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Twenty-five Theses on Philosophy in the Age of Finance Capital

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Repudiation of the present cultural morass presupposes sufficient involvement in it to feel itching in one's finger tips, so to speak, but at the same time the strength, drawn from this involvement, to dismiss it.

—THEODOR ADORNO, *Minima Moralia*

. . . shooting off with the speed of a rocket from A (where one is anyhow) to B (where everything is just the same) . . .

—MAX HORKHEIMER and THEODOR ADORNO,
“The Culture Industry”

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

“During long periods of history,” Walter Benjamin wrote, “the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence.”¹ One would expect no less of thought itself. It should come as no surprise to assert today that philosophy is historical through and through. This recognition of philosophy’s historicity is one of the great legacies of Marx’s thought. Once consciousness is linked to social being and the “ruling ideas” of an epoch are characterized as “nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas,”² it is only a willful bad faith that could lead one back into the slumber of ontology and metaphysics—taxonomic practices that mortal beings use to tally up the categories of immortality. A century and a half after *The German Ideology*, it is tempting to imagine that philosophy is no longer in need of such a stern reminder about the necessary material limits of its activity. Historical consciousness now reigns supreme in the academy in inverse proportion to the infertile toxic brownfields that characterize the postmodern mental landscape outside it. Bristling with endless qualifications and equipped with a map to the minefields of reductive thinking, critical philosophy today actively acknowledges its own contingency

and highlights its limits as proof of its active confrontation with categories that will always prove to be inadequate to their objects. What more could one want or expect? What other form could it take on the ruins of those grand theories diligently elaborated in multiple volumes of tortured prose? In light of the disappointments and general squalor of mental life in the age of finance capitalism, should we not see in the vanguard of contemporary theory evidence that for once thought has run ahead of its historical moment, preserving within it the kind of utopian possibilities once connected with art and the aesthetic?

Of course, such imagined ends betray their own bad faith. It is not hard to see how this vision of the philosophical enterprise reenacts its own version of historical development, one that is essentially the same as Kant's vision of the Enlightenment. The final dismantling of the great master narratives is itself a grand narrative—why else would people get excited about it? This kind of story of growth and development, of the unfolding of life from seed to oak tree, cannot help but reactivate the suspicions of critical theory, which, understanding itself to be a relentless critical nomad, expresses a permanent suspicion about beginnings (childhood) and endpoints (maturity), as well as of the established pathways by which one travels from one to other. Indeed, critical philosophies of all stripes—those wildly variegated and interpenetrated sets of concepts collectively referred to as “theory”—have assumed much of their identity from their suspicion of fixed categories and meditations on the eternal.

Philosophy today faces two challenges: first, it is not critical enough of its own processes and concepts; second, it is inadequate to the present.

The first claim can be grasped more easily than the second. Reading theory today, it is remarkable how many concepts have been transformed into entities that one can imagine snatching with tweezers and dropping in a jar for further study back in the lab. Too often theory challenges the equation between concepts and objects only to dead-end in the reassertion of some primal category like “desire,” “the subject,” “the political,” and so on. It is perhaps impossible to do otherwise; but in that case we should be aware of the limits of what we parade about as critical theory. As Nietzsche reminds us, there is nothing especially impressive about hiding something behind a bush only later to trumpet its discovery.

The question of the adequacy of thought to its age is a more difficult one to make sense of. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”³ If this is the case, why should we imagine that this is any different today? If philosophy even considers this question, it does so

ambivalently. On the one hand, Marx and Engels's famous formulation has been seen, especially in the case of contemporary societies, as far too reductive. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, "the body of intellectual and imaginative work which each generation receives as its traditional culture is always, and necessarily, something more than the product of a single class."⁴ Nor can dominant thought be thought of as uniformly of the moment; ideology is perpetually disturbed by residual and emergent forms that are inevitably mixed into the stew. As Adorno expressed it so beautifully in *Negative Dialectics*, "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."⁵ The emergent, having failed to merge into the dominant, persists as residual. But if almost no one has taken up Adorno's challenge—to inhabit the residual as a critique of the actual—it is because genuinely critical possibilities of theoretical thinking are often assumed to be engendered automatically by the intimate epistemological interference imposed by the heterogeneity that characterizes modernity. It is as though the acknowledgment that there is no pure, homogenous, monolithic ideology necessarily implied that ideology contained its own critique.

On the other hand, the professoriate is fond of pointing out that critical thought today is pretty much an accident waiting to happen, not only in the "culture at large" but within the academy itself. For instance, Masao Miyoshi has claimed that "the current academic preoccupation with 'post-coloniality' and multiculturalism looks suspiciously like another alibi to conceal the actuality of global politics."⁶ He is hardly alone in making such claims. Gayatri Spivak opens her appraisal of contemporary thought by stating straight out that "Postcolonial studies, unwittingly commemorating a lost object, can become an alibi unless it is placed within a general frame."⁷ There is no point in rehearsing the same kinds of criticisms that have been leveled at postmodernism, deconstruction, Western Marxism, and so on. At one point or another, all of them have been accused of collaborating unwittingly with the Man. In this case, "critical" thought is in fact precisely adequate to its moment, just not in the way it imagines itself to be. It reiterates, no doubt in sublimated or misrecognized form, accepted social structures and political presumptions—effectively canceling out real critical reflection. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have pointed out in *Empire*—Alain Badiou has made this point more acerbically—"the post-modernist politics of difference not only is ineffective against but can even coincide with and support the functions and practices" of global capitalism as it exists today.⁸

But if academic “critical theory” appears on this perspective as little more than a highly elaborated version of contemporary capitalism’s spontaneous philosophy, at the very most its vanguard wing, then the former proposition—that an adequate theory of the present can be discovered in the culture at large, reconstructed from the sheer heterogeneity of agendas and the interference of the residual and the emergent—is an even less satisfactory position to adopt. Philosophy’s critical power exists because it is, in fact, inadequate to, not the same as the main substance of the age. Generally, as Hegel was pleased to remind us, philosophy belongs to the residual, always lagging behind—even if contemporary theory has always been more likely to claim for itself a position in the emergent. In this context it is useful to remember that odd moment of self-reflection in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where Horkheimer and Adorno pause to claim that their critique of the total system can emerge only because they just happen to occupy the interstice between the end of classical German philosophy and the burgeoning of American mass culture. It is only because the former is radically incommensurate with the latter that Horkheimer and Adorno could hate both of them properly. But what this tends to mean is that philosophy is in fact unable to take up the present adequately. We might, then, possess a critical philosophy after all (or even a whole slew of them, each with its array of anthologies and journals), but it is a philosophy of the city, the pedestrian, and urban public space, and not of the freeway, the drive-through and the swirl of suburban crescents. (The old urban downtown revived as a simulacrum of its former self does not bring the social world back in line with this thought, but instead leaves it yet a further step behind.) This is why this critical philosophy retains a romantic fascination with Benjamin’s arcades and can treat Las Vegas or pseudourban enclave only with horror.

The question that we want to pose here is: what would be a philosophy adequate to the age of globalization, an age dominated by finance capital? But instead of indulging in the kind of definitional exercise that might now be expected (as if anyone wants to read yet another survey of the modalities of globalization—local and global, the end of the nation and its continuation, the production of antinomies out of every one of the concepts that social scientists have mistaken for the structure of life itself in Western modernity), we want to throw out another possibility. The task facing philosophy today is to examine its filiations to its most hallowed concepts and to consider anew their productivity within a new frame of reference—one, for instance, in which Europe is no longer the leading edge of world history. Easy to say, harder to think.

Unexpectedly, the result of this task might be to see old concepts as more productive than new ones, which suffer not merely from the fact that they are inevitably expressions of the general conditions of possibility of the present moment, but also because of the way in which the eternal production of the new is linked more strongly than ever to the basic drive of capitalism. The concrete meaning of any concept—what it is able to do as opposed to what it can be said to signify—depends decisively on the world in which it finds itself. And indeed, the last twenty years have seen the political significance of whole fields of concepts silently switch valences—often unnoticed by those who use them—as though an unexplained flip-flop of the earth’s magnetic field had taken place at the level of the concept. Whatever its utopian origins, the idea of the State has seemed since Marx to be a repressive one, fundamentally the tool and right hand of Capital. But now, with post-cold war mutations in the global market, the State is suddenly seen by many on the Left as a potential bulwark against the predations of multinational capital. Transgression has long been transformed into a shock value whose primary purpose is to move units, not to disturb social limits. The Universal, in the name of which an oppressive particularity came to dominate the globe, suddenly seems the last bastion against a neoliberal world order that is happy enough to maintain differences (if only of wages, working conditions, and marketing parameters) as long as they are subsumed without resistance within the global market. A notion of subjective authenticity that had seemed to justify the worst sort of complacent self-privilege—not to mention the scabrous possibilities of ethnic and racial authenticity—tempts us once again with the offer of protection against the most corrosive and cynical ironies of commodity culture. The aesthetic, which was so plainly the property and instrument of an elite defending its prerogatives, may yet turn out to be the last subjective vestige of utopian possibility. Totality, which was surely an alibi for a will to power, may be our only tool for grasping the new functioning of global Capital. And History itself, which had been exposed as the master trope of nineteenth-century racist ideology, now seems to be a powerful weapon against an ideology of the continual present.

All of these statements could of course be taken as profoundly conservative ones; to utter any of them without irony would invite a swift rap on the knuckles with the ruler of critical-theoretical thought. (It is good to remember that all genuinely historical thinking is ironic through and through, setting up truth only to turn it on its head the next moment.) In a lapsarian mode, this would be globalization as imagined by John Gray or

Samuel Huntington—the decline and necessary return of tradition and of “values,” an essentially conservative stance. In a triumphalist pose, some of these formulations could take on the aspect of globalization as imagined by Francis Fukuyama or Thomas Friedman—global Americanism without apologies or tears. And, insofar as the philosophical categories invoked are those of Western modernity, this pose is repeated on the left in the kinder, gentler ideas of cosmopolitan governance elaborated variously by David Held, Richard Falk, and Ulrich Beck. In light of these positions, it might seem that taking a genuinely critical view of globalization necessitates the adoption of a narrative of cultural, social, or political apocalypse: super-consumerism, globally dispersed; hypercapitalism, more theoretically innovative than anything coming out of the factories of conceptual innovation called graduate schools; monstrous pleasures (leading to social banality) made possible only by monstrous exploitation (leading to social collapse)—all of which can be sketched in minute detail, with great epistemological care not to simplify things for the sake of polemics, but about which, alas, nothing can be done. (Or almost nothing. One can say: Obama gave me hope and confidence that the right gesture has been made.)

Instead of adopting the comfortable (and, as Derrida reminded us, ultimately conservative) space of apocalypse, we propose to recapture conceptual territory lost to both conservative and cosmopolitan narratives of globalization, to develop a way of thinking about the actual without resorting to ambivalence or despair. In doing so, one always flirts with danger. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff point to the troubling resurgence of the concept of “civil society” at the present moment. “During inhospitable times,” they claim, civil society “reanimates the optimistic spirit of modernity, providing scholars, public figures, poets, and ordinary people alike a language with which to talk about democracy, moral community, justice, and populist politics.”⁹ So who could object to its appearance at this profoundly asocial moment? As Comaroff and Comaroff point out, civil society assumes in its reappearance much the same ideological function it played when it first emerged in the late eighteenth century:

Amidst populist moral panics, mass-mediated alienation, crises of representation, and scholarly perplexity, Civil Society, in its Second Coming, once more becomes especially “good to think,” to signify with, to act upon. The less substance it has, the emptier its referents, the more this is so; which is why its very polyvalence, its ineluctable unfixability, is intrinsic to its power as panacea. It is the ultimate magic bullet in the Age of Millennial Capitalism.

For it promises to conjure up the most fundamental thing of all: a meaningful social existence.¹⁰

A meaningful social existence: this is the goal, after all. It could be a long march.

TWENTY-FIVE THESES ON PHILOSOPHY IN THE
AGE OF FINANCE CAPITALISM

Nothing human is alien to me. Everything should be doubted.

—KARL MARX

We present here a set of theses that might help to imagine the role and scope of philosophy in the age of finance capitalism. The sources of these theses are as eclectic as a music collection: they bear with them the traces of broken relationships, misdirected enthusiasms, the inevitable, short-lived fascination with the new, the enduring influence of old favorites that one cannot get past (about a final category—“things that sounded good drunk”—we’ll say no more). These theses should not be taken as prescriptive. They might be read in the light of Friedrich Schlegel’s conception of his philosophical fragments, as scraps or remnants of a total system that could never really exist.

Fredric Jameson has described his own critical practice as a “translation mechanism,” a theoretical machine that makes it possible to convert other discourses into the central political problematic that animates Marxism.¹¹ We conceive these theses in much the same spirit: as grasping toward a mediating code rather than presenting a set of truth-claims. The utility of these theses will thus be determined by their ability to help produce a philosophy politically rather than conceptually adequate to finance capitalism—a philosophy that takes up the political challenge of the present without thereby failing to become anything more than an expression of (an adequation of) the dynamism of finance capitalism itself.

1

A theft.—Relativism is the dialectic for idiots.

2

Hegel is dead.—One is always coming up against reminders that we have “moved beyond” teleological, Eurocentric Hegel. Sometimes these reminders come in the imperative. But how do we know something is beyond

something else, rather than behind it or beside it, above it or below it, without reference to a vanishing point? And isn't the presumption of a vanishing point in time what we call teleology? Never mind: teleology and Eurocentrism—the dominion of the Same—are bad ideas and they should be avoided. Hegel, bless his eighteenth-century soul, didn't always manage to do so. But why this fixation on Hegel? Let us rather say that the method he invented, but which even he did not always fully understand, has nothing to do with these. Anyone who can muster the strength to read Hegel with both sympathy and skepticism—in other words, to read Hegel like we read everyone else—can see that teleology is the thinnest veneer, even if diligently applied, a last-ditch attempt to save the dialectic from its own deepest implication: the perpetual deferral of utopia, the impossibility of recuperating contradiction once and for all. Far from being a philosophy of the Same, the dialectic elevates antagonism into an ontology, and in so doing turns the very fiber of being into a tissue of fissures, contradictions, frustration, and carnage. The violence of this gesture—visible, above all, in Hegel's brutal contempt for Kant and the often deadpan irony brought to bear on anything that resembles a unitary conception of Being—is lost on us today, due in no small part to Hegel's own rhetoric. But like those Victorian novels where social upheaval is prevented how? by staging a marriage!—the flimsiness of the ultimate reconciliation gives the clue to its falsity. As with the “cosmological constant”—which Einstein briefly introduced into general relativity to silence what his own theory said about the history of the universe—so with teleology: the dialectic gets along better without it. It has been said that every competent student of physics today knows far more about general relativity than Einstein ever did. Perhaps we are in a position to understand the dialectic better than Hegel.

3

American Hegelians.—Critical common sense in North America still gets itself worked up into a lather about the evils of the dialectic. But even during the heyday of the most recent orthodoxy, it wasn't always easy to see what it was fighting against. Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, the dialectic meant Kojève, or Sartre, or Stalinist pseudophilosophy. Enemies worth fighting! But we literal-minded North Americans largely missed the point and developed a hatred for a Hegelian orthodoxy that we never really experienced. Who were the American Hegelians? There were some—not in the last century, but in the one before that. One ran a shoe factory and lived for a time with the Creek in Oklahoma. Another was a superintendent of

schools and believed the dialectic could be used to show that history would end in St. Louis, Missouri. These were the American Hegelians. And then there's Francis Fukuyama—another Midwesterner, by the way. So what's the panic? See thesis #2.

4

A bad penny for your thoughts.—The best critics of the dialectic are practical dialecticians. As for the rest of us, we must beware lest we find ourselves, in our relation to thought, in the position of Milton's Abdiel, rushing to God with his discovery, only to find "Already known what he for news had thought/To have reported."

5

As easy as 1, 2, 3.—The thought of the One goes around creating an awful mess, but it's not terribly common among metropolitan intellectuals. Call it fundamentalism, call it narrow nationalism, call it ethnic chauvinism—or call it the philosophy of Being: the idea is that totality should conform to a single rule. The thought of the Three effectively means the thought of infinity; it is always perfectly correct—and perfectly banal. Multiplicity is easy to find, Difference is indeed everywhere—and very useful, too, for playing whack-a-mole with the thought of the One. But a concept as universal as Difference necessarily lacks all specificity. It is empty as to content. How, then, without content, can there be any difference? Are we not back to the thought of the One? This is not mere logic chopping. The point is not that there is no difference between the Same and the Different; that would be absurd. Rather, it is that they share a Ground—that every mere difference exists by virtue of a field that stamps it with the imprint of the Same. The most innovative thinker of the Three is Alain Badiou, who adds it to the thought of the Zero, and in so doing produces, in the antagonism between Situation and Void, a brilliant version of the thought of the Two.

So what is the thought of the Two, the structuring antagonism? Here's an ontological version of it. We all know that the subject's object doesn't coincide with that same object in itself because if it did, the subject would be God. In other words, knowledge is imperfect. But here's the part that's easy to forget: the subject is not a fool, and knows this. The "object in itself," then, is also the subject's object. Both are real; the object is not, so to speak, simultaneous with itself. It is split, not between what is known of it and what is beyond knowledge, but between the object that exists for us

and the object that exists (for us) independently of us. But if the subject knows the same object in two different and incompatible ways, then neither is the subject simultaneous with itself. This should make it clear that the subject-object split is misnamed. The split is within the object itself—or if you prefer, within the subject. This restlessness within the object (or the subject) is called History.

The choice among these three options—or is it two?—is not trivial.

6

Three classes or two?—The existence of classes in our age is not a factual question but a political one. Nobody will deny that wealth is distributed unevenly. Those who want to do something about this live in a world that consists of two strata, the poorer and larger of which must struggle against the domination of the richer and smaller. Those who benefit, or think they benefit, from the status quo live in a world with three classes or, what is the same thing, with none, because the notion of the “middle class” can encompass everyone who does not belong purely to Labor or Capital in the classical sense—which is to say virtually everyone. The question is not whether, empirically, there are two classes or three or a thousand or none. The question is rather: is there class antagonism, or isn’t there? Here, the distinction between the descriptive and the political—perhaps always a spurious distinction—disappears.

7

More haste, less speed.—Though it belongs to a different era, *Minima Moralia* is a handbook for conducting philosophy in the age of finance capitalism. One cannot avoid reflecting on the temptations and limitations of bourgeois intellectual thought, and indeed, of the temptations of reflecting on these temptations. The concept of “reflexive modernity” lately championed in the social scientists by Ulrich Beck and the architect of the Third Way, Anthony Giddens, seems to represent an advance over a modernity that has no prefacing adjective. But just as being against capitalism doesn’t imply that one is a socialist, so being reflexive doesn’t mean the problems of modernity are magically solved. Adorno reminds us again and again of the institutional settings out of which thought grows, and the constraints and expectations these settings produce. “Since there are no longer, for the intellectual, any given categories, even cultural, and bustle endangers concentration with a thousand claims, the effort of producing something in some measure worthwhile is now so great as to be beyond almost everybody.”¹²

Is it possible that Totality has been rejected not because it is specious or Eurocentric, but because we think it takes too much time? It might as well be admitted: far from having been slowly co-opted by a shift from a university of culture to a university of excellence, as Bill Readings suggests, intellectual labor is the very model for production in the age of finance capital. Long before high-tech firms plopped pool tables down in the middle of their high-ceilinged, reconverted factory buildings, the professoriate was working twelve-hour flex-time days on gothic campuses and hanging out at the faculty club.

As for us: guilty as charged. The lesson here is to leave behind even the lingering idea of intellectual purity vis-à-vis the contaminated state of the rest of the world. And to think with less speed, but more urgency.

8

Aura after aura.—There is no longer anything threatening or dangerous about Walter Benjamin's reflections on the significance of mechanical reproduction for "a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery."¹³ It is often forgotten that Benjamin positions his reflections as coming at the end of a fifty-year process of social transformation that was only beginning to be expressed symptomatically in culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Benjamin's work on mechanical reproduction is thus belated; indeed, Benjamin was writing at the dawn of the age of electronic circulation, an age that Debord (also belatedly) sketched in *Society of the Spectacle*.

What kinds of things are born in and destroyed by electronic circulation? It would be wrong to suggest that this is a question that no one has yet taken up. However, it seems to us that when it has been addressed, the question is taken too literally. The attempt to think about the social significance of images and visibility at the present time seems to be stuck in the to-and-fro of the epistemologies of idealism. The problem of mediation has not got beyond certain very basic notions in Hegel, perhaps because Hegel is not to be got beyond. Whatever the case, contemporary thought has tended to conceive the history of representation as a very undialectical intensification of a more or less eternal dynamic.

Ours is an age that imagines the visual to have a specific and exceptional force and power. The idea of American cultural imperialism (itself a stand-in for globalization) is often imagined as synonymous with the spread of the visual signs emanating from the United States: advertising, the design of consumer packaging, Hollywood. Nevertheless, our theories of electronic

circulation amount to undertheorized ideas about cultural diffusion (any visual image will expand to fill the existing global space), osmosis (it seeps into you), and contamination (it poisons you). More needs to be said.

9

The world is not legible, but audible.—As for the other side of global culture, the flow of musical form across the surface of the globe, things look even less promising. Both disciplinary musicology and cultural studies approaches to music are—somebody has to say it—stupidly empirical in the absence of any sort of remotely adequate theory of the object. But music is an activity by means of which bodies are synchronized into a social body, and a genuine theory of music may one day be able to do more to explain the modalities of global culture than any theory of the image. The global trajectory of musical forms, subterranean and unpredictable compared with the colonization of the world by the Image, may be the very substance in which new social relationships are registered. The job of theory, in that case, would be to cognize (*interpret* does not seem quite the right word) the noncognitive (*unconscious* does not seem quite the right word) performance of musical being-in-the-world. Could it be, as Jacques Attali proposed, that “the world . . . is not legible, but audible”?¹⁴ Unfortunately, Attali’s thesis remains in the realm of science fiction: Music predicts the future! The missing term that would make this intelligible is desire. Can we say more reasonably that music embodies a social desire? Sometimes this desire dies and nothing is born. But if the desire is realized in social form, the musical form that nurtured it appears prescient.

10

Nobody knows, everyone is in the know.—Simultaneously, two contradictory theses about that most alien of creatures, the mass, have been emerging in globalization. On the one hand, there is a sense that globalization institutes an era in which, belatedly, mass culture critiques hit their mark. Now that global media monopolies have anxiously consolidated their hold on every aspect of leisure, we can safely skip over the more optimistic pronouncements of some theorists of mass culture and go straight to Horkheimer and Adorno: “Fun is a medicinal bath.”¹⁵ On the other hand, globalization is also the era of the end of ideology and of the universality of cynical reason (in Žižek’s famous formulation, “they know what they are doing but they are doing it anyway”). What philosophy in the age of finance capitalism needs to explain is how both of these phenomena can not only

occur together, but are in fact also produced out of the same historical conditions of possibility (and contradiction). Elsewhere Žižek writes that “a direct reference to extra-ideological coercion (of the market, for example) is an ideological gesture *par excellence*: the market and (mass) media are dialectically interconnected.”¹⁶ In other words, whatever explanation one produces must come from the inside rather than the outside. It is not only, as Hardt and Negri suggest, that the outside has disappeared: for philosophy, it was always a mistake to conceive of an outside. But that’s history for you.

11

The eclipse of so-called tradition.—For Gramsci, “traditional” intellectuals are connected to one another across time. Because “traditional intellectuals experience through an ‘*esprit de corps*’ their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification, they put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group.”¹⁷ It is this simultaneous autonomy vis-à-vis the present and filiation to the past that still fires the imagination of critical theorists, even though we are now suspicious of both this separation and this connection. But what if we imagined ourselves first and foremost as “organic” intellectuals? Shouldn’t we more properly see ourselves as part of that strata of intellectuals that, especially in the age of finance capitalism, give contemporary capital “homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields?”¹⁸ The exemplary organic intellectual in the age of factories and production is the engineer. Like it or not, the exemplary organic intellectuals in the age of finance capitalism are intellectuals and cultural workers—otherwise known as “content providers.”

12

Ex nihilo.—You can’t start from scratch. If the unruly spirit of Adorno must energize one part of philosophy in the age of finance capitalism, the caution of Raymond Williams should animate the other. The technological euphoria that pervades the official discourses of finance capitalism all too often finds its equivalent in the enthusiasm of theory for all manner of technotheries (from Debord’s spectacle to Haraway’s cyborgs) that contemplate a present that has made an absolute break with the past. Williams reminds us that things are far messier than that. Every social formation is the product of more than a single class, and the product of more than a single age. Academics who theorize the present in the manner of science

fiction films (the ones that imagine the future as so absolutely future that not even the practice of eating real food remains) have a predilection for nineteenth-century houses.

It is an open question whether futurity can be positively conceived at all. The future is no more than a lack in the present. As the Mozambiquan writer Mia Couto puts it in his story “Os mastros do Paralém” (“The Flags of Beyondward”), “o destino de um sol é nunca ser olhado”: the destiny of a sun is never to be beheld.¹⁹ Positive visions of the future like the cyberutopias of our own very recent past or the popular futurisms of the 1950s—or for that matter Plato’s *Republic*—cannot think the future; they can only rearticulate the actual in futuristic form.

13

Without a base.—The base/superstructure model has had a rough ride since it was taken all too literally by those Marxists who followed Marx. By now, everyone agrees that what is fundamentally missing from this model is, as Williams has said, “any adequate recognition of the indissoluble connections between material production, political and cultural institutions and activity, and consciousness.”²⁰ Paulin Hountondji and others have described the ways in which the cultural is finally collapsed into the economic, and the economic into the cultural, in such a manner that one must go beyond what is implied in Williams’s criticism. There needs to be a whole new model of causality in the age of finance capitalism because one of the things that distinguishes this period from all others is that it no longer makes sense to comprehend the social totality through the lens of even a highly developed and complicated idea of base/superstructure. John Tomlinson writes that

the complexity of the linkages established by globalization extends to phenomena which social scientists have labored to separate out into the categories in which we now, familiarly, break down human life: the economic, the political, the social, the interpersonal, the technological, the environmental, the cultural and so forth. Globalization arguably confounds such taxonomy.²¹

What this means is that we have to take seriously the fact that material explanations may require increasing reference to immaterial forces and entities.

At any rate, one need not be ashamed to maintain that, precisely to the extent—not necessarily great—that humanity controls its own destiny, any

intervention in history's course has to take place at the level of thought. This is not the same as idealism. No doubt an infinity of determinations come before thought; no doubt, even, the truth of thought lies outside itself. But if nothing can happen until it becomes possible, possibility cannot be understood in a purely materialist way. Conception, too, is a condition of possibility.

14

We refute us thus.—Every materialism is vulgar, ripe with unexamined presuppositions to be sneered at by any philosopher who happens to pass by. Every philosophy is an idealism susceptible to some version of Johnson's boot. What if both these statements are true? Perhaps then the only way out is to occupy the antagonism between them: not by refuting one to champion the other, but rather by engaging in the intimate and perpetual struggle against one's own idealism. How many people have tried this? We can think of one, anyway.

15

Worstward ho!—Words like *We* and *Ours* embolden polemics such as these. Fear not: we imagine neither a universal subject nor a unitary community. But we also refuse to imagine a "West" that has long founded not only the unreflective "we"s and "our"s of the Eurocentric academy, but also their critique. Indeed, we assert that there is no West, there is no Westernization; for that matter, there is no modernity or modernization. There is Capital, and there is its limit, as expressed both in its internal contradictions and in active resistance to it (which is also, in a different way, internal). There is therefore no such thing as multiculturalism. The instant something becomes a culture—the moment that it ceases to be a world—it belongs to Capital or, what is more rare, resistance to Capital. What we call the "West" names this culturalizing machine, an aspect of Capital. Perhaps especially, of capitalism now.

16

Capitalism always comes from elsewhere.—It is well known that the disequilibrium intrinsic to the function of capital can be kept under control only by the expansion of capital itself: as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*, "the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome."²² This is from the perspective of Capital. But it should not be thought that any place is

originally capitalist and therefore free from the encroachment of capital. From any human perspective, Capital is always encroaching. The privatization of government, the corporatization of the arts, of higher education, of sports, of heretofore unrationalized industries like cattle ranching, continues in the dominant countries today a process that has gone by many names, among them *colonialism* yesterday, and *enclosure* before that.

17

Capitalism is indigenous everywhere.—Marx's pages in the *Grundrisse* on "precapitalist" modes of production, problematic though they are in so many respects, are important for suggesting that every social formation tends to produce inequalities that can easily give rise to a pool of free labor—a suggestion, it should be noted, that is corroborated by any number of fictional narratives of the colonial encounter. Capitalism is not simply another, particularly voracious, social formation, but rather, as Deleuze and Guattari claimed in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), the specific nightmare of every social formation, the secret possibility, always repressed, of recoding existing social inequalities as the capital–labor relation. To confuse "Capitalism" with the "West" is to elevate the latter, a merely heuristic category, to a causal level where it has no place.

18

Ex hybridis, libertinis servisque conscripserat.—It is finally recognized that hybridity, one of the dominant terms of the end of the last century, presupposed its opposite. This incoherence cannot be removed simply by asserting, as the most advanced thinkers of hybridity did, that hybridity goes "all the way down," that the essence that inheres in the concept can be deferred infinitely, any more than the fable to which this phrase refers can explain the suspension of the earth in space by resting it on an infinite series of turtles. At some point both theories presuppose a ground. If hybridity really went all the way down, it would annihilate itself as a concept. This is not to argue for authenticity; indeed, if by *hybridity* one means simply "lack of essence," it does indeed go all the way down. But in order to maintain its distinctness as a concept, hybridity must also mean a "combination of essences." There is no way out of this contradiction except to return the word to its origins in a class distinction. In Latin, *hibrida* refers to the child of slave and freeborn. *Hybridity*, then, would come to refer to something like the complicity of homologous class fractions in dominant and dominated regions of the globe. But no doubt we have better words for this.

19

Same difference.—It is becoming clear that the hegemonic concept of Difference is at one and the same time the most universal and (therefore) the most empty concept, virtually synonymous with Being because both name the very medium of experience. In fact it is Difference (as slogan and as concept), not Totality, that reduces the complexity of the world to the monotonous Same, because the truly different (that is, what refuses to be seen as merely different—what goes, for example, by ideological names such as *totalitarianism*, *fundamentalism*, *communism*, and *tribalism*) is excluded from the field of difference. The primacy of “difference” in fact outlines an identity—the unacknowledged frame of the monoculture, global capitalism.

20

Fear of error or fear of truth?—A position of permanent critique can itself become yet another kind of metaphysics. Suspicion about the strategic function of the signified, for example, is a powerful demystifying tool, but in its chronic form, it produces a delimitation of the domain of truth more crippling than any naïveté.

21

The good, the bad, and the ugly; or, the baby and the bathwater.—It has been said that the essence of liberalism is a facile separation of the good from the bad, as though systems—economic, philosophical, whatever—could be simply carved up and the undesirable elements discarded: Competition is good but poverty is bad, so let’s just get rid of poverty (while retaining the dynamic that sustains it); Marx is good but revolution is bad, so let’s forget about revolution (while educating undergraduates in the poetry of Capital). Totality, incidentally, is the name for the rejection of this tendency, which is as common as ever—it is virtually the editorial policy of the *New York Times*—but a seemingly contrary tendency is equally insidious. This is to conflate a philosophical concept not with its dialectically necessary other but with an ideological cognate. Utopia is a case in point: the construction of utopias is a transparently ideological operation, but the notion of utopia—that is, the reservation within thought of an horizon that is not merely the present—is essential to any genuine politics. Indeed, the failure to think utopia in the strong sense leads directly to utopia in the first sense—in particular, to the utopia (never called that) of a market without poverty.

This corresponds to Hegel's "bad infinity" of infinite approximation as opposed to the properly infinite judgment. The same goes for Totality, the denigration of which in current thought serves to discredit the dialectic by associating it with the thematics of the eradication of difference, with which it has nothing in common.

22

And the truth shall set you free.—"In any case, the death of metaphysics or the overcoming of philosophy has never been a problem for us: it is just tiresome, idle chatter. Today it is said that systems are bankrupt, but it is only the concept of system that has changed. So long as there is a time and a place for creating concepts, the operation that undertakes this will always be called philosophy, or will be indistinguishable from philosophy, even if it is called something else."²³ This is true, and yet Deleuze and Guattari's description of this ceaseless activity of invention called philosophy can't help but send the wrong message in an age that has grown accustomed to the language of invention—inventing communities, inventing identities, inventing ideas . . . hey, no problem! But the generation of concepts does not occur willy-nilly. If philosophy's truth originates outside itself (as Lenin taught us), so does it finally reside. The real truth of all thinking, its effective truth, is of a fundamentally different order than the truth it claims for itself. In Christian allegory, the anagogic Truth that it seeks is only an alibi for its real truth, which is the production of faith and a community of believers. So too with thought. If the intellectual wants to change the world, so much the better. But here there are no shortcuts; Saint Augustine could not just order his congregation to believe. There are other, perhaps better, ways to change the world. But for the intellectual, however naive it may seem, the only path is responsibility to Truth.

23

What is to be done?—This is the question that is not being asked today. Let us call one possible position the politics of immanence. Better yet, let us call it Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. There is to be no revolution, certainly no Party; the world to come will arrive through a plurality of struggles that, taken as a whole, express the desire of the multitude. What desire? The desire that was so effortlessly co-opted during the cold war by high wages in the first world and (relatively) generous development aid in the third? Or the desire that, after the disintegration of actually existing socialism, exists only to be brutally crushed in the name of the Market? For

the secret of the story of the immanent desire of the multitude is that it quietly relied on a prior transcendent revolution. Once the revolution (or at least its vestige) disappears as Capital's threat and horizon, the desire of the multitude has no recourse. And surely we do not need to be reminded that in the wrong circumstances the utopian desire of the multitude can be channeled toward the most obscene ends. The other position might be called the politics of transcendence; or better yet Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. There is to be a revolution, even a revolutionary party, but revolution is fundamentally a decision, a risky experiment never guaranteed to succeed, and therefore an untheorizable particularity. Yes, yes, yes—and a resounding no. Lenin had a theory of revolution, a very precise understanding of the historical conjuncture in which revolution was a possible decision. But our situation, in which no merely national revolution will have much significance (the dilemmas faced by the few national governments genuinely on the Left are evidence enough of this), is immeasurably more complex than Lenin's. We remember Lenin because his revolution succeeded. How many failed? The potential cost of not asking what is to be done is a period of bloody and ineffective rebellions, some of them deeply reactionary. Neither is invoking something like Seattle much help; the protests against our current mode of globalization are a sign and a slogan, but not an organizing principle. And waiting for a messiah will only waste time. What we face instead is the hard work, the collective work, of theorizing the possibilities that inhere in our current conjuncture and possible ways to proceed. The only thing worse than picking the wrong moment would be missing the right one, and it may come sooner than we think.

24

What is the multitude? Since the moment of its appearance, we have been enchanted with the poetry of the multitude. But before we get too carried away, it's worth asking what it is. How can it both resolutely refuse being reduced to a unity and at the same time explode in a political project? Isn't a positive political project—as opposed to political drift, the average of all political projects, or to “the multitude against,” a unity imposed negatively from without—a concrete unity? Hardt and Negri invoke neuroscience to explain the apparent contradiction. The brain doesn't have a center of command, but it manages to make decisions without ever being a real unity. What feels in our daily life like a subjective decision is just the outcome of innumerable parallel processes. So far so good; in some sense, this is no more than obvious. But allow us to ask the dialectical question of the

reality of the appearance: What if the illusion were taken away? Isn't the illusion of a subject itself a necessary part of the functioning of this decentered system that is not a subject? But in this case, the illusion is not simply an illusion but also real. Can we then read Hardt and Negri's analogy back again into political subjecthood? Is the illusion of transcendent unity essential to the functioning of a real immanent multiplicity? Does someone have to come up with a project and sell everyone else on it? Does the political subjectivity of the multitude require—gasp!—a political vanguard to bring it into being? Somehow, we're not too keen on that idea, either.

25

Project(ions).—Writing philosophy in the age of finance capitalism is neither the most self-indulgent (and thus useless) practice possible, nor is it the sole space in which it is possible to fan the flames of aesthetic-utopian imaginings. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, "Capitalism itself has no social goals."²⁴ It is through philosophy that such goals can be imagined.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 222.
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3. *Ibid.*, 172.
4. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 320.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 3.
6. Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism to the Decline of the Nation-State," in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 79.
7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.
8. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 142.
9. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 331.
10. *Ibid.*, 334.
11. Xudong Zhang, "Marxism and the Historicity of Theory: An Interview with Fredric Jameson," *New Literary History* 29, no. 3 (1998): 365–66.
12. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), 29.

13. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 218.
14. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3.
15. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum 1996), 140.
16. Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994), 15.
17. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 7.
18. *Ibid.*, 5.
19. Mia Couto, *Cada homem é uma raça* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1998), 185.
20. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 80.
21. John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13.
22. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), 408.
23. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (New York: Verso, 1994), 9.
24. Fredric Jameson, "Globalization and Political Strategy," *New Left Review* 4 (2000): 62.