

Journal Entry.

September 11-12, 2022. San Diego, California.

It seems to me, on this sticky September day, with excessive heat warnings in America's most perfect climate, that something is drastically amiss when we, of all professions, don't know what to do about this heat and about the inequality surrounding us that has clear cause. The question, to wit: "Does what we as scholars and academics think, say, or do matter at all?" Most of us have the professional privilege, the time, the salaries, and the functional purpose – that is, the space and obligation – to think and plot out an effective engagement with global warming and social equity, and yet conviction wavers even in these relatively salubrious conditions when asked: "How do we get from here and now to there and next?"

Maybe the morning coffee has just run its course. There's always the afternoon.

Marx proposed that consciousness takes its deepest root from rubbing up against material conditions. The intelligentsia, that uncomfortable term we inhabit, albeit in a counter-hegemonic state, has always been something of an anomaly – tasked with trying to prepare the ground as thought workers for something we are told will come of its own accord unbidden. But what if material conditions – in this case, the suffering of the working poor that will one day be caused by climate change – can only be mentally intuited, statistically extrapolated in the here and now, before it is fully realized in the there and then? What if a proper consciousness is postponed for decades until the material conditions fully express themselves and it becomes too late to act?

The sins of our fathers have not even come home to roost; our own emissions and omissions have been postponed to a later reckoning by our children.

In such a context, can those of us tasked with educating a local, national, and global citizenry close the gap somehow?

When the sun gets this high at noon, these small perspirations of hope evaporate.

What does grand theory say about time lag?

Hegemony hasn't an answer. On the one hand, much of the western world clings to Adam Smith, as he passed through Walter Rostow, Margaret Thatcher (or Ronald Reagan, if you prefer), or other material manifestations like gangster capitalism, state capitalism, patrimonial capitalism, or whatever decadence we live in today. And while capital does indeed have a few mechanisms to build futurity into the here and now (e.g. commodity, stock, and bond "futures"), these are piecemeal responses that don't send signals for us to change quickly enough. Moreover, they reflect little in the way of equity. And yet in the unrepentant United States, 60% of Americans, according to a recent Gallup Poll, still believe that capitalism, this euphemistic term for the graft, hooliganism, and patrimonialism, to be the engine of mobility and opportunity. This is the case even as tragedy turns to farce, and even as farce plays itself a thousand times over until it is commuted into despair.

On the other hand, we default to Karl Marx, perhaps as passed through Gramsci, Althusser, Social Democracies, or Xi Jinping's Communist Party, for answers. But these various socialisms also seem to fail in their powers of prognostication. Their dreams of equity don't yet have enough matter in the world to step into. Workers of the world are not united. They are less so today than before. And laborers' political

consciousness around global warming is secondary to the more immediate concern of acquiring bread. These do not always, or even usually, lead to the same politics – though a small breeze comes in through the window to say that 38% of Americans at the height of the COVID pandemic had a positive view of socialism and that a small modified Green New Deal got covert passage (albeit under ideological cover) as an Inflation Reduction Act.

Perhaps there is movement – just not on the right timeline.

So let us assume that workers' consciousness, class solidarity, whatever is to be, will come around in due time once the earth is scorching, and it will somehow carry with it the recognition that the web of life needs nourishing in ways that capitalism could not provide. But we will be well past the tipping point by then. In the here and now, the most usable legacies of Marx, during San Diego's hottest month, are the tools he gives us for a critical exegesis of this system-less system that feeds on and alters nature and humanity.

When this heat emanates from the ground at midday, it begins to bend light. Mirages appear, but no universal dream arises.

September 11th has never been a good day to take up the question of human solidarity.

Even so, from a quiet corner of the mind comes the protest that there is localism, anarchism, libertarianism – but these too shrink in the face of scale. Today's surveillance society is increasingly insidious, the guns on their side much bigger, the technologies of distraction always better. Perhaps these incantations of "small is beautiful" will provide futures we can step into once capital collapses in the face of global warming, but until then they do not offer much succor in the moment. For the time being, the vacuum fills up with strong men, hucksters, mass hysteria. The worst have passionate intensity.

The old orthodoxies waver in this humid afternoon when circadian rhythms plunge us into heresy.

Antithesis One: Accept that Capitalism Has Won (at Least for the Time Being)

"It is easier to imagine the end of the world today than the end of capitalism."

That refrain has plagued the Petrocultures project since its inception in 2011. But if we take that as a premise, then what happens to the type of work that we believe we must do? What would the work of the organic intellectual poised against hegemony look like if this were a starting premise?

Poststructuralism teaches us that words are plastic – that definitions are unstable, that agency resides in these slippages. What would it mean to re-constellate capitalism in our disciplinary work?

Some thoughts.

First, it might mean to acknowledge that capitalism, despite Marx's claims, is not everywhere the same, that it is different things in different times; second it might require us to recognize that most of us struggle in popular politics to even define capitalism as a consistent historical object; third, it might burden us with naming for people the type of capitalism that is especially harmful to us rather than decrying capital *writ large* that has come to mean a million things to different actors; fourth, it might mean embracing the emancipatory parts of capitalism that appeal to those 60% of Americans who see hope in markets, in small businesses, and in all sorts of things that don't sound like socialism to them;

and, fifth, it might mean reckoning with the fact that unless we favor violent unplanned revolution at some later undefined date that we will have to offer people something for this transitional moment, provide our students with more subtle dreams for the here and now. Understanding the politics of transition, of the “in-between,” might require escape, that is, from the simple polarities of the Cold War that somehow still call us back to the retrograde NSC 68 and a world that exists in only two states, free and enslaved, capital and socialism, and so on.

For the organic intellectual working in the counter-hegemonic vein, this might mean rewriting the syllabi, reconfiguring research, and rethinking GE to provide students with more concrete skills to bore capitalism from the inside rather than teasing them with socialist fantasies that don't appear to be viable on the right timeline. That might lead to proportionally more training in early Piketty on inheritance laws, more attention to the history of progressive taxation and its effects, more policy training in how to write environmental law, business regulations, and build coalitions with the other side. I'm wondering right now, given the zero-sum game of the syllabus and the BA degree, if that means teaching proportionally less Marx in a world that does not fit with grand theory.

Or is this just the backslide of a collapsing 401K?

Antithesis Two: Accept that Reason Is Subordinate to Feeling (Against the Better Judgment of the Educator)

And what of the university's purpose?

The modern western university is still, at root, based on an enlightenment project that bets the house on the expansion of reason over faith and irrationality.

Historically, that was a holistic project that positioned literature, philosophy, history, and the arts as a guiding moral foundation for building a shared ethical identity that could be mobilized for political agency (albeit one that was ethnocentric, sexist, blinkered, and misguided). But reason as a thing shrank down in the university to something less ambitious as it passed through scientism, objectivism, positivism, and a whole host of things that came to put a free market faith in rationality's empire, that came to assume the individual disciplines could work in their caves without coordination, that facts and objectivity could produce meaning in isolation, and that somehow, through some magical process that occurs in-between classes, students would know how to knit the world together again. Ceding that moral project of community building has made the university vulnerable to new invasions from capital which thrive on agnosticism and on an absence of clear defenses.

“Critical thinking,” the ur-learning outcome, is the invisible hand of the modern university.

Catching up with facts is challenging for highly bureaucratic organizations like universities, but one uncomfortable fact we have yet to fully absorb is that rationality is not the dominant state of political or social being. Emotion is. Critical thinking, as both neuroscience and contemporary politics tell us, is laden with feeling, with implicit values, and with the apprehension of context-bound facts mediated by social identities that create and deploy them.

Most of us, if Lakoff is right, spend our lives trying to confirm *apriori* biases.

What does an emphasis on the liabilities of reason mean for the project of After Oil? If we are operating in a post-truth society where bad actors pander day and night to the basest of our instincts, if we are in a

political arena captured by the favored technologies of fascists, nationalists, racists, sexists, and bigots of all stripes, then what does that mean for how we train students and do intellectual labor? Do departments need to declare a state of emergency and overhaul the curriculum for a more coordinated response to this crisis of reason? Does GE need a new curriculum that can rise to the moment? Are the disciplines even relevant in the face of such disarray where things spin off in an ever-widening gyre?

It is hard not to feel emotional about these things during the slump of midday.

Antithesis Three: Restore a Canon (for the Sake of Civilization)

And, finally, what about community?

C.P. Snow once talked about the two cultures, the sciences and humanities, and about how the modern research institution had rift them apart. We in the US talk about the two cultures, red and blue, that have less and less common ground to meet on. The divisions go on and on. The question, it seems to me, at 4 p.m. as the heat peaks, is whether or not the university can or should play a role in creating an imagined community that we can dream into?

The heat is now coming from both the ground and the sky. It has been building momentum, stored for this moment of deep sweat.

The destruction of the western canon was a necessary and much-overdue development. Hitching one's educational identity and moral training to sexism, racism, and classism was morally wrong, traumatizing, and miniaturizing of us all. Harold Bloom was in error to seek out human universals that were universally provincial. But it seems to me as hot air sweeps in the pollution from Highway 8 that we lost something when we knocked down and buried the old idols.

The project of canonization, for all its egocentrism and provincialism, was a concrete, human, community-building project based on making collective decisions about what life means and how to learn about it (albeit one keyed to reactionary ideologies). It strikes me, at least for the moment, that we might have run too far in the opposite direction to hole up in our own caves, to the comfort of our disciplines and our tribes. We have not been sitting down at the table together with voices that are both comfortable and disquieting to hash out some shared set of principles, some shared set of texts, that we can agree on, that we can name for our students, that we can blast from the minarets – and that can announce to the world that these are some principles and some texts we believe in in this community at least for now in this moment. For all its problems the canon was about calling an imagined community into being.

Going forward, the work of making canons together need not be universal. It might be different in this department or that department, this school or that school, this nation or that one. The process itself is the point. But if we don't work to sit around the harvest table together, to try to come up with common reference points, we cannot lay out a common terrain or invoke a common future. Relying on the marketplace of ideas, the specialist, the individual professor, is no better than relying on the invisible hand. It cedes the ground to other less conscionable actors that work in think tanks and in consort. We have had some success: to this point, we have done well in integrating the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the university, but after 20 years of sitting in department and GE meetings, I'm not sure we have gotten much beyond that.

Is it possible that the university is itself organized wrong for the moment? Is it possible that the era of specialization that succeeded the bigoted era of religious and philosophical education is not up to the task? What would a provisional, democratic, and inclusive canon look like that moved us from the here and now to the then and there?

Or is this just the familiar middle age ache for some medieval stability?

For now, the deadline passes, the heat has finally broken, a high front has swept in. Catharsis feels imminent. Perhaps this little crisis of faith will pass.