the source of profit, Nike would have no need to go to Pakistan, nor would IBM wish to make its computers in Thailand.

The class question is the question of what is the relation to labor power. Those who have to sell their labor power to earn a living—producers of profit—are part of one class. Those who purchase human labor and take the profit from labor are part of another. There is no third, or “middle” class. The middle class has no material base: it is a makeshift class that receives hand-outs from capitalists in the form of a salary that is actually a fraction of the surplus labor. The middle class, in short, is given a slightly larger share of the wealth produced by labor, thus enjoying greater consumption and more cultural status, which then enables it to separate itself from the “crude” working class and align itself politically and culturally with the ruling class.

The so-called middle class is a fraction of the working class that is culturally segregated from the body of workers in order to provide a social buffer zone against class antagonisms. Members of the middle class, however, are on shaky ground, since the cultural features that distinguish them from workers are too fragile to provide a stable place. Like the high-tech workers who have lost their high incomes and now their homes, the middle class is always only one paycheck away from collapsing into poverty. Without the middle class, the rigid clarity of the social division of owners and workers becomes clear, and capitalism will be seen for what it actually is: a social regime in which the relative few who own capital exploit the labor of the many. The concept *middle class* blurs the lines of this brutal division of people.

Absorbing the extremes into a moderating middle is done mostly through the proliferation of pseudochoices that make no real difference but give the choosers a sense of unique identity that separates them from others in the same class position. Driving a Saab instead of a Ford Taurus creates a cultural image that masks the fact that both drivers are wage earners.

People need not more cultural identities, but economic equality. As long as people believe in the myth of the middle class, they continue to think that they can work hard and get ahead in life. The majority cannot, and the few who do, do it by pushing others behind. Capitalism is a zero-sum game: not everyone can be a winner, some must be losers.

The middle class uses cultural games of consumption and pride to blur the harsh realities of losing. But its historical role now is to recognize that it is not a social class distinct from the workers, and to see that it lives on handouts from the capitalists. These handouts come from the exploitation of workers. The middle class needs to abandon its cultural identity games and stand in solidarity with the workers to make history by making society free from class inequalities—free from classes of any kind.

The middle class is invented for one purpose only: to “increase the social security and power of the UPPER TEN THOUSAND” (Marx 1989, 198).

A version of this essay was published in the online journal *Red Critique*, no. 7 (November/December 2002).

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# IKEA and Democracy as Furniture

**Kimberly DeFazio**

The way Americans think about design is changing. Design (and especially modern design) used to be associated with expensive products for the rich. Today modern design, with its emphasis on sleek lines and elegant simplicity, has not only become popular and affordable, it has also become a symbol of individual change and equality. From the popular home design shows like *Trading Spaces* and *Surprise by Design* (not to mention the growing number of cable networks devoted entirely to the redecorating, renovation, and makeover of domestic space), to the success of the Martha Stewart product line in working-class stores like Kmart and the expansion of hip IKEA stores around the world, to the endless updating and showcasing of technological design in such personal technology as cell phones, palm pilots, iPods, etc., design in the United States has become the latest way to transform everyday life through consumption.

Proponents of mass-produced design suggest that the more stylish your sofa, the better your life, and that redecorating your house will help you change everyday living by providing more comfort and pleasure. Your paycheck may barely cover your bills, but you can secure a hip and stylish image with a trendy ten-dollar lamp. And now that design is no longer the exclusive privilege of the rich, all people (so the new design narrative goes) can enjoy such lifestyle pleasures.

The story of the democratization of design, in other words, is a renarration of the American Dream: the myth that access to (stylized)

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commodities is the basis of individual happiness and freedom. As IKEA's "Unböring Manifesto"<sup>1</sup> puts it, "In the past, more often than not, the people who really needed a more beautiful home weren't able to afford it. That's boring." "Unböring," in contrast, is "mak[ing] design available to everyone," which "very few have ever bothered" to try. This is another way of saying that it is not equality at the point of production that constitutes social freedom, but equality of consumption.

But there can be no equality of consumption if the vast majority of people have to rely on increasingly lower wages, while a few reap greater and greater profits. No amount of "unboring" commodities on the market can cancel this growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, because what the haves have that the have-nots do not has never been access to more commodities. The class of haves is not made by access to more commodities, but by the ability to purchase others' labor power (by owning the instruments and materials of production) in order to produce profit. Class, in other words, is one's position in the division of labor: whether one purchases the labor power of others to produce profit, or whether one must sell one's labor power to survive. The growing cult of design is an attempt to occult this economic gap ideologically, by focusing on the extraordinary superfluity of commodities on the market and the differences between them.

The superfluity of commodities, in fact, is itself an index of the class basis of production. There is such an excess to begin with because of the small amount of time it takes workers to reproduce their daily needs with today's technology compared to the bulk of the time they spend producing value for the capitalist in the form of commodities. More and more workers cannot afford to buy what they themselves produce because of the cheapening of labor due to the competitive use of technology for profit. By fetishizing the effects these conditions have on the form of commodities, the changes in style are themselves trivialized as matters of pure taste above and beyond the social contradictions of class. Like all "above class" representations, the representation of style as above class is not a neutral position but precisely the cultural view of those few whose needs are sure to be met because

they live off the surplus labor of others. The changes in style in actuality come when the reigning style exhausts its ideological function and can no longer cover over the class politics of culture. “Boring” is in actuality a marker of a bankrupt ideological mode that has lost its ability to disguise the class conflicts. The lamps sold at Wal-Mart (which has a growing reputation for its bullying tactics in driving smaller stores out of business and its sweatshop labor practices, such as locking night workers in the building and forcing unpaid overtime work on workers) are “boring” compared to the “unboring” lamps of IKEA that are marketed as politically savvy products at a time of increasing global class contradictions and consciousness, at a time when it is becoming impossible to ignore the crises of global capitalism.

In reality, the unique and “unboring” commodities that are supposed to more freely express consumers’ individual identities are mass-produced on a global scale, and the very products in which workers are supposed to find pleasure, comfort, and freedom are produced under increasingly exploitative conditions worldwide, especially in countries in the South and in the former Soviet bloc, where most of the manufacturing now takes place. The more “well-designed” products for “good living” become available to working people, the more the conditions of living for the majority actually deteriorate, while corporations amass ever-increasing profits.

For instance, IKEA, a transnational corporation based in Sweden, reputed to be a highly socially and environmentally conscious company, has seen its profits increase dramatically: “worldwide sales have grown by an estimated 20 percent a year for the past five years, and its 2001 revenues topped \$9.6 billion” (Margonelli 2002). On the other hand, in the United States alone, the real wages of the working people to whom IKEA sells its products have not increased since the 1970s, and more and more of IKEA’s products are being produced in developing countries where workers receive even lower wages and suffer terrible working conditions—so that workers in the North can buy trendy products at very cheap prices.

It has become clear that design—whether it is the design of furniture, home, apartment, or technology—is being marketed as

a local solution to problems that have their source in wider global economic relations. Fashionable home furnishings for some have become a substitute for a social existence in which all people's needs are met. So while IKEA pays cheap wages to workers in the South who cannot afford basic necessities, let alone faddish domestic products, this process keeps workers in the North in debt and living increasingly precarious lives, where becoming ill, being laid off, or missing a rent payment can change a relatively comfortable life into destitution.

The ideology of design is an inversion of the actual material relations of production under transnational capitalism. It presents things—and their redesign, or rearrangement—as the space of freedom and change. But the increase in the production of commodities (whether well designed or not) is actually an index of what Marx in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* calls the “estrangement” of workers from the things they produce, and marks the degree to which social relations under capitalism have become subservient to private accumulation. By “estrangement,” Marx means that the workers do not own the product of their labor, which stands as something “alien” or “strange” in relation to them. It is of course the capitalist, not the worker, who owns the products of the worker's labor, and if the worker needs the product produced, he or she is forced to purchase it (like all other products) through the wages received by selling his or her labor power to the capitalist. The estranged relation of the worker to the product of labor, in other words, is because the worker owns nothing but labor power, which must be sold as a commodity to those who own the means of production and who exploit the labor of those who do not.

Estrangement (to put it differently) is the effect of what Marx in his later writings calls “exploitation”: the process under capitalism through which an increasingly large portion of the value produced by the worker is appropriated by the owner in the form of surplus value (the basis of profit). What workers receive for their labor (wages) steadily decreases as the rate of capitalist profit increases, a result of the ruthless competition among capitalists for a larger share of the market. But markets are won by lowering

the cost of production, mainly today through introducing “labor-saving” technology that enables corporations to pay less wages for workers (“living labor”) while the productivity of workers actually increases (they produce more products in a shorter period of time). For this reason, Marx argues:

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. (1975, 271–72)

Thus, as Marx argues in *Wage Labour and Capital*, “although the pleasures of the labourer have increased,” and thus commodities that were once the privilege of the rich are now afforded by the working class,

the social satisfaction that they give [the worker] has fallen in comparison with the increased enjoyments of the capitalist, which are inaccessible to the worker, in comparison with the state of development of society in general. (1977, 216)

In other words, that the working class is now able to afford sleek sofas does little to undo the fundamental class division between workers and owners. In fact, for Marx it would be an index of the deepening of this divide, not its leveling, as the corporate cult of design would have it, because the same level of production that is making modern style popular is also concentrating a greater mass of value and power in fewer and fewer hands. The (local) freedom of consumption is an ornament on the global slavery imposed by monopoly capital through its transnational institutions.

Consider again the example of IKEA, which has taken the ideology of design to new heights. IKEA not only produces trendy modern home furnishings at low prices but also suggests that affordable modern design is fundamentally “democratic” and “socially and environmentally” conscious. For example, IKEA’s “Our Vision” Web page informs readers that

IKEA was founded when Sweden was fast becoming an example of the caring society, where rich and poor alike

were well looked after. This is also a theme that fits well with the IKEA vision. (Our Vision: Heritage 2002)

IKEA, it is suggested, should be celebrated and shopped at because IKEA has “decided to side with the many,” because “most of the time, beautifully designed home furnishings are created for a small part of the population—the few who can afford them” (Our Vision: A Better Everyday Life 2002).

IKEA claims to “side with the many” by producing cheap, well-designed home furnishings. As it explains in one of its case studies, IKEA was able to produce a mug (which it calls “BANG”) at half the average price of other mugs by looking around the world for suppliers to “invest in specially-adapted equipment for our specially-priced mug. Our product developer worked to find the best conditions on the factory floor for fast and efficient production”—that is, equipment that would be able to fit “the maximum number [of mugs] in the ovens at a time, an expensive process” (BANG 2002).

Entirely erased in this notion of democracy are the conditions of production that make such cheap prices possible. Left out of this narrative is the fact that the primary way products are made cheaply is by finding the cheapest labor possible, with the most labor-saving technology. What else is meant by the euphemism “specially-adapted equipment” but technology that can mass-produce products using as little living labor as possible—technology that only very large companies (like IKEA) can afford to own or to subcontract? IKEA expresses no concern about the conditions under which workers have to work to produce the mugs—only with the conditions of “fast and efficient production,” or the greatest amount of products produced in the least amount of time and for the cheapest price (the lowest wages). This necessarily means that workers are forced to increase their rate of productivity without being compensated. As an article in the corporate magazine *Business 2.0* makes clear, “The push to discover ever-cheaper labor in ever-cheaper markets has been one of IKEA’s signature strategies” (Margonelli 2002). Not surprisingly, the article goes on to point out, IKEA in the last five years “has increased its buying in developing countries from 32 to 48 percent.” Rather than

representing the real economic relations behind IKEA's products, IKEA instead fosters among workers a way of thinking about the world in which "the real motive forces impelling [them] remain unknown to [them]" (Engels 1973, 496).

What IKEA calls "siding with the many," in short, is really exploiting the many, with a democratic spin on the terminology.

At the same time that IKEA represents itself as committed to creating better living conditions for the many (a world in which "everyone should be given a chance to enjoy life"), its actual practices lead to the lowering of wages and the worsening of working conditions among the global working class—regardless of IKEA's campaigns against child labor and coerced labor, widely publicized to manufacture its ethical image. Exploitation is at the root of all production under capitalism; reifying the extreme conditions of low-tech capitalism actually helps to normalize the daily exploitation that undergirds all production.

The development of the productive forces is behind the emergence of "design" as a new cultural phenomenon, and it is this same productive growth that is now threatening the capitalist system with a global crisis of overproduction. As corporations strive to gain a larger share of the market through mass-producing products at low cost, they disregard actual social needs, and in the process eliminate the basis of profits by replacing labor (the source of all value) with technology. The result is that while many social needs go unmet, the market becomes overwhelmed by a surplus of commodities (indeed, in the case of IKEA, frivolous commodities). But the products must, of course, be sold, or else the owners of the commodities will not see their profits. Toward this end, as a *New York Times Magazine* article reports, the products IKEA makes are not only impermanent in the sense of trendy, but are actually poorly made and break easily.

The aroma of impermanence that hung over a lot of Ikea products, the nicked veneers and wobbly joints . . . no longer seemed such a problem. Impermanence had become a mark of progress, not of decay. (Leland 2002)

Thus not only are workers taught that they should purchase trendy home furnishings to keep up with the times,<sup>2</sup> they are

also forced to purchase commodities more frequently because the products are designed to have a limited life span (planned obsolescence). In this way, corporations produce an endless need in the consumer base, and provide workers with global consciousness skills for transnational capitalism—consciousness skills that take the flexibility and impermanence demanded of workers in the contemporary workplace as the mark of a hip, up-to-date lifestyle.

Corporations like IKEA renarrate the mass production at the basis of modern design, which requires the intensification of exploitation and the commodification of everyday life,<sup>3</sup> as the epitome of freedom. Hidden behind the ideology of what IKEA calls “democratic design” is the fact that the process of production of the products sold actually leads to and is dependent upon the worsening of living conditions of the vast majority of people. As the division of labor increases, so too does the general deskilling of labor, the aim of which is the general increase in the extraction of surplus value from the worker. Democratic design is really the democracy of transnational corporations.

Design’s ideological severing of exploitation from consumption, rather than producing a more sophisticated consumer who appreciates the stylistic differences among commodities, actually stupefies workers and turns them into corporate tools. Marx explains the intimate connection between culture, daily life, and the exploitative conditions under which products are produced in capitalism. This separation of the workers from their labor is critical to an understanding of capitalism, because it is at the basis of a wider series of estrangements in social life. Objectifying peoples’ laboring activity in commodities also leads to their estrangement from themselves and from one another. The result is that human society becomes increasingly alienating and alienated (inhuman), prioritizing the production of things over meeting and enriching social needs. Objectified labor “in the form of *sensuous, alien, useful objects*, in the form of estrangement” is everywhere “displayed in *ordinary material industry*” (Marx 1975, 302).

IKEA’s theory of design, in contrast, assumes that the real problem is that stylish products are not more affordable by the

many. But this has never been the fundamental problem of bourgeois democracy. The fundamental contradiction of society today is that the many do not own the means of production and therefore must sell their labor to those who do, and who accumulate private profit by exploiting the labor of those who work for them. The concept of *design* reinvents these fundamental relations and turns people's need to purchase things on the market into a matter of choice. People do not choose, however, but are economically compelled to purchase items necessary to survive on the market, because they must sell their labor as a commodity on the market.

Democracy must start not at the *end* of the production process—with distribution and exchange of commodities already produced under exploitative conditions—but at the *beginning*. Real democracy means that people are not exploited in the process of producing their means of subsistence and meeting their social needs. A truly democratic culture would provide consciousness skills to abolish the division of labor in order to meet the needs of all. Such a society, in short, would be committed to “the *positive* transcendence of *private property*” and therefore the real appropriation of the totality of social relations by and for workers (Marx 1975, 296).

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## NOTES

1. IKEA, Unböring Manifesto, originally at <http://www.unboring.com/>. A limited version was accessed on 9 September 2004 at [http://bongardville.com/russell/unboring/unboring\\_us.swf](http://bongardville.com/russell/unboring/unboring_us.swf). The foreign-looking umlaut (produced by a U.S. advertising firm) is IKEA's deceptive way of giving a Swedish appearance to products not actually produced in Sweden.

2. Nowhere is this more evident than in IKEA's heavy-handed TV ad, directed by Spike Jonze, which encourages viewers not to sympathize with an old lamp that has been junked on a curb, but to embrace its stylish new replacement. “Many of you are feeling bad for this lamp,” a man in the commercial says to the viewer. “That is because you are crazy. This lamp has no feelings. And the new one is better” (Hales 2002). The ad's main message is that consumers should get over the “old” idea that your current furniture is okay to keep just because its functional. Furniture, IKEA tells us, should be updated like a fashionable wardrobe.

3. As an article in *European Cultural Digest* makes clear, what is called “modern” design has less to do with aesthetics than it does the economics of production: “modernism represents the most cost-effective style in which to manufacture many goods” (Design: Europe’s Baby 1998).

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## Veil vs. Prada: The Empire's New Morality

Jennifer Cotter

In class society, the position of women has long been regarded as exclusively a cultural matter: an issue of morals, ethics, and values. Recently, nothing has displayed this more clearly than debates over the *burqa* or, for that matter, any mode of *hijab* (Islamic “modest dress”) that requires women to put on some level of covering to “veil” their morality (from the full coverage of the *burqa* used under the Taliban, to the *chador* of Iran, to a simple headscarf). In the United States, for instance, *hijab* has been read as a sign of a barbaric and evil culture that hates the difference of women and is therefore undemocratic.

Women’s individual freedom to be unique and to buy and wear what they want has, moreover, been elevated to an act of moral resistance to terrorism and evil, something along the lines of “shop or the terrorists win.” By contrast, many Muslims have argued that *hijab* is itself an act of moral resistance to the cultural imperialism of the West, including the routine commodification of women and their sexuality under capitalism. Piety, morality, modesty, propriety in sexual relations, and “family values” are all considered to be determinants of women’s economic and social position (its elevation or degradation) in society, as if sexual relations outside of marriage on the part of women are the root of economic inequality.

Despite what seems to be a fundamental moral opposition, both arguments are ideological modes of legitimating capitalist

production. This is because, at root, the moral debate over *hijab* (whether “for” or “against” *hijab*) and the seemingly opposed cultural practices that this debate represents (from Western fashion to the veil), together form a united position—which I call (anti)*hijab*—that serves as a strategy for capitalism to control the international labor force. More specifically, “(anti)*hijab*” ideologically justifies women’s position in capitalism as a reserve labor force that can be pushed in and out of productive labor in accordance with capital’s need for labor power.

In short, (anti)*hijab* is a class issue rooted in capital’s fundamental reliance on the exploitation of human labor power in order to make a profit.

The reduction of the veil to a matter of moral laws (not an economic and labor issue) shores up capitalism by putting forward the ideological illusion that moral values determine class. The (anti)*hijab* debate is an instance of what Frederick Engels called the “application of morality to economics” (1990, 281). It reads the concrete of the economy on the basis of moral laws, not on the basis of economic laws and historical conditions. In doing so, it treats morality ahistorically as “an eternal, ultimate and for ever immutable ethical law on the pretext that the moral world too, has its permanent principles which stand above history and the differences between nations” (Engels 1987, 87). By retreating into ahistorical notions of morality and ethics as “above” class and production relations, (anti)*hijab* conceals the theft of workers’ surplus labor by owners and the increasing disparity between classes, through moral and legal codes of conduct. As a consequence, it conceals the economic laws and historical conditions that determine women’s lives, making the economic conditions of women’s lives appear to be a consequence of their moral and ethical choices. Both Islamic family law and liberalism see fairness and equality in economic relations as derived from moral and ethical behaviors on the part of individuals—how individuals conduct themselves in business and personal relations and how they regard others. In short, they promote an ideal human as the basis of agency and change. Actually, morality and the ideal human always reflect the social relations and, in class society, the interests of the ruling

class. Choices available to individuals are shaped by the material conditions in which they find themselves, especially those that determine the degree of material resources they will command, whether only enough to allow them to become exploited wage laborers or more than enough so they have command over the labor of others as capitalists.

Liberal feminists who oppose *hijab* shore up capitalism by treating the position of women in society as a matter of inherent right to individual freedom, uniqueness, and choice. This position supports the existing capitalist relations of production based on private property by substituting formal justice and equality of individual rights and uniqueness for economic equality, freedom from necessity, and social justice for all. Liberal feminists see freedom for women as something separate from the mode of production, unrelated to whether all people own the means of production—and therefore collectively determine the social uses to which labor power is put—or only some people privately own the means of production—and thereby use the labor power of others to produce profit. This means that they do not think that freedom of labor from exploitation and freedom from necessity for all are requirements for the emancipation of women. Instead, they support capitalism by supporting only its reform—by advancing women's rights to individual freedoms and promoting an ethical or “caring” capitalism that puts the freedom of bourgeois women to exploit others before the needs of the majority of women, who are exploited as workers.

In their arguments that *hijab* is an unethical practice, liberal feminists have held up as a sign of justice and the absence of class relations in the West the freedom of women to choose how they want to dress and wear cosmetics and fashionable clothing. In fact, freedom of choice regarding fashion and cosmetics—aspects of lifestyle—has been regarded as the epitome of freedom for women and is offered as evidence that women are determined by their individuality not by their class. This is because class is understood to be an act of consumption. The freedom of the individual that is defended by liberal feminism is identical to the freedom to go shopping—that is, the freedom to buy whatever one wants, to

wear whatever one wants, to consume. *Hijab* is too restrictive for consumption, which is why liberal feminism opposes it.

But freedom from class for women is determined by material conditions, not the image of the ideal human put forward in fashion magazines. What seems to be the unrestricted freedom for women in the United States to wear and buy what they please is actually a product of economic compulsion in class society. In fact, as Evelyn Reed has shown, fashion and cosmetics have always been used as a way to naturalize class antagonisms and production relations based on private property (1969, 105–31). Cosmetics and fashion (the use of clothing and make-up for decoration, ornamentation, and beauty) are exclusively a product of class society and have since their inception signified economic inequality. They arose under feudalism as a privilege of the aristocracy and were used as a mark of class distinction by both men and women of the aristocracy, in contrast to the serf labor upon which the aristocracy's wealth depended.

Once the bourgeoisie overthrew the aristocracy and displaced feudal relations of production with capitalist relations of production, the majority of laboring women were displaced from their productive role in society as the household ceased to be the center of productive labor. Cosmetics and fashion became an expression of women's economic dependence on men under capitalism and the sexual competition between women for men, brought on by their displacement from productive labor with the onset of commodity production and exchange.

With the advance of the productive forces under capitalism, beauty products and fashionable clothing, which once distinguished one class from another, are now produced for the mass market, giving rise to the appearance that all women have access to equal class status, because they all have free access to beauty and fashion. Contemporary feminists such as Elaine Showalter, who defend the class privileges of women who can afford to wear *haute couture* clothing by Prada and Armani, argue that "once fabric and clothing were mass produced, they became matters of choice rather than class" (Showalter 2001). Class, in other words, is normalized as a matter of lifestyle and one's consumption choices.

As in all cases, however, consumption is limited by production. Cosmetics and fashionable attire for women are an unspoken requirement in most workplaces in order to gain, and often retain, employment. Keeping up-to-date is not a choice for women who do not own the means of production but must sell their labor power in order to survive. Contrary to the ideological representation, it is not possible to determine your class position through “dressing for success.” The fact that one’s position in the social relations of production is what determines class, and not one’s attire, becomes quite clear when the fashion and beauty industry changes the standard in order to create a new need for their commodities—for example, by adjusting a hemline or altering the acceptable color scheme in order that the previous season’s clothes become outdated before they have outlived their usefulness as protective covering. What may be a form of entertainment for ruling-class women who can afford to discard their wardrobe for the latest fashions is extremely costly for working-class women who are required to adhere to corporate beauty in the workplace. The fashionable feminism advanced by elite academics like Showalter erases the real conditions of need for the majority of women in class society, who either produce the clothing and cannot afford basic necessities of life from their wages or who must go into debt to purchase the fashionable clothing required at work. What seems like freedom of the individual, and evidence that class no longer determines the lives of women, is actually the subordination of women to commodity production and exchange and the freedom of the corporation to turn a profit at the expense of workers. Working-class women are offered, at most, the limited freedom to “look classy” while they are being further impoverished economically by the transfer of wealth away from social resources in education, health care, and social security, and toward the defense budget, tax-credits for the rich, corporate welfare—all in the interest of transnational capital.

On the other hand, those who support *hijab* also support private ownership of the means of production and the wage labor/capital relation as the basis for women’s rightful place in society. They also appeal to abstract notions of individual rights and

morality by defending *hijab* for both men and women as a matter of the private spiritual space of the individual in the public sphere—specifically for women, their freedom from the male gaze and sexualized attention (see, for example, Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* [1999]). By defining people as private moral beings who stand outside of the public sphere, this position also conceals the increasing disparity between classes and capitalism's determination of the conditions of women's lives worldwide.

It is telling that an Islamic revival and a turn to *hijab* within nations that do not legally require women to wear the veil, such as Egypt, is gaining ardent support among wealthy young men and women. Many of these women claim that *hijab* gives spiritual security to women regardless of their class position. As one Egyptian sociologist put it, "for some poor people who live in nasty neighborhoods, the veil protects women because it sends a message that they're conservative and not easy prey" (Kandil 2003, 2). It is women's clothing and their moral values, in short, that serve as protection from crushing poverty and the blows of domestic violence and rape. I leave aside the fact that domestic violence and rape rates remain high both in nations where *hijab* is endorsed and in nations, such as the United States, that see it as oppressive to women. The spiritual protection and inner peace attributed to *hijab* are actually effects of the economic security of *some* ruling-class women who benefit from class inequality—economic security allowed some women is represented as spiritual and moral security for all women.

This may seem like a contradiction, since Islam is popularly seen in the United States as hostile to capitalism—most sharply signified by the attacks on the World Trade Center. Moreover, this view has been codified in the arguments of many Muslim women who wear *hijab* and argue that it frees women from the male gaze and the commodification of their bodies and sexuality under capitalism, and therefore serves as a resistance to the effects of imperialism on women.

Islamic Family Law (*Shari'ah*), from which *hijab* takes its direction, however, is a legal and moral expression of private

property relations. Its rules for gender relations, the family and reproduction, and inheritance laws and rights—while widely interpreted—presuppose the historical development of private ownership of the means of production and, therefore, class society. The moral laws articulated in the name of Muhammad on issues of ethical trading, price controls, taxation of markets, etc., that have become sites of intense conflict between various interpretations of the Qur'an within Muslim nations, all presuppose the existence of trade and private property. Moreover, many Islamic feminists argue that Islam in its pure form is the most progressive of all religions for women specifically because the Qur'an explicitly grants women private property rights: the right to own their own business, to inherit wealth, to choose and to divorce marriage partners. But this is ruling-class freedom for women—it is gender equality for property holders and equal exploitation for those who are denied ownership of the means of production.

The unfreedom of class relations for the majority of women is in the practical relations behind the veil. The veil and the seclusion of women appeared many centuries prior to Islam in the class societies of Assyria, classical Greece, the Byzantine Christian world, Persia, and India. Like fashion and cosmetics, veiling has been used since its inception as a mark of class distinction. For instance, Assyrian kings introduced the veil and the seclusion of women in the royal harem. Prostitutes and slaves were forbidden from veiling and could be slashed if they disobeyed this law (Women In World History 1996–2004). Its original adoption by Islam also followed this historical trajectory; it was used by women of the ruling class to distinguish themselves from women of exploited classes. Pro-*hijab* morality grew out of imperatives of private property relations and the concentration of the social surplus into the hands of a few. It was used to support the interests of the ruling class by marking the class position between women and, accordingly, adjudicating the inheritance rights of their offspring in order to help concentrate wealth into fewer hands.

Today these marks of class distinction reassert themselves even in countries where all women are required to wear some form of *hijab*, such as in Iran, where wealthier women are starting

to wear designer *chadors* of fine, colorful fabrics and intricate embroidery (now promoted in *Lotous*, Iran's first fashion magazine since 1979).

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that (anti)*hijab* morality is not an eternal moral code of conduct—both Western fashion and *hijab* (and the codes of morality that these draw from) are *historical* and have their roots in class society. Moreover, inequality and injustice for women are rooted not in their moral choices but in class relations—the private property relations founded on private ownership of the means of production.

It is not morality that determines women's economic position; rather, morality derives from what Engels calls the "practical relations on which their class position is based—from the economic relations in which they carry on production" (1987, 87). Morality and ethics, in other words, are not autonomous and eternal laws. For example, ethical rules that grant women of the property-owning class equal ownership of private property cease to make any sense at all in a society that has done away with private property relations altogether. Instead, they are historical and "the product, in the last analysis, of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality has always been class morality" (Engels 1987, 97).

The practical relations—that is, the production relations—of capitalism do not depend on moral values or ethical ideas about fairness and equality; they depend on the exploitation of human labor power. What makes a capitalist wealthy is not that he is a moral citizen or has democratic ethics, but that he owns the means of production and can, therefore, appropriate the surplus labor of those who do not own the means of production but must sell their labor power to survive. It is not morality but the exploitation of human labor power that is a necessary condition for capitalism, because only labor power can produce surplus value. At a specific stage of historical development of the productive forces, labor power can produce more value than the labor necessary to produce articles required for its own reproduction. It is the theft of this surplus labor (exploitation) that is the basis of profit in capitalism.

For capital to make a profit, therefore, it must have access to a continuous supply of exploitable labor power, and the capacity to control this supply depending on the historical conditions of the productive forces of society. Because only labor power can produce surplus value, the increase of the laboring population is a necessary condition if capitalist accumulation is to be a steady, continuous process. But the absolute growth of the laboring population in reproduction, as Marx makes clear, itself depends upon definite material conditions in production. An increasing population “presupposes an AVERAGE wage which permits not only reproduction of the labouring population but also its constant growth” (Marx 1989, 110). If economic conditions are not developed enough (or have deteriorated, for instance, through warfare), capitalism needs to make provision not to disrupt its capacity to extract surplus labor.

Capitalist production provides for unexpected contingencies by overworking one section of the labouring population and keeping the other *in petto*, as a ready reserve army consisting of partially or entirely pauperised people. (110)

(Anti)*hijab* morality is not explained by eternal moral laws that, upon closer examination, are merely an expression of the practical relations of the capitalist mode of production. Instead, it is explained by the dependence of capitalism on the exploitation of human labor power and the fact that it must use reserve labor forces to manage its access to and control over a continuous supply of exploitable labor power in order to make a profit. Liberal feminist morality of individual choice is an articulation of capitalism's need to pull reserves of previously unproductive workers into productive labor—specifically by incorporating women as collective producers into wage labor—and, at the same time, ensure that women will be a compliant labor force and see themselves not as exploited labor (and, therefore, part of a class) but as individuals. The Islamic feminist morality of *hijab*, modesty in sexual relations, and romanticizing of motherhood also helps capitalism by addressing its need for controlling the future supply of labor power by using the reserve labor force of women in reproduction in order to increase the supply of labor power. Its

emphasis on family values, moreover, helps to place the cost of social reproduction entirely within the privatized family so that an increased population does not serve as a drain on profit for capitalists.

The cultural differences over *hijab* and women's dress do not have to do with fundamental oppositions over private property, the basic process of exploitation, or the use of women as reserve labor for capital. Rather these cultural debates are the effect of increasing systemic crisis and instability in capitalism brought on by the concentration of wealth into fewer hands and resulting internationally in increased intercapitalist competition and uneven levels of development of productive forces. What seem to be fundamental moral oppositions are actually ideological strategies that address different sectors of the international working class, depending on the historical level of development of the productive forces under which capitalists must work to make a profit.

*Hijab* and its emphasis on family values (along with Christian fundamentalism and other conservative and religious tendencies) have grown in many nations of the South as a response to deteriorating economic conditions, brought on by imperialism and the concentration of global production into fewer hands. In Iraq, for instance, the return to religion and the donning of *hijab* by working-class women have increased dramatically from the deterioration of its productive forces as a result of Gulf War I and prolonged economic sanctions (to force out national capitalist competitors blocking U.S. capital's access to Iraqi oil reserves and labor power). Severe economic deterioration has led to a serious decline in the social resources necessary to reproduce the laboring population. State-funded programs of child care, public education, etc., established in the 1970s and 1980s to pull women into skilled productive labor in order to address labor shortages for the developing national bourgeoisie have now been cut. The increasing acceptance of pro-*hijab* morality is an effect of economic compulsion of class relations and increasing class contradictions. Although it is taken up by many proletarian women in Iraq, *hijab* is a ruling-class morality that has bolstered ideologically the interests of the struggling national bourgeoisie, which is

facing severe labor shortages as a result of the human slaughter of the U.S.-led imperialist war. Transnational capital, moreover, also needs absolute growth of the labor force, without dipping into the surplus value required to reinvest in capitalist ventures in order to accumulate profit.

The liberal feminist moralism of individual rights, on the other hand, serves the labor needs of capitalism under conditions of higher development of the productive forces. Liberal feminism has always been used to incorporate reserve labor forces of women into the workforce while at the same time it preserves the ideological illusion of classlessness to cover over the theft of the surplus labor of working class women. In its economic content, however, the projection of classlessness for women on capitalist relations of production is a defense of the class relations of capitalism. This becomes increasingly evident as liberal feminism is used to defend the imperialist interests of U.S. capital. Moral outrage by U.S. liberal feminists at *hijab* in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, has helped put a progressive spin on U.S. capital's imperialist interests in Central Asia and the Middle East. It covers over the economic relations in transnational capitalism behind the resurgence of *hijab*, and also helps propel the international labor reserves of women into labor that produces surplus value for the capitalists of the imperialist nations.

The moral outrage by U.S. feminists at *hijab* does not represent the end of women's oppression in class society, but a different mode of it suited to the interests of U.S. capital. It is, in short, a moral expression of the fact that as capitalist production has developed into imperialist capitalism, higher levels of productivity at the same time have made capitalist accumulation more difficult to maintain. The advanced productivity of workers (brought on by advances in labor-saving technology) and intensified concentration of capital into fewer hands mean that capital starts to invest more in machinery and raw materials and less in labor power, since less is needed in order to produce the same commodities for exchange. But this leads to a crisis of profitability, since without increased labor power, there is no increase of surplus value, and capitalist profit tends to decline. When capital

has needed access to more and more quantities of productive labor at a cheap price, having largely exhausted current labor reserves within its own national boundaries (or found them too costly), it has sought them elsewhere by transforming previously unproductive laborers into productive ones. Liberal feminism has helped to justify the export of capitalist production into new areas under the name of advancement for women.

(Anti)hijab morality, in other words, has become a way to conceal the instability of capitalist productive processes and capitalism's increasing periods of crisis, and to normalize the theft of workers' surplus labor, which is a necessary condition of capitalism.

Even the moral objection that the oppression of women is wrong is enabled by the contradictions in the economic conditions of production. As Engels put it in his Preface to Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy*:

If mass moral consciousness declares an economic fact to be unjust, as it did at one time in the case of slavery and the statute labour, that is proof that the fact itself outlived its day, that other economic facts have made their appearance due to which the former has become unbearable and untenable. (1990, 282)

All this demonstrates that the position of women in society is not a cultural matter of ethical values and moral codes of conduct, but of economic conditions of necessity. Capitalism needs to keep workers economically insecure in order to drive down the cost of wages. Using women as a reserve labor force is one way to do this—but without actually resolving the contradictions and crises in capitalism: both the wealth gap and the instability of capitalist ventures are growing. Changing the position of women in society is not, at root, founded on moral demands regarding their position, but on “the inevitable collapse of the capitalist mode of production which is daily taking place before our eyes to an ever growing degree” (Engels 1990, 282). It therefore requires not ethical negotiation, but heightening the fundamental contradictions in capitalism between wage labor and capital, bringing them to crisis, and fundamentally transforming them.

In concealing class antagonisms in the international division of labor, however, capitalism translates economic inequality into a matter of negotiable cultural values. Ruling-class academics put forward a cultural materialism claiming that if morality derives from economic relations of production, and moral codes of conduct differ across nations, this must mean that the relations of production themselves are undecidable relations—that is, Marxist political economy is unreliable as a guide for global social change because it emerged from a very different European context that no longer exists today.

For instance, it is said among globalization theorists (like Peter Drucker in *Post-Capitalist Society* [1993]) that the nation “has been outflanked” in an era of transnationalism, meaning that global capitalism has surpassed national difference; thus, difference in an era of globalization must be at root based on cultural identity and preference (not uneven developments within capitalism). Capitalism, in other words, has led to its own transcendence—a capitalism beyond capitalism—and all matters of culture are now matters of taste and preference, not labor and class. The conversion of women in the North to Islam and *hijab*, and the loosening of *hijab* among some women in Muslim nations who are taking up Western dress are seen as evidence that (anti)*hijab* is a matter of cultural preference and taste and a sign that global relations are undecidable and follow no necessary logic, especially the logic of the economic laws of motion of capitalist society as explained by Marx. Resistance to capitalism is, therefore, brought about by the local, individual, and reversible cultural practices within capitalism.

But this cultural-determinist theory is a ruling-class theory that embraces capitalism through a cultural relay. It covers over the exploitation of workers behind profit and conceals why capitalist production goes all over the globe, crossing national boundaries. Capital does so because the nation is the geography of labor power. The nation is a set of historical conditions in the development of the productive forces of capitalism that determine whether labor power is “more or less expensive to use” (Marx and Engels 1976, 491).

Neither the cultural agency of *hijab* nor the freedom to shop liberates women, but the emancipation of labor from exploitation. Contrary to the ideological claims of (anti)*hijab* moralism to classlessness and resistance to capital, it is not possible to move beyond class relations on the basis of ethical and moral codes of conduct. Classlessness (and freedom of women from the commodification of their sexuality) is a *structural relation of production*, not an autonomous moral or ethical law. A classless morality is an effect of practical relations of production; thus, under capitalism

we have not yet passed beyond class morality. A really human morality which stands above class antagonisms and above any recollection of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life. (Engels 1987, 88)

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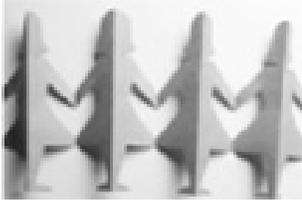
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# Is Family Finished?

**Julie Tarrant**

As part of its proposals for welfare reform, the Bush administration included a plan that claimed to promote marriage, allotting \$300 million for its implementation. Such a proposal has raised many eyebrows in Congress and in the media, not least because Bush's welfare proposal has also called for increases in welfare recipients' work requirements, while refusing to provide any additional funds for child care or transportation or any of the other things needed to meet these increased work requirements. It also refuses to reinstate benefits for legal immigrants and denies the extension of time limits for receipt of public assistance—despite the recent economic recession (something even Democrats say is unprecedented).

In other words, on the one hand, Bush's plan opts for actually cutting social resources available to welfare recipients in order to balance the budget—and, on the other hand, Bush has dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to promoting marriage and “family values” (euphemisms for propaganda encouraging poor people, and particularly poor women, to look to marriage as a solution to poverty).

Why is Bush unwilling to increase funds for the families he purports to value so much? What is at stake in Bush's proposal for reinvigoration of family-value policies and rhetoric that emphasize love and cooperation, alongside its denial of the resources families actually need to survive, much less prosper?

The logic of marriage promotion as part of welfare reform, according to its advocates, is that marriage provides the economic basis for providing for the costs of raising children and lifting single-parent families out of poverty. In capitalism, however, what enables those who do not own capital to have economic security is not access to marriage, but rather access to a sufficient wage. The suggestion, in effect, that all single mothers living in poverty can escape poverty by marrying the father of their children (or someone else) presupposes (inaccurately) that all men earn a family wage, or a wage sufficient to meet the basic needs of a spouse and one or more children. But real wages in recent decades have in fact drastically decreased for the majority of working people, resulting in such responses as the “living-wage movement” to raise wages. At the same time, corporate profits have soared.

The increasing inability of workers to meet their basic needs and the exponential increase in corporate profits represent a fundamental economic contradiction that cannot be solved by such topical remedies as marriage for the poor.

Many have suggested that marriage promotion distracts attention (and resources) from attempts to help poor families and reduce poverty. Marriage promotion, they argue, does not have the economic benefits that its proponents say it does. These critics miss, however, the ways in which marriage and family values have increasingly become important in expanding corporate profits.

Corporations accumulate profit by extracting from the working class the most amount of labor possible for the lowest wages and production costs possible. In the period after World War II that is often termed the *welfare state*, wages were generally able to support a worker and his family (with men usually in the position of sole breadwinner). Moreover, for many poor and working-class families and individuals whose wages were insufficient to meet subsistence needs, or who were unemployed, the state provided federal-assistance programs to help cover the costs of food, housing, education, and health care—federal assistance that helped supplement low wages and was largely financed through corporate taxes.

This situation, however, has changed dramatically since the 70s and 80s. As a result of the capitalists' need to accumulate ever-larger shares of profit, there has been, on the one hand, a massive corporate attack on federal-assistance programs. The U.S. government has, in response, systematically cut taxes for corporations (not for working people), leading to the privatization of social services. On the other hand, workers' real wages have actually been cut (real wages are actually no higher today than they were in the 1970s), requiring families to increase the number of breadwinners in order to meet the needs of the family, a trend that has radically changed the shape of the family in recent decades. This transfer of funds from public to private hands has had devastating results for working people, since without federal assistance, people must rely only on their wages, the decrease in which limits the ability of workers and their families to meet their basic needs.

At one level, marriage promotion is a gesture aimed at acknowledging the deteriorating conditions faced by families, and particularly single-parent families. This, however, is a rhetorical gesture only, concealing the real significance of marriage. The family and marriage are important—not because they lift workers out of poverty—but because family labor is one of the crucial means by which corporations keep wages down (and profits up). Wages paid to workers would have to increase greatly if all the cooking, cleaning, sick care, and round-the-clock child care had to be paid for at the market rate. Instead, this work is done within the family, and usually the bulk of this unpaid labor is performed by women.

Women's role in performing most of this unpaid family labor explains why they are at greater risk of poverty. Devoting much of their time and energy (their labor power) to unpaid domestic labor restricts women's opportunities within the wage-labor force—a restriction that, in turn, reinforces the cultural assumptions about women's specialization in family labor. The exploitative nature of this (unpaid) labor is covered over by a discourse of purportedly natural motherly love and nurturing. Of course, this is not to say that women do not have strong feelings, including feelings of love, for their children, but rather that these feelings are naturalized and ultimately used to justify a system where the owners of

the means of production, and not working-class families, materially benefit from their labor.

Family labor is thus, in effect, a corporate subsidy—undoubtedly the largest and certainly the least acknowledged form of corporate welfare. The marriage movement, in short, has very little to do with family values, and much to do with increasing corporate profits.

This becomes even clearer if we look at some of the other changes accompanying Bush's marriage program. The Bush proposal takes the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, or what is commonly known as "welfare reform," as its basis, but proposes some significant changes. The 1996 legislation itself was of great importance because it ended the existing welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a federal entitlement program, and replaced it with block grants to states from the federal government to provide a state-run program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This change has had devastating effects, because it means that there is now no guarantee in the United States for families in need, including children, of access to the resources necessary for even a minimal level of subsistence. The 1996 legislation replaced regularly available assistance in the form of cash for housing, food stamps, and Medicaid for the eligible for unlimited time periods (i.e., for as long as they were needed), with assistance for only a five-year lifetime maximum, and on condition of fulfilling work requirements. Practically, this means that if the parent does not fulfill the work requirement because of illness or a lack of child care or reliable transportation, then not only the parent but the children are without the basic necessities of housing, food, and health care.

Thus, a key component of the weak form of welfare state (as compared to many of the European nations) that existed in the United States has disappeared. And this is called success by welfare reformers! Success, apparently, is about eliminating the government's responsibility to the people who need assistance most desperately.

But as devastating as the 1996 reform bill has been, Bush's plan actually radicalizes the principles behind it. Not only are

fewer people provided funding (the amount of which has not been increased), but recipients actually have to work more hours (40 hours a week instead of 30—an increase in time of 33 percent for the same amount of assistance).

In addition, in the Bush plan, a much lower percentage of waivers of these work requirements is allowed to states for those recipients who cannot work or who are participating in alternative programs (going to community college, or attending job-training programs or drug-addiction rehabilitation). Thus, by increasing work requirements without providing the necessary supports such as child-care provisions, this round of welfare reform will add to the millions of individuals/families who have been “successfully” forced off of welfare and into extremely low-paying jobs or unemployment, and further prevent their ability to advance their education (which is the condition of better paying jobs and more secure family life).

While the new family-value rhetoric of “compassionate conservatism” is somewhat more subtle than the Gingrich version (which went to such extremes as to suggest that children of welfare recipients be placed in orphanages), both are driven by the same brutal economic compulsion to increase profit at the expense of social need.

The new welfare reform is certainly not a program that promotes any viable sort of self-sufficiency, as the advocacy of marriage promotion in fact confirms. And the limits of the “success” of welfare reform for those most in need of social services is especially sharply exemplified when one considers that this legislation extends the system of indentured servitude euphemistically called “workfare.” As one of the Democratic Party’s experts on welfare, Representative Cardin of Maryland, points out, “the administration would force states to put people in unpaid workfare positions in order to satisfy the work requirement, rather than providing the skills necessary for a person to be successful in a wage-earning job” (Toner and Pear 2002). While such policies cannot successfully enable women’s economic independence or provide economic security for all children, they do quite successfully work to provide a permanent pool of no-wage and low-wage workers who will pay

the most severe price for the sake of maintaining corporate profit-taking while reaping the least rewards in return.

The promulgation of marriage among the poor and working class is an attempt to keep corporate profits up by forcing more people to share minimal means of subsistence in order to enable ongoing intensified corporate profit-taking. While relatively privileged workers in the middle and upper-middle strata may think they benefit from the privatized family in which they have access to larger incomes, their privilege of a decent standard of living is actually increasingly undermined by the same dynamic that condemns the majority to a constant struggle for survival.

The Bush welfare reform redux is symptomatic of the big-business bias embedded in the purportedly small-government, conservative agenda. In other words, what “welfare reform” shows is that for “compassionate conservatives” such as Bush—even more than for Clinton republicrats—government is small only insofar as it enables the socially produced wealth to be used for the welfare of citizen and immigrant workers. On the other hand, the Bush administration is for big government insofar as government is an instrument for ensuring that the socially produced wealth is used for corporate welfare in the form of government subsidies, tax breaks, and programs that force workers to perform unpaid and underpaid family labor at the risk of their own welfare as well as to engage in “workfare” and other enormously exploitative forms of labor.

It is time to end the *corporate* welfare state as we know it, since it cannot meet the social needs of the vast majority of people. The solution to the current lack of social welfare is neither “marriage promotion” nor “welfare reform,” but the transformation of the capitalist relations of exploitation.

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# America's Endless Wars

## The Red Collective

That the U.S. war against Afghanistan and now its campaign to invade Iraq is being represented to the world by the Bush administration and the corporate media as an act of “liberation” of the Iraqi people and the securing of the rule of law and order against the violation of the “norms” of the “international community” shows the limitless hypocrisy of the ruling U.S. elite in pursuing its class interests in the post–Cold War world. The very state that claims to act under the aegis of international law has not only suspended all criteria of evidence and proof in the so-called war against terrorism on both domestic and international fronts, but has now openly declared in its new National Security Strategy that America will not be subject to the International Criminal Court “whose jurisdiction does not extend to Americans” (National Security Council 2002).

Bush's recent appeal to the United Nations and proposal to Congress for *carte blanche* in pressuring Iraq—through any means necessary, including force—to respect and comply with United Nations resolutions is a hoax for putting into power a regime that is more friendly to the interests of transnational business by ending the bar on U.S. access to Iraqi oil. Where, for example, is the U.S. commitment to defending UN resolutions with regard to the illegal and brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine that has been in violation of UN resolutions for thirty-five years? The notion that a war against Iraq is in defense of the lives of U.S. civilians

against a “possible” attack by Saddam Hussein (and a Third World nation already devastated by previous war and a decade of brutal economic sanctions against its citizens), is even denied by its own agents. Scott Ritter, for instance, a former American arms inspector for the UN, openly proclaimed that Iraq does not have the capacity for nuclear attack.

Both the story of Iraq as a possible threat to world peace and that of the “liberation” of the Iraqi people are part of a concerted strategy of cynical manipulation of U.S. citizens and world opinion into justifying the global designs of American imperialism and unleashing a new period of global wars threatening catastrophic consequences for people everywhere. They are both attempts to cover over the fact that “American and foreign oil companies have already begun maneuvering for a stake in [Iraq’s] huge proven oil reserves of 112 billion barrels of crude oil, the largest in the world outside Saudi Arabia” (Morgan and Ottaway 2002) and that the staged debate on national security issues in the U.S. media and in Congress is a pretext for ruthless colonial plunder of the resources and labor of Iraq on behalf of Exxon-Mobil and Chevron-Texaco. Gaining control of the labor and resources of Iraq will give the U.S. ruling elite a position of dominance and control over the transnational oil industry, an essential resource for global capitalism.

The “war on terrorism” has been a political bonanza for the criminal clique of millionaires and corporate CEOs who now are at the helm of the world’s most devastating military arsenal to pursue their search for profits with utter disregard for the sovereignty of other countries, a policy that threatens disastrous consequences for the ordinary citizens of these nations. As international commentators such as Nelson Mandela have argued, the real “threat to world peace” is “the attitude of the United States of America.”

We must understand the seriousness of the situation. The United States has made serious mistakes in the conduct of its foreign affairs, which have had unfortunate repercussions long after the decisions were taken. Unqualified support of the Shah of Iran led directly to the Islamic revolution of 1979. Then the United States chose to arm and finance the [Islamic] mujahedin in Afghanistan instead of supporting

and encouraging the moderate wing of the government of Afghanistan. That is what led to the Taliban in Afghanistan. But the most catastrophic action of the United States was to sabotage the decision that was painstakingly stitched together by the United Nations regarding the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. . . . What [America] is [now] saying is that if you are afraid of a veto in the Security Council, you can go outside and take action and violate the sovereignty of other countries. That is the message they are sending to the world. That must be condemned in the strongest terms. (2002)

In this context, Bush's recently released National Security Strategy, which legitimates preemptive military actions for installing puppet governments favorable to U.S. corporate interests (such as that of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan) in nominally sovereign nations must be seen as the return to a barbarous colonial foreign policy based on forced submission of Third World nations to the dictates of big business. What the preemptive action policy of the Bush administration ensures is that the fate of these nations will be decided not by their own people but by the energy monopolies, the arms industry, and the financial giants who sit in the U.S. corporate boardrooms and interpenetrate the personnel ranks of the State Department and the Pentagon.

Yet opposition to the current war must be part of a broader struggle against capitalism. War is not an anomaly of the normal workings of democratic capitalism. Even the "democratic" opposition to U.S. military unilateralism from such countries as France, Russia, China, and Germany (whose justice minister, in a recent statement subsequently retracted, has compared Bush to Hitler) is the resistance not of an international community interested in maintaining a just international policy, but of intercapitalist competitors against rival interests. If the United States attacks Iraq and overthrows Saddam Hussein, installing a new government to harness the country's oil wealth and labor to make them available to U.S. capital, this could rip the bottom out of existing Russian and French economic arrangements with Baghdad and diminish their level of control over the profits from the world oil industry.

Using warfare when capitalist “democracy” fails to serve the interest of profit is, as Lenin explains, integral to capitalism in its monopoly phase in which giant transnational corporations grown increasingly desperate for greater profits compete for (re)division of the world market and for economic territory. Whatever the publicly asserted political motives under which the drive to war takes place, war is in its essence a form of economic struggle over making profit and dividing the world into zones dominated by particular transnational capitalist groups.

Imperialist wars are not an anomaly but a necessity under capitalism.

The capitalists divide the world, not out of any particular malice, but because the degree of concentration [of production] reached forces them to adopt this method in order to obtain profits . . . [and] there can be no other conceivable basis under commodity production and capitalism. . . .

. . . The only conceivable basis under capitalism for the division of spheres of influence, interests, colonies, etc., is a calculation of the *strength* of those participating, their general economic, financial, military strength, etc. . . .

. . . Imperialism is the epoch of finance capital and of monopolies, which introduce everywhere the striving for domination, not for freedom. Whatever the political system the result of these tendencies is everywhere reaction and an extreme intensification of antagonisms in this field. Particularly intensified become the yoke of national oppression and the striving for annexations, i.e., the violation of national independence. (Lenin 1974, 253, 295, 297)

The economic and financial weakness of the United States exposed by the collapse of the stock-market bubble and the corporate corruption scandals is ensuring that American military hegemony and wars of effective annexation become increasingly integral to global capitalism in the coming period, leading to new global crises. Moreover, as is also clear, the class struggle against the working peoples of the world does not stop at the borders of the United States. The added bonus of the “war on terrorism”

for the U.S. ruling class is not only its rerouting of public funds through such measures as the \$1.3 trillion tax cut for the wealthy (while millions of citizens go without basic necessities such as health care, housing, and food), but its suspension of bourgeois democracy and rights even of citizens, and outlawing of the growing internal dissent against the massive economic inequality and stark class polarization of American society. Such measures are thin attempts to conceal and legitimate the authoritarian security state that has been put into place to ensure political stability in a period of intense economic instability. The invocation of a threat to “national security” and feverish fomentation of “patriotic” war fervor function, in such a climate, to normalize the channeling of grievances outward, away from ruling-class policies and institutions.

For the world’s citizens, the struggle against U.S. imperialism’s new foreign policy of preemptive war against sovereign nations is indissolubly bound up with the struggle against their exploitation by transnational capital, which is everywhere decimating their living standards and forcing them into a life of growing poverty and economic insecurity. Contrary to the populist slogans of the opportunistic Left, what lies behind the current situation is not a new “Empire” reflecting the invention of a new “imperial thinking” in the United States similar to ancient Rome (Golub 2002). It is not “imperial thinking” that is the problem, but the indissoluble contradictions of monopoly capitalism that are working themselves out on the world stage. By opposing “imperial thinking” without opposing capitalism, the left opportunists perform a pragmatic compromise with capitalism that provides a “leftist” front for imperialism now. For this opportunism, the “hard-left” opposition to all imperialist wars is a symptom of “myopia and intransigence” that is simply “irrelevant” to most Americans (Bérubé 2002, E1). But relevance is a class issue. What is relevant to the “soft-left” thinking on imperialism is that “the United States cannot be a beacon of freedom and justice to the world if it conducts itself as an empire” (Bérubé 2002). What the “soft-left” wants is a kinder, gentler imperialism that effectively cloaks itself in heart-warming humanitarian rhetoric and does not offend liberal

sentiments. But there is no humanitarian imperialism; imperialism is class war on the world working class. An effective fight against the new imperialist wars of transnational capital must be based on workers' revolutionary internationalism and class solidarity—across all national boundaries—in the struggle for a new socialist society based on economic equality for all and the peaceful cooperation of all peoples.

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# **Stylizing Global Protest: Latin America and the Media**

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## **1**

Workers in Venezuela, Argentina, and Peru have risen up against neoliberalism as state policy, along with other forms of neoliberalism forcibly imposed in the hemisphere by a multinational coalition of financiers, businessmen, and even some trade unions under the banner of the free market and democracy. Their victories have shown the world that the only alternative to the extreme social inequality and instability of global capitalism is revolutionary class struggle

The battle for workers' democracy in Latin America directly contradicts the mantra of neoliberalism that has been endlessly repeated across the political spectrum over the past twenty years from the left as much as the right, in the academy as much as in the mainstream media: the claim that the world has entered a postclass moment in which class struggle is over because of the new knowledge economy and all that is left is to make do with capitalism.

In this familiar story, cultural changes like the Internet and the new ecofriendly lifestyle politics are supposed to have empowered the people against totalitarian power by decentering and deregulating their lives so that they can find freedom in the local and everyday, the sphere of consumption, rather than, as in

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the past, through class struggle over the socioeconomic conditions of production.

What recent changes in global media and culture did in fact produce was a cyber imaginary that hides from view the class conflict in global capitalism so as to normalize the exploitation of wage labor by capital that is at the center of capitalism. In other words, it hides from view the fact that capitalism, as Marx and Engels explained over 150 years ago in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, is at its root based on social inequality—the inequality between the “bourgeoisie, the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage-labor,” and the “proletariat, the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live” (Marx and Engels 1976b, 482n).

This unequal division of labor between owners and workers makes capitalism exploitative. It does so, as Marx proved in *Capital*, by forcing workers to engage in surplus labor (labor beyond that required to meet their needs) so as to realize a profit for the bosses, who are themselves free from the need to work for a living because their private ownership of the social means of production forces the majority to work for them.

Capitalism is considered democratic because it is the freedom to make voluntary exchanges in the market without regard to differences of rank or merit, based on pure self-interest. As Marx explained, however, the *dream* of capitalism that free exchanges between legally equal persons ensure the social good of all must always be related to the *actuality* of capitalism as a social system of production. In actuality, capitalism is not simply a political system that ensures civil rights in a free market, but an economic system of production in which individuals basically stand in a relation of class inequality. They are either working class, and thus free to work or starve, because they own nothing but their ability to labor for others, or, capitalists who, owning the means of production, are free to force the majority to engage in surplus labor over and above that which is required for meeting workers’ needs so as to realize a profit for themselves.

Private property in production is what makes the social inequality of class in capitalism; class is the division between those who employ and consume labor (the exploiters) and those who do not and produce the social wealth (the exploited). The monopoly media use all their power to deny this class consciousness to the people in order to present capitalism as the ultimate achievement of freedom and democracy.

But freedom and democracy under capitalism are only for the few who can afford them because they live off the labor of the many. As capitalism develops on a global scale, the many cannot even meet their basic needs and are compelled to enter into struggle against the bosses—as Argentina, after only ten years of neoliberal deregulation, and Venezuela, whose workers must arm themselves simply to defend the Chavez government’s minor redistributions of wealth, once again show.

The emergent revolutionary struggles in Latin America demonstrate the basic truth of Marxism: that the global development of capitalism leads to its own downfall by producing a revolutionary working class with nothing left to lose and a world to win by taking power from the owners and running the economy for the social good. This truth is, however, covered up by a thick layer of mystification by the corporate media through a variety of relays and mediations. This mystification serves to naturalize the social inequality at the basis of capitalism and maintain the status quo.

Take the assertion that the North, led by the United States, has a moral destiny to bring freedom and democracy to the South, crushed by poverty and corruption. The poverty and corruption, of course, are the result of freedom and democracy—the freedom of the capitalist to exploit human labor power for profit. This freedom, really the need for a constantly expanding market, “chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe” and “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to . . . introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst” (Marx and Engels 1976b, 487).

The moral story about protecting human rights is told to cover up the material truth that democracy is the freedom to exploit others for profit. The story is needed to alibi the regime of wage labor and capital as a fact of nature. In other words, it portrays the normal

daily exploitation of labor under capitalism as the free expression of human nature in course of which the everyday brutality of capital is made to appear extreme and irrational rather than a socially necessary consequence of private property.

The representation of capitalism as natural when it is in fact historical is needed now to manufacture consensus that capitalism cannot be changed at a time when it is obvious that the material conditions already exist to abolish class inequality.

As Venezuela shows, what stands in the way of a regime directed toward meeting people's needs, which is what Chavez represents, is not a lack of respect for human rights by immoral and corrupt people of the South, but the need of big business for a bigger share of the world market. The U.S. oil giants represented by the Bush regime and supported by bureaucratized elements entrenched in the AFL-CIO's American Center for International Labor Solidarity aided the counterrevolutionary coup in Venezuela, fomenting the oil workers' strike as the core of the civil-society movement that tried to abolish the popular social reforms of the Chavez government. It was for profit, not democracy, that the United States supported the reactionary coup to overthrow Chavez, with financial aid, military weapons, and advisors as the British *Guardian* has reported (Campbell 2002). It is for profit, not democracy, that the United States supports Israel and colonized Afghanistan in preparation for taking Iraq.

Global public opinion is everywhere outside the United States opposed to U.S. unilateralism and empire building. The growing obviousness of "democracy" as hegemony of the rich threatens the ideology of capitalism by exposing democracy as the bourgeois freedom to exploit the labor and resources of the world. It is also behind the formation of a transnational populist Left, however, that goes along with the system of wage labor and capital by marking the obvious hoax of democracy, but channeling opposition into reformist politics to maintain capitalism. By contesting merely its obviously barbaric effects rather than engaging in a radical critique of capitalism and advocating a social revolution against the wage slavery that causes these effects, this populist Left supports an ideology of democracy that sustains the class rule

of the bourgeoisie. It thus goes along with the reactionary backlash to make social contradictions into problems of governance and policy of unruly subjects—the powerless are made to bear responsibility for the contradictions of class society.

In the wake of the revolutionary explosions in Latin America, an awareness is growing that it is impossible to deny the basic truth of Marxism that bourgeois democracy is class inequality. As a result, newer mystifications of capitalism and why it changes are also emerging to stabilize the status quo.

The dominant mode of naturalizing capitalism is to represent the new social struggles as spontaneous movements of the oppressed and deny that they are a product of history as class struggle over the conditions of production. Rather than produce awareness of the class interests behind the emerging struggles, the populist Left portrays them as the outcome of spontaneous rebellions of the people against power. It is thus on the left most of all that one finds the alibi of capitalism as democracy, which proposes that capitalism may be reformed while the exploitation at its root remains intact. A reformed capitalism is simply a code for a more efficient regime of exploitation and imperialist brutality; such reform is appeasement of the violent democracy of the owners.

## 2

Argentina and Venezuela provide a useful occasion for proving the truth of class against the global postclass ideology, because although the class conflict has dramatically exploded into public view in these countries, and has since become impossible to deny as an ongoing daily reality, one finds instead in the dominant media stories of the “middling” of class. These media stories are designed to redescribe class as a cultural matter and block the need for class-conscious solutions to the unfolding crisis.

For example, the dominant media focus on different styles of protest in Argentina like the *cacerolazo* (pots and pans demonstrations) and *piqueteros* (the unemployed and poor workers who protest without pots and pans “because they have none”) instead of explaining why these differences are effects of basically unequal

economic relations and not merely cultural. These local differences need to be overcome to realize a new society without class inequality; fixing these differences as cultural matters is a way to divide workers and keep them powerless against the exploiters who are demanding more and more austerity from them.

One effect of the middling of class is to make class appear to be such a complex thing that solutions to the social crisis based on the material conflict of interest in society between capital and labor appear simplistic and unreliable as well as manipulative and suspect. Proposed solutions to the crisis based on class struggle can then easily be dismissed as an out-of-touch nostalgia for a dead ideological past, as well as a hopelessly anti-American future. For example, one routinely finds such conclusions in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, revealing the ideology of a U.S. elite that sees any political expression of the needs of the world's people only as a pious or perverse death-wish that is out of touch with reality. These conclusions ignore the actual impact of global capitalism on working people's lives and what it causes them to do. Recent events in Argentina and Venezuela prove, on the contrary, that nothing is now more dead than the postideology thesis that class is dead. In order to contain this awareness, newer class ideologies have become necessary that do not simply deny class struggle, but attempt to redescribe it as a cultural conflict, so as to provide a middle ground for reformist solutions that maintain the social inequality at the root of capitalism.

Current "left" and even "Marxist" stories of class as culture oppose class as the structure of necessity. Before turning to consider them, I shall touch briefly on popular media representations. This analysis should make clear the underlying ideological sameness of the bourgeois order that is usually cloaked behind local idiomatic differences. The middling of class occurs in the mainstream media in a variety of ways, all having in common the erasure of class consciousness, or what I term the awareness of the material conflict between exploiters and exploited. This conflict constitutes capitalism, and explains why social crisis and poverty exist in the midst of wealth, and why class struggle is necessary.

The different ways of middling class in the media correspond to the local differences in global capitalism, which must manufacture consensus for the status quo for differences that have arisen from the division of labor and capitalism's need for different kinds of workers (for example, high-tech and low-tech workers). These local differences, arising out of differences in production, are represented in the dominant media as cultural differences of consciousness and behavior so as to restrict awareness of the class division between the haves and have-nots. These conflicts periodically threaten to reveal the basic inequality in capitalism between the interests of capital (a merely formal democracy where economics is directed toward the accumulation of wealth for a few) and those of labor (a social democracy where economics is directed toward meeting the needs of the many).

Mainstream news media use an effective method of disguising class with a middling logic: they attempt to appear nonideological by using the codes of *description* and *neutrality* to hide the class antagonisms at the core of capitalism. For example, the news coverage of events in Argentina since the *Argentinazo* uprising in December 2002 misrepresented the difference between the uprisings over food and medicine, and the *cacerolazo* demonstrations that formed because of the freezing of bank accounts to meet the balance of payments to the global speculators in Argentine financial markets. The former was regularly represented as the "poor rioting," and therefore a matter for the police forces to handle, and the latter as "middle-class rage," which was given political significance as legitimate anti-government protest. This cultural coding of class in the dominant media hides the true class basis of the conflicts that go beyond Argentina.

The profit imperative that guides capitalist competition, as well as the government policies that protect this imperative by subsidizing the wealth of a few and devaluing the small savings of the many, causes the existence of poor and unemployed workers to begin with. Behind the "poor rioting" and "middle-class rage" is a single socioeconomic system directed toward profit maximization, in which the needs of workers are secondary.

The profit imperative, compelling the capitalists to invest more and more in technology to lower their labor costs and compete more effectively with other capitalists, produces unemployment. In a system directed toward meeting people's needs, no need for unemployment would exist. The profit motive also lies behind the economic bankruptcy of the government, which seized the small bank deposits of the many in order to pay off global financial investors. Moreover, these investors are themselves forced to speculate in the international financial markets to realize a profit on their capital because it no longer yields a high enough return to invest in the real economy of plant and equipment that is already highly efficient and overproductive.

Behind the superficial appearance of differences between the problems of the poor and middle class is the same class logic of capitalism that periodically produces the crisis of overproduction (mass poverty in the midst of social wealth) from which Argentina currently suffers acutely. Such crises occur not because of purely financial mechanisms that exceed any possible political regulation in the new global economy, as the neoliberals claim, but because labor productivity is now so high due to advanced technological efficiency that it is no longer profitable to invest capital in production. At the same time, labor is so cheap, because of the unemployment and cutbacks in social services, that workers cannot afford to buy the commodities they themselves produce.

For this reason, even before the financial crash, estimates of Argentine unemployment and underemployment were around 20 percent. More importantly, official government estimates of poverty had themselves placed half the population in this category, even when Argentina was being celebrated as a model democracy.

The representation of class struggle in Argentina as merely a matter of different problems facing the poor and middle classes and their mode of responding to them does the work of middling class and deflecting class consciousness. It portrays the most needy sections of the working class as an irrational threat to peaceful society, whose politics must be met by force. It portrays another section of the working class, who have been able to save some

money for times of hardship, as reasonable people because they do not challenge class relations directly but only the official policies that maintain the status quo.

The workers who engage in struggle only against the neoliberal policies of the official political institutions are represented as rational middle-class people, while those workers whose politics challenge the principle of social inequality directly are the rioting poor, who are politically ignorant and only understand force.

In reality, protest called rational and reasonable because it pressures the government to reform itself, is not ultimately in the interests even of those called “middle-class,” much less the poor. Only the interests of the wealthy are served when people believe that capitalism can be politically reformed and is not so exploitative at root that it must be socially transformed.

The actions of those workers who directly challenge class relations by expropriating the food and medicine they need to live from those who want to profit from them are called “rioting poor” and coded as “irrational” to deflect attention from the primary division in society between exploiters and exploited and the anarchic logic of the economic system based on this division.

Class is made a matter of culture by the dominant media (class as levels of political “reasonableness”) in order to divide and block the unity of the workers. This is done by instilling in them the values of compromise and negotiation with their exploiters so that they consent to being collectively exploited for the profit of a few rather than taking power into their own hands and running the economy to meet the needs of the many.

### 3

The most effective middling of class—effective in terms of hiding that what is at stake in the wake of Argentina and Venezuela is the truth of class and the future of capitalism—is found on the left because of its overt political questioning of the more oppressive features of capitalism.

Read, for example, the articles on the *Argentinazo* appearing in the French monthly *Le Monde diplomatique*. A recent article objects to cultural commentators who “have attempted to play

down events, claiming that this was little more than a show of bad temper on the part of the middle classes” (Quattrocchi-Woisson 2002). But the reason for this criticism of media focus on the middle classes is not to uncover the class conflict at the root of capitalism, but to pluralize class into mere differences and blur the basic class division in society. “The revolt” is thus represented as “the result of an alliance between the poorest people and the urban middle classes” and not an expression of basic working-class collectivity that stands to challenge capitalism at its root.

It is assumed on the left that class is a political alliance and not an economic struggle. It is assumed that class struggle between exploiters and exploited is over and that cultural struggles for a mere reform of capitalism in its localities have taken its place. Thus, in *Le Monde diplomatique*, the proof of class is not that the have-nots must engage in struggle with the haves just to be able to eat (proving the bankruptcy of capitalism as a regime of democratic equality). Rather, it is “what people were singing on 19 December.” This focus on “the national anthem and a song that openly poked fun at the state of emergency the authorities had declared” (Quattrocchi-Woisson 2002) gives capitalism a popular democratic cover.

The singing that included the national anthem and poked fun at the same time symbolizes, in this populist left cultural imaginary, an alliance of the ever-loyal middle class and the desperately cynical poor. This takes the focus off the massive unmet needs of the majority and instead celebrates events in Argentina as a carnival of the people. This same writer, predictably, sees in the neighborhood assemblies (*interbarrials*) that have emerged across the country—whose demands include direct challenges to capitalist rule such as repudiation of the foreign debt, nationalization of the banks, the renationalization of all privatized utilities, popular election of Supreme Court judges, state control of pension funds, etc.—not the radical expression of working-class needs, but a place for more cultural consumption. The *interbarrials* are reduced to “talking shops where all manner of daring, innovative ideas circulate” (Quattrocchi-Woisson 2002)—like a Starbucks, only with more interesting and colorful people than usual. The

celebration of culture is supposed to signal to the reader the death of class struggle, as can be seen when it is contrasted to the “rioting” (popular expropriations of food and medicine) as a reflection of “the despair of people with no political direction or agenda.” Rioting, in other words, is not a class issue of food and health and the need to change the system, but a moral issue of a lack of hope. For *Le Monde diplomatique*, in short, class is culture (singing, knowledge, feelings), not economic struggle (the politics of need).

The shift from economics to culture in considering class is made in order to claim that what is occurring in Argentina is not class struggle that puts workers and owners in conflict over the purpose of democracy—that is, whether democracy is a matter merely of equal rights or of economic equality. Instead, it represents the class struggle in Argentina as “casting off the most deeply ingrained habits of . . . political culture” on the part of “a new generation, born under a democracy,” in which the goal is to give people more “say in economic and political decisions . . . with a sort of street veto” (Quattrocchi-Woisson 2002). In short, democracy is equated with more bourgeois freedom of speech (amounting to the freedom to exploit) not freedom from economic need (abolishing exploitation).

Another *Le Monde diplomatique* article uses the same post-class cultural logic with slight variation: “In the past, demonstrators had always obeyed strike rules, marching in columns behind their union or party banners. This time, they came out simply as citizens” (Gabetta 2002). Emphasizing generational changes in cultures of protest obscures the basic class division in society in order to define class as strictly a cultural matter of the people spontaneously acting out against “power”: “the people of the country rose in protest . . . saying that it had had enough of universal corruption” (Gabetta 2002). A bad political culture that corrupts the people’s spontaneity is the problem, not an exploitative economic system that makes them into wage slaves who must take to the streets in order to meet their basic needs. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank of course use the same logic, explaining away the contradictions of global capitalism in

the South as local problems of corrupt governance. Democratic reform (by force of arms if necessary), is all that is needed to manage the current systemic crisis and normalize exploitation.

## 4

The manifesto of the new capitalism, *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), is central to the ideological work of giving global capitalism the face of freedom by covering up its basic class inequality and the necessary consequences. It is for this reason that *Empire* has become an academic best seller and is celebrated by such official organs of finance capital as the *New York Times* and Charlie Rose Show as “the next big thing.” This designation simply repeats, in a popular idiom for those who cannot afford to read the book, its central premise—“imperialism is over” (xiv), displaced by “empire,” a “new form of sovereignty” (xi) where cyberlabor “creates the very world it inhabits” (xv).

*Empire* does not explain the world as an effect of the economic laws of motion of capital accumulation (an understanding necessary for transforming the world). It announces a new world, free from the past, that changes in response to changes in rhetoric (freedom of speech). Hardt and Negri declare, for example, that “imperialism is over” because we now live in a world system where “the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another” (xiii). The purpose of this rhetoric is to make the source of profit in surplus labor explained by Marx’s labor theory of value a “fiction” (402). Without Marx’s labor theory, there can be no basic contestation of capitalism, only moral condemnation of its more oppressive effects; exploitation is thus kept intact, immunized from critique. *Empire*, in short, does the ideological work of capital by giving it a human face, by displacing Marx’s ruthless critique of “surplus labor” with the sentimentality of “affective labor.”

“Affective labor” is one of the phrases for the “autonomy” of labor, that is, labor as desire rather than praxis in the new world order that Negri and Hardt propose: “a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight and forge alternative constitutive itineraries” (48). Affective labor occults the extraction of surplus labor by capital

that is behind the current drive of imperialism and the emerging revolution against it. Moreover, it mystifies the fact that history is at root exploited labor and not a matter of people's desire. The surplus labor that workers perform and that is stolen by capitalists is what makes history. Without surplus labor, there can be no capitalism. This will only change when the expropriators of labor are expropriated by the laborers and "society inscribes on its banner: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!" (Marx 1989, 87). A theory of social change that displaces surplus labor, the political economy of need, with affective labor, the symbolic economy of desire, thus works against the workers in complicity with the ruling class.

Behind the premise that imperialism has been displaced by empire is the reduction of history to politics (desire) and the erasure of the primacy of the economic (need). Empire is Hardt and Negri's imaginary of a new time in capitalism free from history that cannot be explained by class struggle. Empire is, they claim, beyond "the fiction of any measure of the working day" (402). In actuality, empire represents the moment in their analytic when material interests do not enter into consideration under the alibi that labor is no longer economically exploited at the site of production (because, they say, it is "post-fordist," "flexible," and "co-operative"). Whether it is called "multitude," "creative" or "affective" or "immaterial labor," or a "*new proletariat*," the idealism is the same: a trope of spontaneity and freedom from necessity is meant to signal a basic change in capitalism that makes it impossible to materially explain what makes capitalism and why it changes. Their concept of labor is really a trope of cultural resistance, a change of values. As another autonomist Marxist puts it:

labor is for capital always a problematic "other" that must constantly be controlled and subdued, and that, as persistently, circumvents or challenges this command. Rather than being organized by capital, workers struggle against it. It is this struggle that constitutes the *working class*. (Dyer-Witherford 1999, 65)

Labor and class, in this voluntaristic logic, are the same as Foucault's idea of *power* ("power is everywhere" and "where

there is power there is resistance” [1990, 93, 95]). Foucault’s idealist theory of power, however, is masked in *Empire* in a new popular form, since it is no longer possible to ignore class analysis altogether. *Class* here becomes cultural politics to go-along-to-get-along with capitalist inequality, not class as the cause of who is or is not hungry, sick, housed, and why.

“Class as struggle,” in Hardt and Negri’s schema, takes the focus off production (the social relation in which labor stands in a necessary relation to capital and, therefore, determines what is to be done in the struggle) and puts it on consumption (where labor is free to reproduce itself only to be exploited because of privatization of the means of production, the source of profit). This displacement once again makes Marx and Engels’s point that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (1976a, 59). By using the spontaneity of “class as struggle” and “autonomous labor” as a way to occult how private property makes labor free, Hardt and Negri trivialize workers’ agency as a matter of desire. As in conservative discourses, changes in tastes and values are represented as just as important as the change of property relations. This sentimental view of labor and class as cultural change blurs the line between production (base) and consumption (superstructure) so that the class priority of revolutionary praxis is undermined by an opportunist pragmatics that appeases imperialism—the multinational coalition that is raping the South for the benefit of a few in the North.

*Affective labor* is in reality a sentimental romanticization of the effects of the falling rate of profit. It portrays the more flexible and therefore more exploited (i.e., more reliant on capital) workforce of global capitalism as free to (re)make the social. In actuality, the social changes not owing to the management of workers’ desire but owing to changes required by the need to make profit in the context of private competition. Workers’ “desire,” in other words, is itself a matter of need and not free of material history (the law of value). They struggle against capital because their needs are not being met. By limiting workers’ struggle against the systemic causes of unmet needs to the capitalist ideology of spontaneous and personal “desire,” Hardt and

Negri are marketing the logic of trade unionism, which is the normal rule of capitalism, as a radical alternative to revolutionary socialist transformation.

The reduction of the totality of workers' struggle against capital to the spontaneous resistance against their daily working conditions is what Lenin called *economism*—"arguments that a kopek added to a ruble was worth more than any socialism or politics" (1973, 381). Its social effects can be seen in the multinational trade-unionist movement against the "Bolivian revolution" in Venezuela. The international arm of the AFL-CIO, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, materially supported the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, whose leaders conspired with the coup plotters to obscure their interest in overthrowing the Chávez regime with one more amenable to the needs of transnational capital behind a veil of protecting workers' "personal rights." This shows that there is nothing autonomous about workers' struggles. They either support capitalism or socialism. To represent workers' struggles as an expression of "free" desire to remake the world through spontaneous local actions is to conflate them with the agency of capitalism itself that is in power everywhere, including the workers' agencies. This conflation is part of the routine functioning of capitalism needed to manage its contradictions and keep workers exploited.

Workers will be free to change the world only when they take power over their own production so that the economy is planned to provide everyone's needs and none go unmet. For success, workers need advanced forums of class consciousness where they can learn to become vanguard fighters for socialism. As Lenin explains:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement,\* the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. . . .

\*This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, . . . they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they

are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge. But in order that working men *may succeed in this more often*, every effort must be made to raise the level of the consciousness of the workers in general; it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of “*literature for workers*” but that they learn to an increasing degree to master *general literature*. It would be even truer to say “are not confined,” instead of “do not confine themselves,” because the workers themselves wish to read and do read all that is written for the intelligentsia, and only a few (bad) intellectuals believe that it is enough “for workers” to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known. (1973, 384)

In order for workers to succeed in this historical task of acquiring class consciousness it is necessary to critique the spontaneity of economism, which displaces global class struggle for the good of all with local struggle for a privileged few. Class consciousness is the other of the false consciousness of workers’ resistance to (and maintenance of) capitalism that is now masquerading as a new radical and Marxist theory not only in the writings of the autonomist Marxists but the populist Left as a whole. (This thinking is represented by such journals as *Social Text*, *Monthly Review*, and *Rethinking Marxism*).

The Euro-American Left has abandoned a materialist analysis of the world; its acceptance of *Empire* reveals its bankruptcy. Behind *Empire*’s claim that “imperialism is over” is a fundamental idealism that says ideas (tropes of desire) shape the world rather than the other way around, a view which supports the most barbaric imperialism the world has ever known. *Empire* alibis imperialism by reiterating the dominant post-al (see page 249, note 1—Ed.) ideology of the end of history in the mode of a tropic performance of resistance where labor is represented as a free desire to make the world outside of history.

Not only is the post-al dogma of the end of class struggle found in its assumed premises, but also in its explicit statements.

*Empire* reiterates, for example, that the United States is different from the rest of the world, not because of what Fukuyama and others celebrated as its liberal pluralism (which is now exposed as a cover for world domination) but, in a more philosophical and high-tech idiom, because of its unique “composition of social forces” (Hardt and Negri 2000, xiv). “Power” allegedly is “effectively distributed in networks” (xiv) of “affective labor” (xiii) that cannot be explained by the working of the law of value central to capitalism.

In place of the logic of profit, *Empire* systematically deploys the (a)logic of desire coded as “immaterial” and “affective labor.” On this (a)logic, what is it that compels the United States to back counterrevolution in Venezuela, exploit Argentina through its debt agencies, expropriate the labor and resources in Afghanistan, support Israeli colonialism, etc.? According to Hardt and Negri, it is not the drive to profit from the free labor of the world but desire: the old modern national desire to “police the purity of its own identity and to exclude all that was other” (xii) unaware of the new times of “cooperative” social relations represented by the United States.

*Empire* is a religious and therefore reactionary text. Its basic idea is that the world is an expression of an ahistorical essence: the “constitutive power” of affective labor (which is a code for representing the informal high-tech sector in the North as a cooperative social arrangement that makes socialism unnecessary). This agency is ahistorical because it is posited as existing independently of the series of material conflicts over the social relations of property. As in Foucault, materiality is made a matter of desire; affective labor is an excess of history that resists explanation, while its historicity is idealist, only ever considered genealogically, i.e., as a discursive construction. In other words, Hardt and Negri’s “labor” is what Foucault called an “event”: “the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it” (1990, 154); like all “events,” it is unexplainable. The most important effect of such an ahistorical view of labor is its opposition to the only consistently materialist theory of labor, Marx’s labor theory of value. Marx’s theory explains the agency of labor not as spontaneous resistance

to causal explanation in a world without borders (a throwback to romanticism), but, borrowing a phrase from Marx, as an effect of “the ensemble of the social relations” (Marx 1976, 4)—i.e., the ongoing class conflicts over the conditions of production.

Against the totally discredited postmodern micropolitics of the past, *Empire* represents a desire-full social totality that tails the popular movements by recognizing the need for systemic change. But because it maintains that the social totality exceeds theory and cannot be reliably explained, it authorizes stories of change as more important than the Marxist theory of change as the outcome of historical necessity. Thus a change of rhetoric to provide a therapy of hope in capitalism is put before red criti(que)al theory for explaining the world so as to change it. Such hope is needed to contain the newer contradictions of the system in which antiglobalization is becoming global anticapitalism. *Empire* renews the bourgeois ideology of agency as free by giving it a new life as autonomous labor (simply a metaphorical embellishment for a syndicalist populism) in order to cover up the class antagonism central to capitalism, as bourgeois ideology has always done. But, as Lenin said,

there can be no talk of an independent ideology . . . the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course . . . and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology. (1973, 384)

The imperialist system of profit makes clear why intellectuals in the North can afford to believe that the world changes with merely cultural changes, while brutal exploitation and unmet need are the daily reality for most people in the world. This reality will only end with the social expropriation of property by the exploited, not by affective cooperation with the exploiters. Events in Venezuela prove the impossibility of such cross-class cooperation; the revolution there (in the form of the neighborhood Bolivian circles) must arm itself in preparation for the next Bay of Pigs being prepared in the United States.

Imperialism is, of course, not merely political sovereignty, as *Empire* claims, but is “the highest stage of capitalism.” *Empire*, by

announcing a new sovereignty based on cyber (“affective”) labor, is directed against Lenin’s integrated theory of the social, which explains sociopolitical changes as a consequence of class forces.

Lenin’s *Imperialism*, however, is the only materialist analysis of global capitalism that explains the contemporary world situation by grasping the rule of necessity (the law of value, or production for profit as central to capitalism) underlying the surface events rather than merely (re)describing these events so as to more effectively explain away the social laws that produce them and alibi the ruling class.

To fragment such an integrated understanding of the world under the sentimentality of affective labor is, as Lenin explains, “to sink to the role of a sophist” by substituting “the question of the form of the struggle and agreements (today peaceful, tomorrow warlike, the next day warlike again) for the question of the *substance* of the struggle and agreements between capitalist associations” (1974, 253). In actuality, “the question as to whether these changes are “purely” economic or *non-economic* (e.g., military) is a secondary one, which cannot in the least affect the fundamental view on the latest epoch of capitalism” (253). “The *forms* of the struggle may and do constantly change . . . but the *substance* of the struggle, its class *content*, positively *cannot* change while classes exist” (253).

It is only by grasping the essence of history as class struggle that imperialism is explained and thus available to be changed. Why? Because imperialism is that moment in the circuit of capital accumulation when the capitalist must pursue profit and enter into competition with others on a global scale because of the falling rate of profit in national markets, thereby testifying to the moribund state of the system and its ripeness for socialism. This explains why, at its highest stage, capitalist

competition becomes transformed into monopoly. The result is immense progress in the socialisation of production. In particular, the process of technical invention and improvement becomes socialised. . . .

Production becomes social, but appropriation remains private. The social means of production remain the private

property of a few. The general framework of formally recognized free competition remains, and the yoke of a few monopolists on the rest of the population becomes a hundred times heavier, more burdensome and intolerable. . . .

. . . Domination, and violence that is associated with it, such are the relationships that are most typical of the “latest phase of capitalist development”; that is what inevitably had to result, and has resulted, from the formation of all-powerful economic monopolies. (Lenin 1974, 205, 207)

Lenin’s theory of imperialism is explanatory and therefore transformative. It exposes the contradictions of the system and opens space for change by providing a framework for the emergent struggles that takes them beyond the class limits of ideology that accommodates and naturalizes capitalist inequality, and points toward what is to be done for social justice for all.

What is needed now is not more of the “hope”-full stories of cooperation and getting along repeated by *Empire*, but Lenin’s red criti(que)al theory as a force for change—theory that is radical because it grasps the root of the system in exploited labor and brings it to bear upon the false consciousness of class. This root is radical because it explains the laws of the system that govern its movements, explains why imperialism today is a symptom of decaying capitalism—i.e., capitalism that has lost its viability because it does not meet the needs of the people and is practically ripe for socialist transformation—and why for a new society free of exploitation workers must learn to become socialist theorists (Lenin 1973, 383–84). This is especially necessary now that workers’ struggles have taken up revolutionary tasks against imperialism while the populist Left celebrates these struggles as the rule of spontaneity that fetishizes “democracy” over revolution and blinds the people: “The most dangerous of all in this respect are those who do not wish to understand that the fight against imperialism is a sham and humbug unless it is inseparably bound up with the fight against opportunism” (Lenin 1974, 302).

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# Alcohol Is Sublime

Robert Faivre

Despite a failing stock market, rising health-care and education costs, and the potential of global war, “frivolous” consumption is everywhere. From tax breaks for buyers of SUVs, to television shows on MTV that expose the lavish lifestyles of pop stars, to the theoretical work of postleft cultural theorists like Pierre Bourdieu, the return of frivolous consumption has become the dominant indicator of one’s class. In short, *class* has become “classy.” While having “returned” to class, the dominant cultural theory today has emptied class of any connection to relations of production and, instead, now substitutes a theory of class as desire, defined primarily by one’s level of “frivolity” (i.e., consumption) in the marketplace (Dimock and Gilmore 1994). My aim here is to explain why, in a time of acute crisis, theories of frivolous consumption emerge and circulate to promote the enjoyment of little pleasures over and above the satisfaction of real needs. Because of the seriousness of this situation for the majority of the world’s people, whose needs are unmet, I discuss one of the most “frivolous” commodities—alcohol, which, despite its serious health risks, is perceived almost entirely as a recreational consumable. I argue, opposing consumptionist theories like Bourdieu’s, that its consumption is determined by the primary conflict between capital and labor.

According to the World Health Organization, “overall, alcohol causes as much illness and death as measles and malaria, and

more years of life lost to death and disability than tobacco or illegal drugs” (quoted in Zuger 2002). Ranging from binge drinking among college students in the North (40 percent of whom binge regularly [Clayton 2002]) to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) in the South (for instance, the FAS rate in South Africa is fifty-two times that of the United States [Glasser 2002, 28]), alcohol consumption is a global health crisis, the severity and scope of which are heightened by the marketing practices of the alcohol industry. Targeting young people worldwide and especially in the emerging markets of Asia, the industry uses advertising to represent drinking as glamorous and reinvigorating. Indeed, in much “frivolous” discourse, alcohol consumption—rather than being understood in relation to addiction, illness, malnutrition, domestic violence, and other social harms—is usually represented as a matter of individual choice. Consumption of alcohol in moderation is represented as a form of virtually harmless recreation and indeed a key feature of a classy lifestyle. How and where one drinks is taken as an index of one’s status in society, a sign of one’s identity, and a measure of one’s success. This contradiction between the widespread harmful effects of alcohol consumption and its persistent role in recreation must be addressed critically if one is to understand not only alcohol but the social reality in which it is consumed.

Frivolous consumption, such as the recreational consumption of alcohol, emerges at a time of global crisis. More specifically, a condition for the emergence of frivolous consumption is the current highly developed productive capacity of labor and, at the same time, the existence of social relations of production that prioritize profit over need.

While the recreational consumption of alcohol in a range of forms, tastes, and styles is taken as the measure of one’s freedom, it is, in actuality, a symptom of the irrationality of organizing production for profit. At a time when the productivity of labor has reached the point when it would be possible to meet the basic needs (and more) of everyone in the world, the continued restriction of production to the demands of transnational capital against the needs of the majority means that the few who own the means of production can fulfill their every desire while increasing numbers

of people have little or no access to clean water, health care, housing, and education. This is what is at the core of the frivolity of alcohol consumption. The image of alcohol as freedom is based upon the only freedom capitalism offers to the world—the free market in which a few profit from the labor of the majority. Transnational capitalism promotes the recreational consumption of alcohol—which as a source of empty calories has no real food value but is a source of profit—while millions suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and related illnesses.

Truly frivolous is the argument now circulating that increased consumption, as opposed to transformation of the relations of production, is the solution to social inequality. A recent book by Stuart Walton, *Out of It: A Cultural History of Intoxication* (2002), is exemplary. The book is a celebration of the recreational consumption of intoxicants, including alcohol, which Walton describes as one of the most widely available and legitimated “radical intoxicant[s].” For Walton, intoxication is one of the most essential human experiences, one that he aims to reclaim from the various institutions (legal, religious, and medical) that have attempted to seize control of it because it is perceived as a threat to social stability and progress.

The problem, as Walton presents it, is not that alcohol consumption is harmful. In fact, Walton asserts that most alcohol consumption has “no negative medical or social side effects” (12), but rather provides necessary recreation and release from the daily grind. In his experience—and experience is what he relies on to make his claims—only “the small minority of drug use” is “problematic” (12). His central concern is that people are prevented by various cultural prohibitions from having good information about, and free access to, the experience of intoxication, and Walton sees in the increasing calls to moderation an attempt to stop the play of identity that intoxication enables as an escape from the everyday. He writes, “I consider [intoxication] a heartening and positive phenomenon, a last tidal wave of mass defiance against institutional apparatuses whose power is now concerted on a global scale, and yet whose minatory efforts at dissuasion are being stubbornly brushed aside” (9). How can we know “moderation,” he asks, without excess?

As Walton sees it, all that is necessary to make a positive experience of alcohol consumption available to everyone is a cultural reform that reconceives alcohol in its positive essence. Alcohol becomes, in his text, a trope of individual autonomy in an increasingly homogenized society. It represents, he argues, “the moments of our lives given over to the ludic, the celebratory, the digressive and the recreational” (270). Alcohol, in other words, is understood as a cultural matter, and in the terms of all dominant cultural theory today, culture is a matter of ideas, not class. All one needs to do to escape class is to rearrange one’s perception of the world. However, despite taking the view that the cultural history of intoxication can be written only from the singular experiences of people’s lives, this argument presupposes that recreational intoxication is transhistorical and a means of crossing all social and cultural boundaries. Throughout the book, Walton habitually repeats that “the drive to achieve intoxicated states is a universal and abiding one” (15, 23, 270). While focusing on the “unique” experiences of intoxication, Walton locates intoxication as a universal and indeed an almost biological drive that will always exist, and recreational use of alcohol and other intoxicants as a constant across cultures and through history. In short, it is not that Walton is against any totalization, but rather against any totalizing theory of the world that connects intoxication to class. For Walton, intoxication is a transhistorical constant, the forms of which are only conditioned by the realities of the particular culture in which people live.

I have focused on Walton’s text not because these textual inconsistencies and slippages are a mark of any sophisticated deconstruction of the cultural symbolism of alcohol, but because of its symptomatic popularity. By even the most basic standards of intellectual inquiry, Walton’s text is a thin investigation of the issues. The level of attention that it has received, despite the conceptual thinness of the argument, is an index of the dominant understanding of class in cultural studies today. Walton’s text is symptomatic of the way in which post-al (see page 249, note 1—Ed.) cultural studies has become the theoretical wing of transnational capital by celebrating consumption—and, increasingly,

frivolous consumption—as a means of realizing individual autonomy. In its relentless promotion of increased consumption as a viable alternative to economic and social justice, this view accepts capitalism as the natural and only way of organizing production, and rewrites as cultural difference of taste the inequitable division of access to resources that is an effect of the divided social relations of class. Class is reduced to a matter of style, and, according to this logic, one can achieve an improved market situation with more classy consumption. The book's reliance on experience as the only reliable basis of knowing is an integral part of a cultural theory of class in which class is reduced to a lifestyle. Walton is but one instance of the consumptionist theory that addresses the diverse surface appearances of commodity culture, but brackets them off from the deeper determinations, thus universalizing the differences, because the reality of class—not only its appearances in consumption but its role in production—is denied.

Insofar as class-as-lifestyle has become the dominant theory of class, I am aware that to argue otherwise is to call into question immediately my ability to discuss frivolous consumption. If, however, cultural studies is to be not merely a witness to the effects of capitalism but a force for transforming the material conditions in which the few profit by exploiting the labor of the many, it is necessary to return to a theory of class in which class is understood as one's relationship to the means of production. In order to understand consumption, and indeed to understand the diverse cultural forms, institutions, and practices that make up daily life under capitalism, it is not sufficient to limit one's analysis to culture as it is immediately experienced, but rather it is necessary to explain cultural appearances in relation to the basic social relations. This means that to understand consumption effectively—to understand, for instance, why frivolous consumption of alcohol exists alongside hunger, or why alcohol appears at all as a form of recreation—it is necessary to show how the relations of consumption are a manifestation of the social relations of production, relations that are determined by the exploitation of labor by capital for the production of profit.

Alcohol, as it appears to us, or as we conceive of it, or as we experience it, is an example of what Marx calls an “imagined concrete” (1986, 37). Alcohol appears, like all commodities, to have no history. It is presented as a “natural” experience, one that cuts across all cultural and class boundaries. What Marx’s analysis of daily life under capitalism explains, and why I argue that it provides an effective and necessary means of understanding culture today, is that a concrete thing such as alcohol is not simply a given but rather a set of relations that have come to take on a concrete form or appearance as a seemingly singular entity. This is best understood, as Marx says, as “a rich totality of many determinations and their relations” (37). Marx is saying that in order to understand what appears to be a purely cultural event like the consumption of alcohol, we need to understand the relations in which this concrete is produced. Thus, in order to understand alcohol as it is experienced by people now, it is necessary to understand alcohol in its various forms as a commodity. Alcohol is produced and, like all commodities, is part of a complex system of production that goes beyond one’s immediate perception. Marx’s theory of the concrete as a set of relations is effective because it allows us to begin to understand alcohol both as it appears and in terms of the underlying relations that produce alcohol in its various appearances and forms.

Marx’s theory of the commodity and commodity relations has, however, been displaced in what is known as cutting-edge cultural and social theory by theories that address commodities and their consumption separate from any underlying relations. These theories regard commodities as items of exchange and consumption, as things, and not in terms of basic social relations within which these things are produced, exchanged, and consumed. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, or cultural consumption, is such a theory. While Bourdieu uses the term *commodity*, his theory of commodities and commodity consumption regards commodities as things that express not a fundamental relation underlying all social reality (a concept that Bourdieu critiques as a logical illusion), but as things that are consumed with distinction, that is, things that in their consumption signify or construct the identity

of the consumer, marking the consumer's position in a spectrum of lifestyle status.

According to Bourdieu, the problem with Marx's analysis of concretes is that such an approach to the understanding of substances, practices, and indeed to all of "reality" confuses "the things of logic with the logic of things" (1987, 7). He argues, further, that such an approach is a "theoreticist illusion that grants reality to abstractions [and] hides a whole series of major problems" (7). Bourdieu argues here that to claim to "know" a "thing" through concepts ("abstractions") poses problems because one is trying to grasp one type of thing with another. That is to say, because of the mediation of the concept, one can never get at the nature of the thing in question. Bourdieu seems to be saying that it is not possible to have reliable knowledge of substances and practices, because ideas occupy a different reality than things and are thus always a totalizing reduction of unique experience. Conceptual apprehension of a thing such as a particular form or style of alcohol is then not the same as actual consumption of a specific alcoholic beverage. No theory of alcohol, in short, can ever account for the multitude of possible experiences of drinking.

For Bourdieu, reality can only be contingently defined by the innumerable cultural distinctions that make up the experience of alcohol. In this view, alcohol can only be understood through its consumption, whether it is one's own experience of drinking or others' recognition of one's consumption within a hierarchy of drinking distinctions (such as those between consuming a six-pack of canned beer from the convenience store, consuming a few raspberry cosmopolitans in a trendy urban club, and consuming a glass of a rare aged port after a business deal). According to this logic, alcohol is a matter of taste, or the ways that it is consumed differently by different people. Bourdieu argues that to understand consumption practices, one needs to look at the ways in which people are culturally conditioned to consume alcohol. This cultural conditioning is presented by Bourdieu as a matter of what is considered legitimate, both in terms of an overall hierarchy of distinction within the social space (the social reality as imagined by social subjects themselves) and in terms of which specific

consumption practices appear as legitimate for subjects at various shifting positions within this hierarchy.

“In matters of taste,” Bourdieu writes, “more than anywhere else, all determination is negation” (1984, 56)—that is, taste cannot be explained by any causal theory in which one aspect of social life, such as class, is made more important than any other. On the contrary, at the core of the theory of “determination is negation” is the notion that society is an open, fluid space of multiple determinations without a center. For Bourdieu, one’s position in social space as a subject is a matter of the distribution of the different forms of “capital,” his term for the various culturally legitimating assets—including economic capital (such as wealth or income) and cultural capital (such as education or particular sorts of knowledge)—that everyone owns in differing degrees. In other words, Bourdieu is arguing that *taste* is determined by one’s social class. However, *class* for Bourdieu is not, as it is for Marx, a matter of position within the exploitative relations of production, but rather a network of various social resources to which everyone has access.

The relationship of *taste* and *class* is evident in Bourdieu’s discussion of how practices are identified in relation to each other and to two primary tastes in the hierarchy of legitimation. These are the “taste of necessity” and the “taste of luxury,” which Bourdieu also terms the “taste of freedom.”

The taste of necessity is that set of tastes that is most conditioned by economic necessity (or limited economic capital) and, at the same time, by limited knowledge of other tastes (or limited cultural capital). Calculated in terms of the “distance from necessity,” the taste of necessity is a matter of the degree to which “economic power” keeps economic necessity “at arm’s length” (55). In other words, the taste of necessity is the most constrained taste. Thus, Bourdieu is arguing that taste, or one’s preferred forms of consumption, is determined by one’s status, or place within a hierarchy. In this sense, taste is merely descriptive of the behavior of consumers based upon a matrix of their income and their cultural status.

An illustration of this ordering of tastes can be seen, for example, in the hierarchical arrangement of vodka brands on the

shelves of the liquor store: nearest the floor are the cheap and rough brands (often with the highest alcohol content—100 proof or higher); above these is the highly advertised middle range of brands in their various forms, from plain to flavored, with their familiar designs and novelty features; and on the top shelves are the premium and specialty imports, the “purest of the pure.” Which subject consumes which brand or level of vodka, for example, is a matter of the conditioning of his or her taste. In this way, Bourdieu’s theory of consumption aims to address the appearance of distinct consumption practices within a population, practices that constitute particular styles and mark specific tastes, without reducing these decisions either to economics or to culture.

It is this fluid nature of class status, Bourdieu argues, that makes it possible to distance oneself from the taste of necessity not only by acquiring economic capital but also cultural capital, or knowledge of the taste of luxury, a taste that can be acquired in degrees. In this sense, Bourdieu suggests that cultural knowledge of different tastes is an equally determining factor in one’s position in the hierarchy of social space as one’s position in the relations of production. That is, one can gain access to different tastes and therefore make it into a higher class stratum by learning how to consume like the cultural other. In short, one can consume one’s way into the upper class. But, of course, this refined consumption is a matter of superseding one’s cultural preconditioning (or predispositioning) through access to knowledge, or cultural capital. Thus, for Bourdieu, the difference between haves and have-nots is ultimately a cultural imposition upon the lower classes, whose problem is that they just don’t know how to live well. To return to the example of vodka consumption, social subjects will tend to consume at the level to which they are accustomed, which means that through what Bourdieu calls a “forced choice,” their preference for either a crude, or alternately a premium, form of vodka is dependent more on what they know than what they can afford. In other words, through experience and education, a social subject can develop a taste for what is seen as better vodka, thus acquiring cultural capital and the ability to exceed their so-called class position. Those who continue

to drink crude vodka or drink it in ways that are not classy thus do so because they do not know better. To improve one's taste and class, one needs only the knowledge for making an informed choice, rather than a forced choice.

This representation of freedom as informed choice in the marketplace calls on people to identify themselves as individuals who will do whatever they can to meet their own needs and desires within the existing social structure. This appeal to individuality rather than collectivity as the site of freedom is the dominant understanding of freedom in capitalist society. Bourdieu thus repeats the logic of commodity culture that has its most familiar ideological representation in advertising. For instance, to stay with the example of vodka, a highly advertised form of alcohol today is specialty or premium vodka marketed in terms of its distance from alienated labor, a distance demonstrated through various strategies of representation in advertisements. The ads for Vox vodka, for example, make use of images of vacation sites (alpine ski resort, remote Caribbean beach), associating a taste for Vox with the escape or respite from work. This is alcohol as a marker of status, or in Bourdieu's terms, alcohol as the taste of luxury and freedom.

Another such strategy is marketing's aestheticization of labor. For instance, the ads for Belvedere and Chopin, printed in sepia tones or softened black and white, depict workers as precapitalist craftsmen or peasant workers. The ads feature the potato or the rye as well as the rustic implements of their processing (the flail and pitchfork), leaving mention of distillation to the fine print. In one ad, a worker's soiled and cracked hands seem to be made of the same earthy substance as the potatoes they hold. This strategy of representation presents the consumer with an image of the worker as someone he or she might encounter while touring rural Europe or observe gathering or cooking potatoes in a painting by Van Gogh. There is, in fact, a brand of specialty vodka named after Van Gogh, reproducing various familiar paintings that can be viewed inside the bottle through the framing label. This association of the vodka and the artworks represents an association of taste, whereby the consumer can enjoy the vodka as if it were an artwork; together these make a display of cultural capital.

In either instance, the distancing from labor, or the aesthetizing of it, is an idealized representation of reality that covers over, and thus denies, the reality of both production and consumption. Vodka is produced under specific historical conditions and is consumed within them as well. The producers of vodka, unlike the owners of the means of production and the privileged, do not generally experience the artworks or the resorts; indeed, they have no distance from necessity, but by necessity must sell their labor power, their ability to work, under harsh conditions of exploitation that the images of advertisements soften, dehistoricize, and obscure from view.

As already noted, in his conceptualization of social structure, Bourdieu represents class quite differently than does Marx. Specifically, he draws on the Weberian notion of class as a matter of identities that are basically an array of differences in “capital” holdings. While Weber theorized class as a sort of cultural spectrum, Bourdieu theorizes a multidimensional space of identity mobility, or mobile identities that shift according to the alignments of various combinations of the different forms of “capital.” This is a more nuanced version of Weber’s differential rewriting of Marx; but both versions of this bourgeois theory of class deny the classical Marxist concept of class as exploitative relations of production—that is, class as the difference between exploiter and exploited and the way this basic difference determines cultural differences.

Bourdieu treats the commodity, in other words, only as an item of consumption, as if consumption occurred independent of production. But as Marx has theorized, this is merely the way in which the commodity appears in culture. The reality of the commodity is in why and how it is produced within capitalist relations of production and how this determines its consumption. Thus, from a Marxist view, one must explain the consumption of alcohol and its effects by turning to commodity relations.

In *Capital*, Marx explains that the commodity is significant in this respect because “in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of their labour” (1996, 82–83); that is, the relation of commodities

as exchange among things appears as an objective relation among things because this is also the social character of people's labor in the capitalist mode of production. The ability to work, or the labor power of workers, becomes in these exploitative relations a commodity; labor becomes something that is bought and sold on the market like any other commodity. Moreover, these relations of the buying and selling of labor are exploitative relations because this most basic exchange is not an equal one but only appears as such. It appears as such because the wage appears as compensation for a certain amount of labor. However, as Marx explains in *Wage Labour and Capital* (1985) and elsewhere, workers are not compensated for the full value of their labor (or more accurately, the full value of the labor power expended), but rather for the cost of reproducing their labor power (more or less), with the excess or newly created surplus value going to the capitalist, who has paid the wages out of already existing capital.

What is ideologically hidden in the exchange between the worker and the owner is the double consumption of the wage. A worker consumes the wage by spending it on the means of subsistence—for various commodities—while the owner of capital consumes the equivalent amount by paying it to the worker out of already existing capital for a certain expenditure of labor power that yields a value greater than the wage. Thus, as Marx explains in *Wage Labour and Capital*, the wage is consumed “*reproductively* for capital,” as the exchange of wage for labor power has netted the capitalist the surplus value, and “*unproductively* for the worker,” as it is then “exchanged for means of subsistence which have disappeared forever and the value of which [the worker] can only recover by repeating the same exchange” (1985, 214). The wage for the capitalist produces surplus value and accumulates as capital; the wage for the worker produces the means of subsistence, more or less. If *more*, then it may be spent on commodities above and beyond subsistence (the means of privilege and pleasure), either immediately or mediated by an interval of savings and investment in order to be spent on commodities with a perceived higher yield of pleasure, prestige, etc. If *less*, then the wage may be spent on means of subsistence of lesser value and

quality, or some needs may go unmet. The “more or less” situation is mediated somewhat in two ways: on the one hand by credit, which allows the wage to be spent in advance, again “unproductively” for the worker as this tends to result in debt and interest payments to investment capitalists; and on the other hand, by state interventions such as public assistance, which do allow many in the United States to survive at a minimal subsistence level, but which are never more than a reform within the social relations that bring about the basic unequal exchange.

The effect of this unequal exchange is that workers are alienated from the full value of their labor and the owner receives the surplus as profit, all while the wage is represented as a fair exchange. The reason that capitalists are able to extract this surplus value (or profit) from workers is because they have monopoly ownership of the means of production and the workers have only their labor power. Therefore, in order to work at all and thus meet their basic needs, workers have to sell their labor power to capitalists. It is in these social relations where the owning class can command the labor of others that their interest in profit is structurally prioritized over workers’ interest in production for meeting needs. This prioritizing of profit over need begins in production, but it determines consumption.

Consumption cannot be the solution to the contradictions of capitalism because, as Marx argues, production “produces the object of consumption, the mode of consumption and the urge to consume” (1986, 30). That is to say, what we consume and how we consume it are determined by the structure and organization of production. If production is organized, as it is under capitalism, to produce commodities irrespective of the needs of the producers and for the private profit of the owners, then no amount of consumption can change this relation because consumption always comes after the extraction of surplus labor in production. Frivolous consumption, in other words, is not the resolution to the problem of unmet need but rather its contradictory other within the relations of exploitation. To posit consumption and forms of frivolous recreation as the compensation for want is to resolve ideologically the problem of historically produced want so that

the contradictory social relations that produced both frivolity and unmet need in the first place can continue. Unless the structure of inequality based upon private ownership of the means of production is transformed, consumption works only to reproduce the conditions of the exploitation of labor.

The idea, however, that consumption is the most fundamental right and the primary means of expressing of one's identity is an example of the way in which "freedom" under capitalism is determined by the needs of the market. Under these conditions of commodity relations, in which many social needs are not and cannot be met, workers turn for recreation to commodities and culture generally for consolation and escape, for a temporary resolution at the level of consciousness and consumption of what remains unresolved at the site of production. Thus the recreational consumption of alcohol, which is in fact a harmful and addictive substance, becomes a way to respond to the needs that the relations of production have denied and that alcohol can cover over, though only temporarily and at great social cost.

At the level of culture, the social relations produce the social contradiction of what Bourdieu calls "taste." Marx explains that the refinement of tastes and luxury are "the refinement of needs" that develop in relation to an

artificially produced crudeness, whose true enjoyment, therefore, is *self-stupefaction*—this *illusory* satisfaction of need—this civilisation contained *within* the crude barbarism of need. The English gin shops are therefore the *symbolical* representations of private property. Their *luxury* reveals the true relation of industrial luxury and wealth to man. They are therefore rightly the only Sunday pleasures of the people which the English police treats at least mildly. (1975, 311–12)

While Bourdieu theorizes a social space in which luxury and freedom are defined in their distance from necessity and the constraint and outright denial of pleasure and need, Marx emphasizes that no matter how far removed the refinements appear to be from the crude reality of class, they occur within the same social relations of exploitation. The luxury commodities and their various

forms of consumption are “symbolical representations” of the relation of private property, or capital, to wage labor. The distance of luxury from necessity and its freedom, for Marx, is an appearance, a matter of culture, but, as Marx explains, culture is best understood as an expression of the basic social relations that are the very relations culturalist theorists such as Bourdieu obscure from view.

Thus alcohol, for Marx, is first and foremost a commodity, and in its various styles of consumption are “symbolical representations” of the social relations determined by production. This means that these appearances—these historical and cultural forms of alcohol—are manifestations of the basic fact of exploitation, the unequal exchange of wage and labor power. The (mis)representation of this forced and unequal exchange as a free and equal one is the primary ideological representation of culture. It is the basis of ruling-class ideology. As Marx and Engels explain in *The German Ideology*, “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas” (1976, 59). The notion that the wage-labor exchange is or can be free and fair circulates as the dominant idea, and it does so because the “means of mental production”—that is, much of culture, including media, advertising, education, etc.—are very much under the control of the class with the means of material production. Thus the means of producing and reproducing culture and consciousness are put to use in the interest of the ruling class, which means that not only ideas about society and culture, but also cultural practices and uses of commodities, circulate as ideological forms that cover over the real relations. The forms of alcohol and its styles of use are ideological forms in that they appear as choices, preferences, tastes, recreation, the escape from worries, a moment’s pleasure, etc. But the reality that is made partially manifest, even as it is covered over in the ideological forms, is that alcohol comes from the same natural and agricultural sources as food; alcohol production, like food production, is a use of resources that are put to particular use depending on the priorities of those who control or own these resources. As an example, turn again to vodka. In times of grain

scarcity, vodka production often displaced the production of bread (Phillips 2000, 126). Why would this be the case, since bread provides nutrition, whereas vodka provides no nutrition, and in fact harms people's health? Marx explains this contradiction by referring to the underlying economics. It is more profitable to produce vodka than bread, and thus if there are limits on the availability of grain, the grain goes to the producer who can pay the most for it; producing frivolity is prioritized over producing food. Vodka competes with bread for grain—in order to produce profit. Intoxication competes with nutrition—in order to produce profit.

This is of course a particularly telling instance where workers' access to different commodities is directly limited. Why, however, from this view, do workers drink at all? Is it to demonstrate a certain taste or to take up conspicuous consumption? Or because of social conditioning? Is it to slip free of the social order in obedience to a transhistorical desire? Sociologist Sidney Mintz cuts through such musings when he characterizes commodities such as rum and sugar as "proletarian hunger-killers" (1997, 360). This characterization of drinking and why it is done—to kill hunger, to mask the effects of unmet need—clarifies what is obscured by the rationales of Bourdieu, Walton, and the marketeers of frivolous consumption. It shows the class nature of consumption in a manner that is not merely descriptive of an apparent transhistorical difference, but explanatory of historically produced inequalities.

Here it is useful to turn to concrete instances of alcohol consumption. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels (1975) chronicles the conditions under which the industrial working class lived, labored, and recreated. Although working from the surveys and empirical studies of others, Engels does not simply describe the experiences of alcohol consumption and its effects on the working class. More importantly, he connects these experiences to the exploitative relations of production that were the cause of these contradictory conditions of consumption, whereby the owners and, to a lesser degree, the managers of the industrial means of production were able to consume and recreate with refinement, while the laborers, the unemployed, and the unemployable were forced to live in degradation, poverty, and

social neglect and thus to consume and recreate in crude and indeed ultimately harmful ways. As opposed to Bourdieu's notion of taste as "the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference" (1984, 56) that naturalizes the historical conditioning of consumption practices and the class subjectivity of taste, Engels argues that the conditions of life forced upon the working class are not inevitable, but rather are the product of the capitalist mode of production. These conditions included the denial of education beyond training for work, lack of access to health care and nutritious food, and exposure to sewage and industrial pollution. He explains that if workers in general seek respite in crude and harmful means of recreation, it is only because the existing relations of production, and thus conditions of consumption, make these the only forms of recreation available. He writes, "It is morally and physically inevitable that, under such circumstances, a very large number of working-men should fall into intemperance" (1975, 401).

Under these conditions, which in their crudeness stand in direct contradiction to the refinements of the exploiting class and its privileged managers, it is not surprising that workers would turn to drunkenness as recreation. Indeed, Engels emphasizes:

All possible temptations, all allurements combine to bring the workers to drunkenness. Liquor is almost their only source of pleasure, and all things conspire to make it accessible to them. The working-man comes from his work tired, exhausted, finds his home comfortless, damp, dirty, repulsive; he has urgent need of recreation, he *must* have something to make work worth his trouble, to make the prospect of the next day endurable. (400)

The materialist explanation of workers' alcohol consumption differs significantly from the frivolous interpretations served up by Walton and Bourdieu. Walton, for instance, asserts that everyone turns to intoxication as a means of compensation for the workday and the daily grind, as well as the inevitability of pain and loss that is the human condition. Bourdieu posits that people of all classes drink in the ways they do because they are conditioned to do so, with some conditions allowing for greater freedom from necessity. Engels, however, explains that while recreation cuts across

the classes, the form and quality of recreation that the exploited and alienated workers take up is a response to the conditions of life that are brought into existence and perpetuated by the relations of production that benefit the owners.

As opposed to the frivolous or consumptionist theories that represent drinking and drunkenness as a matter of choice—whether free or (un)informed or forced—the materialist theory of drinking shows that alcohol consumption is not determined by subjectivity. The objective relations of production in which people live determine how their food is produced, where they live, how they get to work, and whether or not their ability to afford these things comes from the sale of their labor power as wages or from the ability to command the labor power of others as profit. And just as drunkenness is a response to the conditions of life, alcohol consumption has consequences that reproduce and indeed worsen these conditions. As Engels explains, “What else can be expected than an excessive mortality, an unbroken series of epidemics, a progressive deterioration in the physique of the working population?” (396).

The conditions of working-class life in the midnineteenth century that Engels describes and explains are conditions that also exist today, not only for those exploited in the North, but even more intensely for those in the South. For instance, in South Africa, one of the world’s main producers of wine, alcohol has been used as a form of payment by landowners in order to placate agricultural workers laboring under extreme conditions of exploitation, a practice that has resulted in fetal alcohol syndrome rates of 1 in 55 (Glasser 2002, 28). Excessive alcohol consumption, intoxication, and the legacy of effects on health and society are produced not by choice, but by the conditions under which people try to live their lives.

Engels noted that working people are “constantly spurred on to the maddest excess” of the only pleasures available (396). One influence that spurs them on is the intensive marketing of compensatory commodities, such as alcohol. In our time, alcohol advertising is so ubiquitous, and its consequences for global health so devastating, that the World Health Organization repeatedly

criticizes and lobbies to restrict the marketing of alcohol to young people and to emerging markets in those parts of the world where increased industrialization has brought into existence new markets of workers whose wages can now be split between providing for the reproduction of labor power and compensating by means of intoxicating recreation for exploitation and alienation. The marketers of alcohol and its intoxicating promises of pleasure and reinvigoration actively target specific markets, with regard only for new sources of profitable consumption and none for the inevitable harm of such consumption.

When one drinks, one drinks one's class. But contrary to the frivolous discourses that celebrate the differences of drinking as inevitable and that posit improved consumption within exploitative relations as the solution to want, what is needed is class knowledge of the material conditions of consumption and a sobering critique of the discourses and theories of frivolous consumption that circulate as alibis for exploitative relations. The forms of consumption and the economic conditions that underlie these conditions can and must be changed so that people can produce, consume, reproduce, and recreate in meaningful, healthful, and sustaining ways—that is, live full lives. The necessary condition for a full life is the end of the exploitative relations that drive people to drink. This end can only be achieved by a struggle to establish new relations in which the means of production are collectively owned and managed, and in which frivolous consumption is not substituted for the meeting of real needs.

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# Just-in-Time Working and the Avant-Garde Cinema

Amrohini Sahay

The fluidity of subjective “identity” that has now more than ever before become necessary for the emerging “new” economies—from the wireless economy of the cyber to what business writer Tom Peters calls the “ephemeral” and “fickle” economy of just-in-time production for the global market (1996)—is increasingly being elaborated not just in business manuals for corporate executives but in popular cultural texts as well. To say this another way, the new business climate of production for transnational markets demands high-tech knowledge workers who display a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty and who are skilled in techniques of improvisation—the capability of making decisions in a highly volatile environment of constantly changing information and the ability to act effectively (self-reflexively and inventively) on piecemeal and ever-fluctuating knowledge. In privileging a fluid model of subjectivity and spectatorship founded in such knowledge skills, films ranging from the indie film *Memento* to *Run Lola Run* to the blockbuster hit trilogy *The Matrix* thus function as part of the culture of corporate capitalism—a culture that is now ideologically legitimating (as always) the economic interests of capital in “artistic” form. Critics who morally condemn such films for their “inauthentic” narrative style, improbable and hard-to-grasp plots, and the lack of “emotional depth” of their characters, as well as postmodern viewers seduced by their

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staging of avant-garde cultural theory miss the political and social logic of these films. They provide ideological training in a new model of subjectivity amenable to the interests of transnational business.

*Memento* (directed by Chris Nolan, winner of best screenplay at the Sundance film festival in 2001, and nominated for several Academy Awards) provides an exemplary instance of such ideological encoding. The new self-reflexive and fluid subjectivity is encoded in *Memento* at the level of both form and content. Formally, the film provides a postmodern reworking of the classic elements of 1940s American *film noir*; appealing to a cinematically literate and sophisticated viewing audience capable of appreciating its tongue-in-cheek play with *noir*. While it retains, for example, such features as the ambiguous quest for the “truth” of a crime, the setting of a shady underworld of drug dealers, crooked cops, and double-dealing *femme fatale*, it also puts forward a reversal of the normal world of *noir*. The film opens not only with the crime scene but also with the killer—thus complicating the familiar flow of the crime film. Similarly, the film’s use of a visually messy and complex postlinear editing style (the entire story is narrated backwards—starting from the crime scene—and told in short, interspersed, fragmentary episodes as remembered by the main character) presupposes a spectator who delights in negotiating a terrain of conflicting and fragmented information.

At the level of content, the film is constructed around the interplay of a main plot and a subplot. In the main plot, we find the protagonist, Leonard Shelby, a former insurance agent, on a quest for revenge for the murder and rape of his wife. As a result of being assaulted during the criminal attack that (ostensibly) killed his wife, Leonard suffers from a lack of short-term memory (whether physically or psychologically caused is unclear). He is unable to make new memories subsequent to the attack. As a result, he is, in effect, forced to externalize his memory capability in order to remember not only what he is doing at any given moment but also who he is. Unable to use his memory to establish coherence in his life, Leonard devises a method to keep track of his actions: he relies on continuously taking notes, annotated

Polaroid photos, and tattooing his own body with key phrases and injunctions (“Fact 5: Drug dealer”; “Learn by repetition”; “Memory is Treachery”).

Leonard believes that he has a system that will work to give him reliable access to the facts around which he can base his actions. At one point he even states, “Memories can be distorted. They’re just an interpretation—they’re not a record. And they’re irrelevant if you have the facts.” The film’s logic, however, works to undermine any such reliable access to the facts, placing Leonard (as the exemplary model of a high-tech subjectivity) into a void of endless interpretation and constantly displaced coherence. Among other formal means, through its layered narration of events (with each scene explaining the scene that preceded it), the film works to undermine Leonard’s interpretative scheme—constantly bringing new contexts to bear on Leonard’s “facts,” which change their import for understanding the story. The world of “signs” out of which Leonard forges his identity thus remains fundamentally ambiguous and open-ended, yet in order to act he is forced to construct the momentary semblance of a stable self that can orient him in the present. Leonard thus stages the new corporate dogma of identity under globalization—that is, as a form of self-invention in which the subject lives not by reliance on any definite, clear, and coherent understanding of the world, the logic of its operations, or his or her place in them, but on a moment-to-moment, contingent, and pragmatic interpretation that needs to be constantly revised and redone on the basis of new information.

What is at stake in this version of subjectivity as fundamentally open-ended, in constant reinvention, and able to adjust rapidly to unexpected change, unfolds with clarity in the subplot of the film. Here we learn, through Leonard’s flashbacks to a moment prior to his injury, of an accountant named Sammy Jenkins who suffered from the same memory disorder (and whom he keeps as a reference point for navigating his own illness—“I use habit and routine to make my life possible. Sammy had no drive, no reason to make it work. Me, yeah, I got a reason”). Jenkins and his wife are seeking to claim insurance money from the insurance firm where Leonard is employed, and Leonard is assigned to their

case. In this moment of the film, we are seemingly given access to another Leonard, a ruthless and impersonal cog of the corporate profit machine who contrives to deny Jenkis and his wife their due insurance money, which leads to their psychological and financial ruin, and, ultimately, to the death of Jenkis's wife at his own hand. As opposed to Leonard, who visually embodies the ideal of the contemporary knowledge worker—young, efficient, and stylistically urban—Jenkis and his wife are portrayed as “ordinary,” naïve, middle-aged working people without the “savvy” to comprehend adequately the anonymous workings of the corporate world (represented by the insurance firm and Leonard as its agent) and thus casually victimized by it. It is, then, through this twofold representation that the film establishes its basic point: while on the one hand it seems to acknowledge the brutality of the corporate machine, at the same time it plays on the divide between Leonard and the Jenkises to point to the difference between two opposed models of subjectivity in contemporary capitalism. The fate of the Jenkises is the fate of an outmoded subjectivity—one whose belief in a stable world, a coherent identity, and the principled actions of other people collapses in confrontation with the postmodern realities of the cybereconomy. Ultimately, the film tells us, they are subjects without drive, and thus are crushed not by the profiteering actions of the insurance firm and its agent, but rather by virtue of their own naïveté and incomprehension, their inability to play the game effectively. (Indeed the truth of this life lesson that the film teaches is hardly negated when later in the film we encounter the possibility that Sammy Jenkis was not only a con man, but had no wife. Rather, the harshness of the film's message is softened and mitigated, thus relieving the viewer of identification with the plight of the victims.)

Within the terms of its own much-debated internal logic, *Memento* poses the question: Is Leonard a deranged killing machine whose quest for the killers of his wife is a deluded fiction he tells himself (complete with fake memories) to cover over his trauma and guilt at accidentally killing her as a result of his memory disorder? Or is he instead a manipulated victim of scheming petty criminals simply searching to avenge his wife's death? In

fact, it is this fundamental (and irresolvable) ambiguity of the ending that has, after the film's release, spawned a speculative maelstrom on Internet chat lists and the response pages of journals in the attempt to recover some clue to the truth of Leonard Shelby's identity. But these commentators, seduced by the film's formal complexity, miss the point of the film.

The political truth of Leonard's identity in crisis is a theory of subjective identity that is being aggressively marketed to high-tech workers through the myriad cultural venues of cybercapitalism as the model of successful subjectivity. Leonard Shelby is an allegory of the worker whom the proglobalization writer Thomas Friedman celebrates as an "information arbitrageur" (1999, 17–28): an intellectual nomad, constantly in motion, deftly capable of weaving together multiple perspectives into temporary coherence, and thus molded according to the imperatives and uncertainties of the market.

And yet, on the other side of the glamorization of such a subjectivity as the only means to success under capitalism, still lies the fundamental class divide between the owners of capital and the interests of *all* workers, including high-tech workers. While the film represents uncertainty as the very natural condition of being/knowing the world, at issue is the escalating *uncertainty of capitalism* as it affects the lives of all sections of the working class with increasing devastation. No less than the average unskilled or semiskilled workers, the privileged sections of the working class must live with the daily uncertainties of capitalism, and (as the information technology bust at the end of the 90s irrevocably demonstrated) in a fundamental insecurity with regard to their jobs and thus the ability to meet their needs.

Films like *Memento* not only naturalize these basic and insoluble contradictions of capitalism, but do the essential ideological work of stratifying and dividing different sections of the working class against their own collective interests. Contrary to the ideology of cybercapitalism, these collective class interests still require struggling for a society based not on the imperatives of profit for the owners (according to the anarchic fluctuations of the market) but rather on a system of economic production rationally

organized toward meeting the basic needs and life security of all people globally.

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## Soft Labor, Hard Work

Rob Wilkie

So much of the company propaganda is convincing you that you're not workers, that it's something else, that you're not working class.

—Borders' employee on the "New Economy"

The "cyber" is the ideology of transnational capital in which the cultural imaginary outraces production; all social determinations of class, race, gender, and sexuality are undone with the development of a "weightless" economy of symbolic exchanges. In these terms, the primacy of culture in the new cybereconomy of signs ends determinate structures of meaning presupposing as the condition of explanation the existence of an "outside" to discourse, and substitutes fluid networks of desire that resist interpretation through the endless play of indeterminacy. The cyber, the argument goes, renders culture and its study a permanent "problem" by introducing new modes of social organization that "fit badly with earlier complexities of domination, putting them into question and thereby opening the field . . . to new spaces of politics" (Poster 2001, 1–20).

Culture, according to this logic, having been freed from any material base through the multiplication of sites of cultural production in cyberspace, operates as an autonomous zone of contingencies, acting simultaneously as a site of overwhelming power and subversive resistance that blurs the boundaries of all social

distinctions and renders all concepts forever “fuzzy.” The social, in turn, is put forth as a site of myriad interests and contesting “negotiations” that “oscillate wildly” from one side to the next and that cannot be reduced to any single determination without the charge of totalitarianism (Hitchcock 1999, 2). This new ephemeral capitalism and its “virtual” culture are defined by an overmediation that subverts any singular attempt at definition. As a result, the study of culture is transformed from any materialist interrogation of the complexity of determinations by the systemic class interests that underlie specific manifestations of social power to the speculative documentation of the multiplicity of possible outcomes of technological development. Cultural studies is moved from the “outside” of class struggle to the “middle” of political negotiations and overdetermined oscillations from within, and all “first principles, fixed means, or established ends” are stripped from it, as Aronowitz and Menser advocate (1996, 17).

This essay is a critique of the “new” logic of the cyber, which theorizes the developments of technoscience in advancing global communications and accelerating globalization of production in terms of an epochal shift. It is claimed that this shift transforms the structures of capital from production, wage labor, and profit to consumption, immaterial labor, and power. Instead, I demonstrate through an analysis of some exemplary texts of the new cyber theory that what is at stake is the obscuring of the fact that not only are the fundamental laws of capitalism not eclipsed by the development of the cyber, but that the increased pace of technological advancement is an indication of the heightened crisis of capitalism and the necessity of social transformation from a system based on private profit to a system based on meeting the needs of all. Against the cultural theory of the autonomy of the cyber in which both “Lenin and capitalism [lie] in ruins” (Kroker 1996, 175), I maintain that contemporary culture, regardless of the form it takes, is determined by the laws of motion of capital. I argue that the theory of imperialism and monopoly capital developed by Marx and Lenin, which foregrounds the primacy of production in the study of culture, remains the most effective means for understanding the development of the New Economy of cybercapitalism.

Declared by its publisher to be a “highly readable and thought provoking work” and by reviewers a “welcome and timely contribution to discussions about the future of globalization and communication systems” (Downes 2002), Nick Dyer-Witheford’s *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (1999) is a prime example of the post-al left writing that has caught the attention of big business because of the way it translates corporate interests into popular rhetoric for easier consumption.<sup>1</sup> Like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*—which is declared by the *New York Times* to be “The Next Big Idea” (Eakin 2001)—and Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (2002)—which the *Guardian* (UK) proclaims is “the *Das Kapital* of the growing anti-corporate movement”—*Cyber-Marx* is part of a new ideological assault on the working class from the left. In the name of addressing the complexity and nuance of cybercapitalism, this post-al left writing attempts to disarm the oppressed and exploited people around the world by convincing them that in the New Economy they no longer have any power to resist the workings of capitalism. They are told that such futility is ultimately OK because it is only a matter of time before the fundamental social contradiction between capital and labor, which has the effect of putting to work tremendous technological advances solely for the purposes of producing huge profits for a few, leaving millions in utter misery, will simply work itself out.

Many of Dyer-Witheford’s assertions raise the issue of the readability of the text. For example, the argument that, as a result of the influx of new technologies, capitalism is in an obvious crisis requiring deep changes and a return to the concept of class struggle (1999, 217), would have been unintelligible just a few years ago to the mainstream publications that now praise it. This shift in mainstream thinking, which has led to the corporate embrace of the post-al left writers, shows that the cyber is in fact an arena of class struggle. Technological developments that in the hands of the working class could be used to meet the needs of the world’s population are used instead at the expense of the world’s majority to create increasing amounts of wealth for a few. As a response to the crisis of overproduction of the 1970s,

the transnational restructuring of production that has come to be known as the cyber and is often characterized by concepts such as *postindustrial*, *postfordism*, and *flexible accumulation*, and the expansion of global telecommunications marks the introduction of new means of increasing and concentrating production on a world scale. These changes were necessary in order to maintain the rate of profit previously available after the destruction and rebuilding of the global markets following World War II. The dominant arguments have claimed that the expansion of technoscience and the increasing innovation of industry would represent a new mode of accumulation that radically breaks with the capitalist cycles of boom and bust, ushering in a postcapitalist mode of production that no longer relies on the exploitation of labor as the source of value and profit. This illusion that technological growth alone solves the contradictions of capitalism is described by Marx in *Capital* as “the sunny time of his [the capitalist’s] first love” (Marx 1996, 409)<sup>2</sup> because it reflects a temporary moment in which the introduction of new technologies creates a sort of monopoly—and tremendous profits—for the capitalist. The current crisis of overproduction, however, undermines the argument that capitalism is no longer marked by the conflict between capital and labor.

Capitalism is entering a global crisis of overproduction. The *Washington Post* now admits that the “unprecedented overbuilding” of the 1990s has “created a vicious downward cycle in which price wars beget bankruptcy and bankruptcies beget more price wars, dragging down weak and strong companies alike” (Pearlstein 2002). The United States is facing a double-dip recession as monetary crises sweep across South America; the daily corporate accounting scandals both in the United States and Europe are fundamentally threatening “democratic capitalism” (Gore 2002, 13). In this situation, the previously celebratory remarks by the financial czars of transnational capital such as Alan Greenspan about the New Economy moving beyond the business of the old capitalism and economic crisis and class struggle being things of the past appear to be hopelessly out of touch with social reality today. Even billionaire financier George Soros, who has made

hundreds of millions of dollars speculating on the misery of people in the former Soviet Union and in the South, now declares that “globalization has been lopsided” and “the disparity in the treatment of labor and capital is an essential feature of the global capitalist system as it is currently organized” (2002, 39).

In this climate of capitalism’s crisis of profitability, post-al left writers like Dyer-Witheford are welcomed because, unlike the claims of postmodernism that now appear as blatantly advancing a procorporate agenda, they speak to workers in the language of the more “hip” and “savvy” transnational capitalism that recognizes the contradictions of capitalist production and purports to assuage the anxieties of an atomized working class, while continuing to advance the corporate agenda of deregulation and decentralization. While postmodernism echoed capitalism’s attack on barriers to capital circulation by proclaiming the textual deconstruction of social binaries as the realm of freedom from determinations such as class inequality, now (with the global market contracting), “post-Marxism seems, a decade after its first enunciation, strangely dated” (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 189) and “contrary to the post-Marxist belief that different kinds of domination politely arrange themselves in a nonhierarchical, pluralistic way the better not to offend anyone’s political sensibilities, capitalism is a domination that really dominates” (10).

It is as an intervention into postmodernism’s “intelligibility crisis” that Dyer-Witheford situates his project as part of the need for constructing a “heretic” Marxism (63) to respond to the social contradictions that have rendered postmodernism a dead language and to address the concerns of the knowledge workers who now find themselves facing the economic cycles supposedly overcome by their labor. *Cyber-Marx* attempts to secure again the ideological barriers to questioning the contradictions of capitalism. By distancing cybertheory from the more overtly corporate postmodernist dematerialization of culture, while continuing to isolate culture (subjective) and the economic (objective), post-al left writing opens a space for the postpolitics of transnational capitalism to find legitimacy. It speaks to a crisis of profitability by transforming the anger of the working class into market-friendly “ethical” consumerism that leaves intact the fundamental structures of class inequality.

Although for Dyer-Witheford capitalism remains nominally about the struggle between capital and labor (2), he argues that it has undergone a radical transformation from the system based on production to a system based on consumption and circulation. He writes that cybercapitalism, characterized by the imposition of technoscience directly into the production process and the development of “lighter-than-air” means of production (143), has meant a restructuring of work from material to immaterial labor so that “the most radical aspect of this socialization of labor is the blurring of wage and nonwaged time. The activities of people not just as workers but as students, consumers, shoppers, and television viewers are now directly integrated into the production process” (80).

The inclusion of moments of commodity consumption and the “blurring” of wage and nonwage labor is, according to Dyer-Witheford, necessary if we are to understand fully the impact of cyberrelations, in which “the demarcation between production, circulation and reproduction of capital is dissolved” (81). Dyer-Witheford’s theory of new capitalism, in which the “world of virtual finance has become both increasingly detached from, and superordinate over, material production” (139) and “the immediate point of production cannot be considered the ‘privileged’ point of struggle” (129) reflects the dominant cultural position on the New Economy and cybercapitalism. This dominance is shown in the close imitation by the Left of the Right’s declaration of the end of capitalism and the end of the necessity for an organized working-class resistance. Corporate guru Peter Drucker, for example, claims that we have entered the “post-capitalist age” in which “the basic economic resource—‘the means of production,’ to use the economist’s term—is no longer capital, nor natural resources . . . nor ‘labor.’ *It is and will be knowledge.* . . . The leading social groups of the knowledge society will be ‘knowledge workers.’ . . . Unlike the employees under Capitalism, they will own both the ‘means of production’ and the ‘tools of production’” (1993, 8).

In spite of their rhetorical differences, post-al left writers like Dyer-Witheford and corporate flunkies like Peter Drucker share the primary assumption that capitalism has entered a new mode

of accumulation, one that is based not on the exploitation of labor, but instead on the harvesting of knowledge. Capitalism, according to these arguments, is structured by a specific industrial relation between capital and labor that is subverted by the introduction of various new cyber technologies. We are witnessing in the development of the global economy a fundamental break from the past in which the boundaries between worker and owner, production and consumption, can no longer explain an economic system based on the circulation of ideas. Anthony Giddens, director of the London School of Economics, declares that with the advent of the information economy, there has been “a wholesale reinvention of the cultural perception of business and capitalism,” in which “even the poor resist being described as poor” (2000, viii–xi) because of the way in which, in a knowledge economy, anyone can come up with a new idea and, following this logic, go from being the janitor to becoming the CEO.

According to these arguments, what differentiates the New Economy from the old capitalism is the superseding of production by consumption as the locus of profit; both Drucker’s “knowledge workers” and Dyer-Witheford’s “students, consumers, shoppers and television watchers” are in the end consumers of ideas. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether or not capitalism has entered a new mode of accumulation in which “knowledge has become the principal force of production over the last few decades” (Lyotard 1993, 5), what remains is in fact a constitutive set of social relations that structure all social practices. This is because capitalism, at its root, is about the extraction of surplus value from the surplus labor of workers by owners. As many dot-com workers have unfortunately learned during the current economic recession, even if we accept for the moment the dominant argument that the primary concern of capital is the production of knowledge commodities such as software applications and commercial media, this does not change the class relation between those who own the means of production—the code, the computers, and the networks, in the case of the software industry—and those who own nothing but their labor. As Marx argues, what differentiates labor power,

defined as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being” (1996, 177), from all other commodities, is that it “not only produces its own value, but produces value over and above it” (219). In other words, labor power, unlike other commodities, is the source of surplus value because it alone produces value over and above itself. In a system in which the primary drive is the accumulation of profit, the purchasing of labor power by the owners from the workers who have nothing else to sell drives the system, and this relationship is not changed by the change in the mode of accumulation.

Capitalism is a dynamic system that is based on increasing profit at all costs, and, as Marx argues in *Capital I*, the drive to accumulate increasing amounts of profit requires constantly driving down the costs of production: “The starting-point of modern industry is, as we have shown, the revolution in the instruments of labour” (1996, 397). The role of technological advancement in capitalism is to lower the costs of production by reducing the time it takes to produce a commodity, while simultaneously driving down the cost of labor power both by expelling workers from the production process and by increasing the competition between workers through the introduction of redundancy. It is this relationship of exploitation that from the beginning makes capitalism a revolutionary system:

Modern Industry never looks upon and treats the existing form of a process as final. The technical basis of that industry is therefore revolutionary, while all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative. By means of machinery, chemical processes and other methods, it is continually causing changes not only in the technical basis of production, but also in the functions of the labourer, and in the social combinations of the labour-process. At the same time, it thereby also revolutionizes the division of labour within the society, and incessantly launches masses of capital and of workpeople from one branch of production to another. (489)

What is at stake in the constant revolutionizing of the means of production is that although at certain moments in the business

cycle capitalists are forced to introduce technological innovation as a means of securing market position, insofar as they rely on the exploitation of labor power to increase surplus value, a contradiction emerges between the need to introduce new technological advances that drive workers out of production and increase the rate of commodity production on the one hand and the ability of the capitalist to accumulate higher rates of profit on the other. Because surplus value represents the stolen labor power of workers, capital cannot replace labor with machinery without driving down the rate of profit. This relationship between capital and labor is ultimately at the base of transnational trade treaties such as NAFTA, MAI, and the recently passed Fast Track trade legislation in the United States, as well as the dramatic movement of industry from North to South since World War II. The fact is that cheap labor in the South is still more profitable to the capitalist than an “automatic” factory in the North. This is because the exploitation of human labor power—not machinery, no matter how automatic—is the sole source of corporate profits.

This same process of technological innovation and accumulation leads to a crisis of overproduction. As a result of the fact that productivity under capital is driven by profit and not by need, technological innovations that expand the productive force of industry result in the production of millions of commodities that cannot be sold. As the weight of unsold commodities grows, it causes a crisis not in one industry, but across the entire system as the need for raw materials, for investment, for new machinery grinds to a halt. The very process by which capitalism replaces living with dead labor to increase the mass of accumulated profits simultaneously drives down the general rate of profit as a whole, culminating in a crisis of overproduction (Marx 1998, 209–33). With the current crisis of overproduction, capital has once again entered a “vicious downward cycle.” That such a crisis can occur, in which the massive overproduction of goods happens alongside the fact that almost three billion people try to survive on less than two dollars a day, indicates the absurd anarchy of the production for profit that drives the capitalist system.

A materialist theory of technology explains why this crisis of overproduction is an inevitable consequence of capitalism. Marx writes:

The enormous power, inherent in the factory system, of expanding by jumps, and the dependence of that system on the markets of the world, necessarily beget feverish production, followed by the overfilling of the markets, whereupon contraction of the markets brings crippling of production. The life of modern industry becomes a series of periods of moderate activity, prosperity, overproduction, crisis and stagnation. (1996, 455)

What we are witnessing in the development of the cybereconomy, contrary to the arguments of the post-al Left and the corporate Right, is not the superseding of production, but rather the effect of tremendous advances in production. These advances have enabled the concentration and centralization of such massive amounts of productive force that millions of commodities can be produced in an increasingly shorter time; these developments have rendered hundreds of thousands of workers redundant. In the telecommunications market, for example, what began as a new industry with high profit margins and low production costs leading to monopoly profits becomes a developed industry with increasing competition that drives down costs, eliminates labor, and turns a high profit return into a falling rate. As long as the determining factor in developing new technologies remains the production of private profit, this “vicious downward cycle” will inevitably continue, with its wasted production of millions of commodities while millions of people lack access to adequate food, housing, health care, education, and clean water.

In fact, developing Marx’s argument that as the level of production increases “the law that surplus value does not arise from the labour power that has been replaced by the machinery, but from the labour power actually employed in working with the machinery, asserts itself” (1996, 409–10), Ernest Mandel provides a useful means of understanding why the labor theory of value explains how the crisis of a falling rate of profit has led, in part, to the growing importance of knowledge in the New Economy. Mandel argues

that what we are witnessing in the globalization of production is not the replacement of labor by knowledge, but rather the expansion of the role of technoscience, research, and development necessary for increasing the exploitation of labor and maintaining the accumulation of profit. He argues that one of the contradictions of contemporary capitalism is the fact that even monopolist transnational corporations, which have developed and concentrated productive forces at the cost of billions of dollars, are

never completely shielded from competition and hence always have an interest in perfecting and bringing a new product onto the market earlier and more massively than their competitors. In this sense, they are undoubtedly interested in expanding the research and development under their control. At the same time, however, in considering each expensive research project they must take into account the inherent risk not only that it may fail to result in any new marketable product at all, but also that a simultaneous innovation by a competitor may make it impossible to realize the anticipated super-profits [. . . which] compels them both to differentiate their research and, at the same time, for pure reasons of valorization of capital, to narrow their development. (1978, 257)

The consequence, in other words, is that the monopolization of industry requires increasing amounts of capital for research and development not as a substitution for labor, but rather as a means of ensuring the expansion of the productivity of labor and the reduction of the costs of production. In fact, contrary to the arguments of the postcapitalists, periods of increased technological development that result in the growth of the productive forces lead not to new development and growth, but to stagnation and decay precisely, as Mandel argues, because of the possible negative effects on profit. We witness, for example, this stagnation of the cyber economy in the collapse of the monopoly profits of the telecommunications industry, which has seen massive failures of profitability and layoffs in such giant firms as World-Com, Lucent Technologies, Nortel Networks, AT&T, and Qwest Communications International.

The cyber, however, does not only represent the objective developments at the level of production. As a theory of social relations, it is also part of the ideological superstructure that reflects these developments in the attempt to erase and rewrite in the cultural imaginary the growing contradiction of capitalist production. Against the increasing crisis of overproduction of commodities, the cyber elevates consumption to a revolutionary practice and thus trains a future labor force not to oppose capitalism from the “outside” of class struggle at the point of production, but from within—at the point of consumption. The cyber attempts to solve the crisis of capitalism by increasing consumption in a moment of overproduction. This reading of (post)capitalism, which Dyer-Witthford follows in the wake of the writings by autonomist Marxists in Italy—most commonly known in the United States through the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000)—has become the theoretical guide for the post-al Left in the North.

According to autonomist Marxism, capitalism is less a system of objective laws and economic exploitation than a fluid system of power. Drawing from Foucault’s theory of society as the contest of the “will to power” of competing forces in which power is theorized as “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” (1998, 377) above and superseding the capital/labor relation, autonomist social theory holds that in the cyber age the relationship between capital and labor has ceased being an exploitative one, in which capital extracts surplus value from the surplus labor of workers, and has become instead a political one, a reciprocal relation in which capital tenuously dominates labor for the sake of maintaining social privilege. So, while Dyer-Witthford declares that it is “clearly false to suggest that cybernetic systems entirely eliminate capital’s need for labor” (1999, 94), he also argues that we cannot understand the concepts of *capital*, *labor*, *production*, and *consumption* as advanced in the “old” Marxist theory. He writes, “without sacrificing the Marxist emphasis on class struggle [we must] admit important postmodern insights into the variegated and technologically mediated aspects such conflict assumes today” (166).

The “variegated and technologically mediated aspects” to which Dyer-Witthford refers are the fracturing and multiplying

of the anticapitalist forces that, according to autonomist Marxists, emerge in the technoscientific era of capital. Maurizio Lazzarato, in his essay “Immaterial Labor,” clarifies the basic premise of the autonomist theory of capitalism. Defining immaterial labor as “the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity,” he writes, “Immaterial labor finds itself at the crossroads (or rather it is the interface) of a new relationship between production and consumption” (1996, 132, 138). This “new relationship” is that of the new, postmaterial, technoscientific capital in which “consumption is no longer only the ‘realization’ of a product, but a real and proper social process” (141). More specifically, Lazzarato argues:

I do not believe that this new labor-power is merely functional to a new historical phase of capitalism and its processes of accumulation and reproduction. This labor-power is the product of a “silent revolution” taking place within the anthropological realities of work and within the reconfigurations of its meanings. Waged labor and the direct subjugation (to organization) no longer constitute the primary form of the contractual relationship between capitalist and worker. A polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of “intellectual worker” who is him- or herself an entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space. (140)

This movement, from a material theory of production to what Lazzarato calls an “aesthetic” theory of consumption (144), is echoed by Antonio Negri, in his now-foundational autonomist text *Marx beyond Marx* (1991). Negri argues that “the law of value” in which Marx theorized that profits produced by capitalism represent the stolen surplus labor of workers during production, is “an operation which is now only pure command, empty of any appearance, even minimal, of ‘economic rationality’” (16). Far from representing a system based upon exploitation, capitalism has now superseded profits and has become a system of flows of power, and as such open, fluid, and reversible. Negri goes on to declare that in terms of capitalism’s development, “a break has

been made, there is no denying it. The theory of value is worn to threads, as far as our struggles are concerned" (17). The core of this "aesthetic" theory of labor is the claim that the globalization of production and the expansive telecommunications and service industries that have necessarily developed in response to the needs of global capital call into existence a regime of social relations no longer based upon production and exploitation, but rather on consumption.

Lazzarato and Negri claim that immaterial labor represents the superseding of wage labor from within capitalism as an effect of capitalism's own drive to eliminate labor through the automation of production, turning both bourgeoisie and proletariat into contesting consumers. What emerges from the autonomist theory of the social as a series of reversible and fluid acts of consumption that defy the homogeneity of global capital is the idea that it is no longer possible to challenge the central logic of capitalism. Instead, workers are instructed to find and to celebrate the rare moments of "discontinuity," in which the ideology of capital and its interests seem to collide, as the only possibility for overcoming the alienation of commodity production. As Dyer-Witheford argues, "By informing production, capital seems to augment its powers of control. But it simultaneously stimulates capacities that threaten to escape its command and overspill into rivulets irrelevant to, or even subversive of, profit" (1999, 85).

The attempt to rearticulate the basic relation of capitalism into one of consumption and knowledge is to obscure the antagonistic relation between owners and workers, and replace it with a fuzzy concept of a new capitalism in which all become consumers, regardless of their class position. Dyer-Witheford's more "complex" theory of capitalism, in which "non-productive" actions such as the time spent as "students, consumers, shoppers, and television viewers" (80) are included on a par with the relations of production between owners and workers erases the fact that the meaning of each of these actions differs in accordance with the class position of the person undertaking them. It ignores the fact that the meaning of actions such as logging onto the Internet, shopping in the mall, or watching television is determined

by relations fixed at the point of production. Each of the acts of consumption outlined by Dyer-Witheford as being just as integral to production obscures the fact that going to school, to the store, to the Internet—all require the prior production of commodities to be purchased. The exploitation of labor that occurs prior to consumption is thus necessarily integral and natural to such actions. The fact that Bill Gates and the numerous outsourced workers who build and write the code Microsoft sells watch television or shop on the Internet does not erase the exploitative relationship of private ownership that exists between them.

Of course, as the crisis of overproduction shows, the line between the owners and the workers has not disappeared, but has become a point of heightened conflict. The effect of the theory of immaterial labor—the “kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (Lazzarato 1996, 132)—is to elevate moments of consumption over production, thereby presenting as “natural” the exploitative conditions in which production and consumption occur. By focusing on consumption, the theory of immaterial labor thus limits the usefulness of technological advances to the narrow boundaries of capitalist production. This theory posits an understanding of capitalism in which the struggle between capital and labor over control of the social resources is replaced with the negotiation of disparate forces that exceed class boundaries over the control of the means of representation. In this, the fundamental role of production in determining social relations and the revolutionizing of the means of production (i.e., technological advance) for the sole purpose of advancing corporate profits is eclipsed and is ignored as irrelevant. With the occlusion of the materiality of class struggle, what remains is a depoliticized struggle among consumers within an already “de-hierarchicalized” capitalism without classes. Thus Dyer-Witheford declares that developments in technology that have led to the universality of immaterial labor mean the “overflowing and surpassing [of] previous Marxist distinctions between base and superstructure, economics and culture” (222). On the basis of this reading of cybercapitalism, he calls for a new “fifth

international” formed by “a transnational connection of oppositional groupings that does not, like the four previous Socialist Internationals, rest on the hierarchical directives of a vanguard party, but rather arises from the transverse communications of multiplicitous movements” (153). In the guise of a radical theory of organization founded on resistant consumerism, Dyer-Witherford is actually proposing the construction of a cross-class alliance that erases the antagonism between capital and labor.

Much of what autonomist social theories term the *new labor* of knowledge and service work actually comprises work in the commercial sector—namely, the unproductive labor necessary for capital to reproduce the conditions of production and thus the conditions for exploiting the productive labor of other workers in the division of labor. By elevating the segment of the workforce that sells the commodities and manages the services necessary to prepare the workforce for another working day, autonomist social theories erase the fact that the existence of knowledge work is predicated on a social division of labor in which the primary intention is the production of commodities for exchange. Not only do autonomist theories of new labor obscure the exploitative relation of capital to labor, but they also act to divide the working class politically by strengthening the ideological antagonisms among workers. As Marx argues, the development of the service or knowledge industry does not supersede the antagonism between capital and labor at the core of capitalism because the role of this segment is to sell the products already produced in order to valorize the surplus labor of the producers as profit. Marx writes:

The commercial worker produces no surplus value directly . . . but adds to the capitalist’s income by helping him to reduce the cost of realizing surplus value, inasmuch as he performs partly unpaid labour. The commercial worker, in the strict sense of the term, belongs to the better-paid class of wage-workers—to those whose labour is classed as skilled and stands above the average worker. Yet the wage tends to fall, even in relation to average labour, with the advance of capitalist production. (1998, 299)

The purpose of the commercial industry is to come up with new ways to sell the products the capitalist owns and thus is an integral part of the process of commodity exchange. It cannot supersede production because, in the end, it has no role outside of the production of commodities. Much of the theory of the postindustrial economy is based on analysis of the knowledge production of the media industry, for example. The media industry is not in itself necessary, however, but serves as a means to sell televisions, computers, radios, palm pilots, CD players, and the like. The emergence of an entire transnational commercial industry points then not to the end of capitalism, but to the tremendous productive forces that are now shackled to the profit motive and continually require new ways to sell new commodities. In fact, the level of cross-ownership of transnational corporations, which not only own the factories that produce the technology but the media that play on it, demonstrates the structure of this relationship. And the dot.com crash exemplifies the relationship Marx identified: just as the stagnation of the global economy affects the computer industry, it necessarily affects those in telecommunications and others in the dependent service industry.

At the core of the autonomist theory of immaterial labor is the essential delinking of the logic of capitalist accumulation of profit and the forms in which this accumulation is accomplished. As I have argued, this delinking operates on two levels: on one level, autonomist Marxism posits the possibility of technological advances leading to new forms of global accumulation that fundamentally transform the underlying structure of capitalism from production to consumption. On another level, it maintains the possibility of resisting capital from within as a result of technological development, thus constructing the usefulness of machines solely in the terms of the market and reducing all modes of resistance to exploitation to those sanctioned by capital. Social antagonisms are relegated to the realm of consumption, and the fact that modes of consumption are always determined by the mode of production is erased, so bourgeois society is represented “as governed by eternal natural laws independent of history, and then *bourgeois*

relations are quietly substituted as irrefutable natural laws of society *in abstracto*" (Marx 1986, 25).

To argue that production is primary is not to deny that consumption has an essential role in the production process. The sale of commodities produced is necessary to ensure both the continuation of production as well as the realization of surplus value in the form of profit, and a crisis of overproduction, in which commodities remain unsold, is a direct threat to future corporate profits. However, consumption always comes after production and is determined by it. As Marx writes, if the commodity is not sold, or if it is sold at a loss, "the labourer has indeed been exploited, but his exploitation is not realised as such for the capitalist" (1998, 242–43). Failure or success in selling the commodity does not change the primary relation between capital and labor. Only when consumption is separated from production (thus obscuring the basic fact that the whole economic structure of capitalism is built upon the exploitation of labor for profit), can consumption be considered more important than production and can the emergence of a new capitalism superseding all previous social boundaries be posited.

Contrary to the corporate theory of autonomist Marxism advanced by Dyer-Witheford, Negri, and Lazzarato, the revolutionary understanding of technology is further explained by Lenin. Lenin writes that technology is determined by the social contradiction between labor and capital:

The effectiveness of labour is increased manifold by the use of machines; but the capitalist turns all this benefit against the worker: taking advantage of the fact that machines require less physical labour, he assigns women and children to them, and pays them less. Taking advantage of the fact that where machines are used far fewer workers are wanted, he throws them out of the factory in masses and then takes advantage of this unemployment to enslave the worker still further, to increase the working day, to deprive the worker of his night's rest and to turn him into a simple appendage to the machine. Unemployment, created by machinery and constantly on the increase, now makes the worker utterly

defenseless. His skill loses its worth, he is easily replaced by a plain unskilled labourer, who quickly becomes accustomed to the machine and gladly undertakes the job for lower wages. Any attempt to resist increased oppression by the capitalist leads to dismissal. On his own the worker is quite helpless against capital, and the machine threatens to crush him. (1972, 102)

In this passage, Lenin marks the tremendous potential of technology to transform the lives of working people: the reduction of necessary labor time, the increase in productivity, the expansion in scope and depth of social knowledge. He makes clear, however, that technology cannot develop under capitalism an autonomous existence from capitalism's fundamental laws, because the development of technology is integral to increasing private profits. These developments are used, not to free labor from the drudgery of work, but to isolate and atomize workers and reduce them, in the end, to a "simple appendage to the machine."

Dyer-Witheford's concluding "third way" proposal of a post-capitalist "commonwealth" based upon a guaranteed income, the "democratization" of the media, and the "decentralization" of communication technologies (1999, 193–210), while appearing to be a radical mode of resistance to the extreme commodification of contemporary life, is ultimately a code for the reformation of transnational capital from within, leaving its essential structures intact. This declaration of radical shopping has made post-al left writing very popular in the corporate press. Dyer-Witheford openly sides with movements that do not seek to transform the global structures of class exploitation, but instead operate as a "fine mist of international activism, composed of innumerable droplets of contact and communication, condensing in greater or lesser densities and accumulations, dispersing again, swirling into unexpected formations and filaments, blowing over and around the barriers dividing global workers" (157). This "fine mist" activism, based upon Guattari's call for "more individual, more singular, more dissensual forms of social activism" (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 183), positions the possibility of reorganizing production on the basis of need and not profit as the same as the homogenizing logic of capitalism.

Socialism, according to Dyer-Witheford, is a “catastrophic evolutionary detour” (12) in which “centralized state planning has been the alternative to the market” (206), while consumption, albeit in “ethical” ways, has emerged as the “authentic” mode of realizing individuality and freedom. The working class is given an empty theory of resistance that denies the necessity of transforming the fundamental relations of production and abolishing the conditions of exploitation in order to end worldwide epidemics of poverty, hunger, and disease. Class struggle is removed, and resistance is rewritten as a spontaneous theory of individual self-fashioning through consumption that mirrors the logic of wage labor in which workers are forced to come to the market as “free” and “autonomous” individuals to sell their labor power. *Autonomy*, in other words, is merely the code word for absence of control over the means of production. This fine mist is thus the reproduction of the alienation of labor by capital in theory. It speaks the language of transnational capital, which wants to tear down state barriers to trade, the circulation of labor, and the global flow of capital in the interest of consolidating a world market and expanding profits, while atomizing and isolating workers as a means of dividing any possible resistance.

In contrast to the autonomist theory of spontaneous action by singular individuals, which denies the possibility for a united, global agency based upon the collectivity of labor, Lenin’s position today would be that as long as workers are subject to capital and must sell their labor power, the only mode of effective resistance is the organization of the working class across all national, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual boundaries. He writes that

on his own the worker is helpless and defenseless against the capitalist who introduces machines. The worker has at all costs to seek means of resisting the capitalist, in order to defend himself. And he finds such means in *organization*. Helpless on his own, the worker becomes a force when organised with his comrades, and is enabled to fight the capitalist and resist his onslaught. (1972, 102–3)

I argue here, in opposition to the autonomist theory of consumption, which posits a new relationship between capital and labor that goes beyond exploitation, that there can be no reconciliation

between capital and labor regardless of the form the private accumulation of profit takes. The complete emancipation of labor can be achieved only when private ownership of the instruments of labor is abolished, and technology and other collectively produced social resources are used in the interests of all.

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#### NOTES

1. *Post-ality* is Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's revolutionary concept for those theorizations that posit a fundamental shift in capitalist relations such that capitalism has entered a "post-production, post-labor, post-ideology, post-white" and ultimately "post-capitalist" stage of symbolic exchange (1995, 1).

2. Marx here is quoting the last line of the sixth stanza of Friedrich Schiller's "Das Lied von der Glocke."

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## **Oil and War**

### **The Red Collective**

The U.S. war against Iraq demonstrates the complete brutality and violence of capitalism in its expansionist drive for profit.

Since 1991, the United States and Britain have led a relentless assault on the people of Iraq, using an economic blockade to deny food, medicine, and other resources to the Iraqi people that, along with an endless bombing campaign over two-thirds of the country, has left 500,000 dead and millions of others suffering from leukemia and other diseases resulting from the use of depleted uranium bombs on water-purification plants and agricultural land. Because of the sustained attack on a nation that had the highest standard of living in the Middle East before the first Gulf War, and continued to provide its citizens with free education and free health care up until the recent U.S. bombing, Iraq is now one of the poorest in the world. Almost half of the Iraqi population is under sixteen, and the UN reports that, because the majority of the population survives on food distributed by the Iraqi government, almost 80 percent of the population will be at immediate risk of hunger, famine, and malnutrition following the end of the war.

Revealing the utter barbarism of the imperialist cabal of Bush, Blair, and their corporate cronies, only after Iraq was disarmed and economically devastated did the United States begin its “shock and awe” campaign of sustained bombing of urban centers populated by millions of civilians. Despite the pronouncements

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by the Bush administration, and the wonderment of the television reporters who now operate as propaganda clerks of the State Department (including Peter Arnett, who, before being fired by NBC for “misjudging” the degree of media censorship in the U.S., excitedly declared from Baghdad that the images of bombs falling were “amazing” and “just like a movie”), this is not a war of “technological” wizardry and “precision” bombing. It is an armed mugging by the forces of capital of a nation that for twelve years has been systematically denied even the most basic defensive weapons. As Air Force Brigadier General William Looney declared in a swaggering 1996 interview in *Defense Weekly*: “They know we own their country. We own their airspace. We dictate the way they live and talk. And that’s what’s great about America right now” (quoted in Kamen 1996, A15).

But the current war against Iraq is not only a war on the people of Iraq but on the people of the world. It is a war led by U.S. transnational capital to gain control over the world economy and to ensure that the future of billions of people is decided in the interests of the U.S. owners. It is this understanding that is missing in the current debates over war in Iraq. Most commentaries have focused solely on the question of oil. While the control of oil as an important resource of production is key to understanding U.S. interests in the war, the dominant arguments—about whether or not this is a war for oil—miss the central point. What is at stake in the war is not oil as such but what oil represents in the imperialist race for competitive profits: control over the rate of exploitation of the world working class. The current war is a class war being fought in the interests of U.S. imperialism in order to extend its control over the rate of exploitation of the global labor force by gaining control of the future rate of economic growth of the South, the primary source of cheap labor for transnational capital.

The activist understanding of the issues is summarized in the slogan, “no blood for oil.” It centers on the idea that “Washington has [Saddam Hussein] in its gun sights because he is the chief opponent to U.S. control over the vast oil wealth of the Persian Gulf” (Dayaneni and Wing 2002). For the activist Left, the force

driving the war is the fact that Iraq has 112 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, control over which would increase the wealth of U.S. oil companies. This view is seconded by such mouthpieces of transnational capitalism as the *Economist*, which stated that in the event of war, “the big prize is control of the country’s oil reserves” (2002, 63).

The official line, of course, has always been that this is not a war for oil. In a series of talking points entitled “Myths to be Debunked,” distributed to the media at the beginning of March, the Bush administration declared “if all America was looking for was cheap oil, Washington could cut a deal with Iraq: that would be far easier than going to war.” And, as David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter, who has taken credit for creating the phrase “Axis of Evil,” argued in the *Daily Telegraph*:

America can already freely purchase all the oil it wants. There has not been a credible threat to access to oil supplies since the Arab embargo of 1973–74 and there is no credible threat to access today. Saddam wants to sell more oil, not less. And if conquest and occupation were necessary to obtain oil, why wouldn’t America attack an easier target than Iraq—Angola, for example? (2002)

What is common to all sides in the debate is that control of oil is the main issue at stake, a perspective that conceals the actual objectives of the war by representing oil—an object—as the source of wealth.

But objects—whether essential natural resources such as oil and water or manufactured commodities—do not produce wealth (and yield political power). Labor does. While nature provides a source of use values, it is labor power that turns them into social wealth. Thus, in the first instance, without the labor of thousands of workers to build the machines that locate, drill, ship, and process it, oil would remain an undiscovered and unused substance sitting idle in the ground. It is human labor power that enables oil to become a resource of production and, under capitalism, it is control over exploited labor power that turns oil, like all means of production, into a commodified source of private wealth.

It is only through the agency of labor, in short, that capitalist wealth—whether from oil or any other object—is produced. By equating oil with wealth, the dominant commentaries on the war from both the Right and the Left erase the issue of the exploitation of labor in the production of wealth and thus obscure the fact that the fundamental issue in the war on Iraq is not control over oil and oil profits; it is control over the world supply of surplus labor. By controlling the world's oil resources, the United States will be in a position to control the rate of economic growth in such nations as China, India, and Pakistan—nations heavily dependent on oil from the Middle East and the major suppliers of cheap labor to transnational capital today—and thus effectively gain control of the rate at which the workers of the South can be exploited. It will gain control, in other words, over the relation between that part of the working day in which workers produce value equal to their wages and the part in which they are engaged in surplus labor, the part in which the worker works for free, producing the surplus value that is the source of profit and accumulation of capital.

It is not a thing—oil—that determines the economic hegemony of capital and thus its political power, as evidenced by the fact that many of the nations with the largest oil reserves are among the poorest nations in the world and have been subject to brutal colonial and neocolonial occupation throughout their modern history. The economic dominance of the rich imperialist states comes from their global command over the exploited labor power—the surplus labor—of workers in all sectors of production. The struggle for the Iraqi oil reserves is an attempt by the United States to establish its decisive hegemony within this global system of exploitation.

Oil, in short, is a social relation. It represents the exploitative relation of private ownership of the world's resources and productive forces in the hands of a few while most people in the world are left in a subjugated state of dependence in which their ability to survive is determined by whether or not they can earn enough in wages to purchase the commodities their labor produces. The war on Iraq is about this relation. It is a war of the owners against the workers.

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## ABSTRACT

***The Red Collective, Special Issue: “Turning Culture Right-Side Up Again”***—This special issue of *Nature, Society, and Thought* is guest-edited by members of The Red Collective. The ten articles, dealing with areas of cultural studies, focus on the economic, political, and cultural methods used by the owners of the means of production to disguise their extraction of surplus value from the workers they employ. In doing so, they devise ever-new techniques for sowing ideological disorientation in the working class.

## ABREGE

***Le Collectif rouge, numéro spécial: «Remettre la culture dans le bon sens»***—Ce numéro spécial de *Nature, Society, and Thought* a été rédigé par des membres invités du Collectif rouge. Les dix articles concernant le domaine des études culturelles se concentrent sur les méthodes employées par les propriétaires des moyens de production pour déguiser leur extraction de valeur ajoutée aux dépens des ouvriers qu’ils emploient. Ainsi, ils trament des techniques toujours nouvelles dans le but de semer une confusion idéologique parmi la classe ouvrière.