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NEW LEFT REVIEW

Wolfgang Streeck *Germany Marches Right*

Lola Seaton *Art's Uncertainties*

Loïc Wacquant *Colony to Banlieue*

Jiwei Xiao *China's Worker Artists*

David Harvey *On Sraffa's Trail*

Ed McNally *Imperial Intelligence*

Wang Xiaoming *Old Barbarisms and New*

Nick Burns *quizzes* Ross Douthat

Where Is America Going?

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NEW LEFT REVIEW 152

SECOND SERIES

MARCH APRIL 2025

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PROGRAMME NOTES

Ross Douthat: Condition of America

Nick Burns quizzes the *New York Times* columnist on the contradictory ideological forces and factions driving the second Trump Administration, the strengths and weaknesses of American liberalism and the state of the country that he's described as sinking into economic and cultural stagnation.

Wolfgang Streeck: Germany's Road Right

A high-turnout election, sharply polarized around immigration, has brought another centrist coalition to power in Berlin. Wolfgang Streeck offers an unsparing analysis of Germany's political situation as its hardline incoming Chancellor rams through an expansive fiscal revolution and the far-right AfD doubles its seats.

Wang Xiaoming: On Civilization and Its Barbarisms

Lessons from the history of Chinese thought on the tension between the liberal-democratic internal order of great powers and the imperial 'law of the jungle' to which they subject weaker countries. How to resist their barbarity—how to civilize oneself—without barbarizing others?

Lola Seaton: Trusting Art?

Replying to Malcolm Bull's hypotheses in NLR 151 on the balance of trust in the artworld and cryptocurrency, Lola Seaton asks what distinguishes readymade works, like Cattelan's banana, from everyday commodities—and what exactly buyers of conceptual art get to own.

David Harvey: On Sraffa's Trail

David Harvey recalls a lifetime of encounters, actual and intellectual, with the enigmatic Piero Sraffa. Interlocutor of Wittgenstein, Keynes and Robinson; devastating critic of neoclassical economics; helpmeet of Gramsci and rescuer of his *Prison Notebooks*. Reflections on an *éminence grise* of twentieth-century intellectual life.

Loïc Wacquant: Punish to Rule

If punishment was central to colonial statecraft—police, courts and prisons forming a 'penal triad'—how has this logic mutated since? A comparative survey of the forms of official violence that upheld empires past sheds light on techniques for domesticating today's hyperghettos and *banlieues*.

REVIEWS

Ed McNally on Hugh Wilford, *The CIA: An Imperial History*. Antidote to apologias for the US intelligence agency, a periodization from the Truman Doctrine to the 'war on terror'.

Jiwei Xiao on Margaret Hillenbrand, *On the Edge*. Analysis of working-class precarity as a structure of feeling, manifest in Chinese literary and visual culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Interview with Ross Douthat

Claims that left and right, terms born during the French Revolution in the divisions of the National Assembly of 1789, are becoming, or are already, anachronisms have been a recurrent political trope since the last century. If there is no more reason to credit it now than there was in the past, evidence of confusion between the two has been visibly increasing, in an ideological flux dramatized in Brazil by Roberto Schwarz, historicized by Christopher Clark in Britain, and enacted daily in the cross-cutting populisms of Europe and America. Scenes like these speak to a slow erosion of the liberal order, with no clear-cut alternative to challenge its rule, whose upshot is the jumbled discourses cartwheeling through social media and broadcast politics, open feedstock for clinical scrutiny.

The world of ideas proper, where articulated systems of thought confront each other, is another matter. There, a serious left needs to respond, not with self-segregation or withdrawal to any Abgrenzung *of its own, but with open-minded curiosity and principled critique, where these are in order. In that spirit, we lead this issue with an interview with Ross Douthat, the conservative columnist who is the most consistently original mind writing about American politics in the pages of the* New York Times. *In doing so, the journal continues a tradition of treating thinkers and writers of an outlook antithetical to its own with respect—and, if merited, admiration—that started with Michael Oakeshott in the sixties, and from the nineties onwards continued with Francis Fukuyama, Giovanni Sartori, J. G. A. Pocock, Karl-Heinz Bohrer and others. Author of some seven books on a wide range of subjects, covering class and culture, demography and religion, technical progress and economic stagnation, the organizing subject of Douthat's writing is the condition of his own country, America, placed within the setting of the world. In the Victorian era there were equivalents in the press of Britain, France, Italy and elsewhere, writers about their time enjoying significant public authority. But today's Europe lacks any real counterpart, and in the United States itself there is no journalist of comparable imaginative scope. A firebrand of the student right in his youth—incendiary entries in the Harvard* Salient, *an inaugural salvo of 'Cheney for President' in the* NYT *of 2009—by the time Trump ran in the primaries of 2016, Douthat was one of his sharpest critics. At no point part*

of what became the Never Trump brigade, Republicans—Cheney's daughter in the lead, along with Kristol Jr and the like—scandalized by his lack of regard for Cold War pieties, Douthat would develop into one of the astutest analysts of the trajectory of the current President, whose zigzagging threats of an all-round trade war he judges condemned to failure. Here our contributor Nick Burns questions him about his intellectual formation, political evolution, international horizon and the gains and limits of his role as a tribune on America's leading newspaper. The result is a portrait, perhaps unlike any other so far available, of a far from typical conservative intelligence.

ROSS DOUTHAT

CONDITION OF AMERICA

Interviewed by Nick Burns

Your first book, Privilege*, is at once a devastating take-down of Harvard, as a bastion of a self-satisfied elite careerism, and a rueful love letter to it. Since those days, you've always unmistakeably been an adversary of American liberalism, yet in some ways continue to be a beneficiary of it. Where would you locate yourself—politically, then intellectually—on the map of the contemporary American scene? What is it in liberalism, beyond obvious hypocrisies, that you dislike?*

I SHARE THE FAIRLY conventional conservative view that the strongest case for liberalism is as an effective technology for managing social peace in a complex society—but one that depends upon sources of meaning and purpose deeper than itself, which it struggles to generate on its own.

Liberalism as feeding off non-renewable moral resources?

Those resources can be self-regenerative. I don't fully buy the argument that, with the advent of Locke, there is an automatic decline into hyper-individualism. American history provides plenty of evidence that a liberal superstructure doesn't necessarily prevent great awakenings. To the extent that it does so, it is under particular technological conditions. The vindication of the older conservative critique of liberalism as atomization—which looks more potent today than it did when I was at Harvard in the early 2000s; and looked more potent then than it did in, say, 1955—is technologically mediated. There have been technologies that accelerate individualism, ranging from things we take for granted, like the interstate highway system and the birth-control pill, through to

the internet, a particular accelerant. As a metaphor, you can think of individualism's tending towards atomization and despair as a gene within the liberal order, which gets expressed under particular environmental conditions, but doesn't necessarily emerge if those conditions are not present. In recent years, the internet in particular has helped that gene be expressed more fully than it was.

An alternative theory of liberalism is that it is an ambitious way of life in its own right. That would be the argument of my friend Samuel Moyn, with whom I've taught classes on this. He would essentially agree with the conservative critique, but argue that this means you need a liberalism that is not just managerial but ambitious, Promethean, committed to self-creation and exploration. And that form of liberalism, in my view, is subject to strong and dangerous temptations. Sometimes they're necessary temptations—a culture may need a little Prometheanism—but they can quickly lead it badly astray. The liberalism I described in *Privilege* tended towards a spiritually arid form of hyper-ambition; not Whitman and Emerson communing with the glories of creation, but: how do I get a job at McKinsey? Under conditions of prosperity, liberalism as a world-view had been transmuted into a purely instrumental, self-interested meritocracy.

Liberals themselves subsequently decided this was true. A whole spate of books came out after *Privilege*, from Harry Lewis's *Excellence Without a Soul*—he was dean of Harvard when I was there; he wrote it as soon as he retired—to William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep*, Daniel Markovits's *Meritocracy Trap*, Michael Sandel's *Tyranny of Merit*. So in a sense, I was early to a critique of meritocratic liberalism that many liberals came to think was probably correct. Of course, I was already stealing things from Christopher Lasch.

When you talk about the traditional conservative critique of liberalism, is that a specifically American conservativism, or does it overlap with Anglo-conservatives like Oakeshott, or the harder European right?

There is a particular American conservative critique, which is related to the weakness of the left in the US. The original European critique of the liberal project—Oakeshott wouldn't be the right example, he's not hard enough—but if you read someone like de Maistre, the liberal idea is understood as a revolution against order, against God; it's Satanic. That

critique makes sense in a political landscape where there is an *ancien régime* and a social hierarchy that a traditionalist can ally with, and also a deeper form of radicalism than has usually obtained in the US. The reactionary case against liberalism in Europe finds its strongest purchase in the French Revolution and Soviet Communism—instances where there was a radical takeover, a lot of people were killed and a lot of priests were killed, too. America never had an *ancien régime* of that sort nor a really potent form of radical left-wing politics. So conservatism in the States has tended to focus more on the shallowness of liberalism than on its dangers.

Of course, there are moments when the liberal world is perceived to be more radical, and the conservative critique becomes more radical in turn; the late sixties were one such moment, and the period we've just lived through would be another. It's no coincidence that post-liberals have emerged as important figures on the American right in the last five or ten years, with a more thoroughgoing, to-the-roots critique of liberalism, at the very moment when liberalism itself becomes more radicalized and aggressive in its desire for a cultural revolution. Whereas in the 1990s, with neoconservatives versus neoliberals, they were not that far apart. The George Will and Irving Kristol critique of liberalism differed from that of, say, Adrian Vermeule, who argues wokeness proves that liberalism was radical all along. But in periods when liberalism seems moderate, the conservative critique inevitably becomes more moderate. When I was writing *Privilege*, it wouldn't have made sense to claim that Harvard in 1999 was run by Marxist radicals bent on destroying all of America's traditional hierarchy, because clearly the liberalism of that era was fully adapted to American hierarchy and invested in the preservation of elite power. So, to the extent that I felt alienated from that, it was much more about what I saw as its moral and spiritual limitations, as opposed to its radical tendencies.

As a columnist for the New York Times*, you occupy a fraught intersection in American public discourse, charged with interpreting conservative ideas and positions for liberal readers.*

People like to say that, yes—I've heard that before.

What are the rules of this game? How does your own background, formed as much in the institutions of liberalism—Harvard, the Atlantic*, the*

Times—*as in those of American conservatism, like the* National Review, *play into this?*

It's true that I've always worked inside elite liberal institutions. I was an intern for *National Review* and I've written for conservative publications. But I went to Harvard, I wrote for the *Atlantic* and, since 2009, I've worked for the *New York Times*. There's never been a point in my career where I was doing anything other than primarily writing for a liberal-leaning audience from a conservative perspective. In that sense, there are ways in which 'here I stand, I can do no other'. There was no other vocation that my career path prepared me for, and to some degree it's felt natural to do what I do, even though it is a curious position. It seems to me a valuable thing to do—not to overestimate my own importance; I don't look at America and think I've had a positive impact on easing the culture wars or anything like that. But it's good for people who care about ideas to engage with the arguments on both sides. What is writing for, if not to speak to people who disagree with you at some level? Even though this means that there are certain kinds of writing that I don't get to do, types of polemic that I avoid. The reality is that the job's a tightrope, where there's a danger of falling off on one side, going too far into the conservative world to be able to reach back and speak to liberals, or falling in the other direction and becoming a tame figure, the conservative that liberals can read to confirm their sense that Trump and the Republican Party are bad, challenging them only mildly. I've always been conscious of that.

How are you viewed by the intellectual right in America? As an important advocate in such a mainstream outlet as the Times*, or as an insufficiently committed waverer, corrupted by having spent too much time among liberals?*

There are certain conservatives who think ill of me and regard me as having been captured, a tamed figure. But most people to my right whom I respect understand what I'm doing and what the role is, and don't regard me as someone who has sold out to the enemy. In a way the Trump era, by creating a large category of conservative intellectuals who didn't like a Republican president, made it easier to occupy this role. From the liberal perspective, as long as you were on side about being anti-Trump, you could say conservative things and retain credibility. The never-Trump phenomenon hasn't ceased to matter as a force in American politics, but I'm not sure what the future holds in that regard.

Does that create obstacles on the other side, where people on your right say: you don't like Trump, therefore you don't get it, you're not one of us?

Yes, lots of people say that. But those who take that view and discount everything I have to say are not usually people I respect. On the other hand, I've written a number of pieces saying that the new Trump administration will probably mess up and blow this opportunity, and the response I've had from some people on the right whom I do respect has been, basically: 'You don't get it, you're trying to finesse it but this is about power politics, we have to crush our enemies.' But people like that can have the argument with me without assuming that I've sold out; they just think I'm too interested in everyone getting along. Which is a fair point; one aspect of my life and work is that I like people on both sides—I always have. It's true, as you say, that my first book was a scathing critique of Harvard, but most of my friends there were nice liberal Harvardians. My life was formed there; it's where I met my wife. I'm friends with people who voted for Trump and with people who think Trump is a fascist threat to American democracy. Maybe at some point that will become untenable, but I hope it doesn't.

At moments in your earlier writing, you adopted a polemical or programmatic tone—for example, in Grand New Party, *your 2008 book with Reihan Salam. But in your* Times *columns, you tend to take a more dispassionately analytical approach, offering discomfiting critiques rather than conservative prescriptions. Sometimes you defend more moderate positions than the ones you seem to hold. Is that a personal preference, or an accommodation to an audience that doesn't share your perspective?*

I think it's both. There's value in not burning your bridges every time you write an 800-word article. The role I play at the *Times* could not be played if I was constantly burning bridges; I would just be undermining my own vocation and my professional obligations as a writer. But experience has taught me a lot about the limitations of the influence a political columnist can actually have on American life. When Reihan and I wrote *Grand New Party*, we were part of a project that aimed to change the GOP, to make it more working class-friendly—'reform conservatism', as it was labelled—with quite a few people involved. Then in 2016, Trump came along and vaporized that—while at the same time, realizing some aspects of the outreach to the working class. Things that we predicted came to pass, but not in the way that we predicted and certainly not

through our own efforts. My period of maximal anti-Trumpism came after that, during the 2016 campaign and into 2017, when I wrote a lot of very anti-Trump columns.

The people in political journalism who hate me the most right now are probably those who agreed with me about Trump in 2016, but who then took it as an obligation to make anti-Trumpism their organizing theory. To someone like Jonathan Last at the *Bulwark*, for example, I'm a symbol of the failures of conservative punditry to grasp just how bad Trump is. Maybe in the weighing out of Trumpian history, he'll be proven right—I don't know. But the endless anti-Trump columns just seemed to be screaming into oblivion; I saw how little effect they had upon the world. In the end, I found a cooler and more analytic style, which in my view has been more helpful to the people who wanted to oppose Trump. The Democratic Party of the last eight years would have had more to gain from listening to me than to those never-Trump writers who became intense adherents of everything Biden decided to do!

There was a parallel between my most anti-Trump columns and my most vehement critiques of Pope Francis. Two things that I was deeply attached to—American conservatism and the Catholic Church—were being taken out of my hands by figures with whom I did not identify at all: Trump was a populist reactionary, the Supreme Pontiff was a liberal. This was a period when I was physically very ill, living in the woods in Connecticut, and very angry. That anger was expressed in those columns. In both cases, at a certain point I realized I needed to accept that I'm not in charge of the Republican Party, I'm not in charge of the Roman Catholic Church. I'm a newspaper columnist, and my fundamental role is to try to help my readers understand the world in which they live. I continued to be a critic of the Pope, but I tried to shift tone when writing about the Francis era—to write less about it, honestly, and not get in fights with liberal Catholic theologians where I call them heretics. It's not that what I said was wrong. But a columnist is mostly trying to understand and describe history, rather than to change it. There are moments when a columnist can be a political actor, but I haven't experienced many of those in my stint at the *Times*. The descriptive role is much more important right now, because we are entering into a very different dispensation to the post-1990 era. Maybe I have useful things to say about that, by virtue of having a weirder perspective on it than a lot

of people. But being useful in the world requires being dispassionate, to some degree—or at least, not being seen as a spokesman for a faction. Which I haven't been, since reform conservatism died ten years ago. My sense of myself as belonging to a faction just evaporated.

Your 'reform conservatism' project with Reihan Salam in Grand New Party *argued that the Republicans should become something like a US version of Christian Democracy, reaching out to the working class through social programmes and pro-family policies. To some extent, the GOP has modified its position on things like Medicare. But the Party's principal working-class gains have come through the ascendancy of Trump, a figure you have, as you say, consistently opposed. Trump's win in 2024 was clinched by working-class voters, including working-class Democrats who stayed at home. What's your explanation for his spectacular success in changing the GOP and the political landscape in America?*

The simplest explanation is that the more stringent libertarianism of Republican elites has never been that popular here, even if America is, and will always be, a more libertarian society, to some degree, than western Europe.

Is that why reform conservatism didn't work?

No, I think we were reasonably aware of that. But to take a different case study, that's why someone like Sohrab Ahmari, who was originally much more libertarian than I on economics, has now travelled well to my left. He wants actual Christian Democracy, or some version of it. But that particular fusion is in certain ways too Catholic—it's a poor fit, ultimately, with America's Protestant politics. But so is full-tilt libertarianism, zeroing out the government, cutting old-age pensions and so on, which is why the Tea Party hit a wall. We'll see where things go, but part of what Elon Musk is doing may hit that wall, too. The quest for an effective right in America is always for the zone in between. You're not trying to be Clement Attlee meets Konrad Adenauer. You're going to be a little more right-wing than that. The other reality is that, because the Republican Party is libertarian, it's just always going to have trouble being the party that creates an effective system.

Reform conservatism was against Obamacare, more or less?

Right. In hindsight, it was always unrealistic to imagine that you would get a successful Republican-led healthcare reform. What we ended up with, which was Obamacare reformed by Trump, was probably the more plausible path, but not one that a policy wonk in 2007 would sit down and design. Our view was: the libertarians are right that Medicare and Social Security need to be reformed, but we want to combine that with opportunity-enhancing Clinton-style programmes. Let Paul Ryan cut a deal on entitlements and then use the savings to do things on education, on family policy, and so on. But what Trump intuited was that voters actually want the big existing programmes. It's more attractive to a lot of right-of-centre voters, who are not hard libertarians, to say we are not going to touch Medicare and Social Security, we're going to protect them. If you map it, Trump found a different way to navigate between Christian Democracy and hard libertarianism than the one we were trying to push.

On trade and tariffs, though, we'll see what happens. Our assumption was that those features of the global economic system were just fixed, that trade policy was not going to go back to the nineteenth century. It didn't make sense to see those as the levers you would pull to make conservatism more working class-friendly. Clearly there are people around Trump right now who do think that. Trumpism 1.0 was: we're making the Republican Party more working class-friendly by promising to protect entitlements, running the economy hot and cutting immigration. Trumpism 2.0 is: OK, we can't run the economy hot any more because of inflation, and maybe we'll have to cut Social Security and Medicare—who knows?—but we're going to be populist by renegotiating all America's trade agreements. Which, whatever else, is interesting.

What explains this baseline libertarianism of the US and of the Republican Party? Certainly, it's a set of ideas that has had currency in different forms over the course of American history. What are the material forces giving it purchase?

American geography? The psychology of the kind of people who came to America? You don't have to get into genetic determinism to say there is some psychological distinction between the sort of people who will set out on a long voyage, and then keep moving westwards across a continent, and those who don't. If you spend time in Europe today, compared to America, then whatever explanation you choose for it, Americans

have more appetite for risk. The old line about every American being a temporarily embarrassed millionaire—that's real, and it's a trait you see less of these days in western Europe. There is some dynamic interaction between settlement and the frontier, even now that the frontier is closed; the US is a vaster system, with easier migration inside it.

Plus, Protestantism. American Catholicism is important to our history, but America is a Protestant country that has a theological suspicion of hierarchy and authority, which extends to bureaucratic liberalism. People ask, why are Southern evangelicals so hostile to the government doing good things for the poor? Why don't Southern Baptists support foreign aid? The reality is that some of them do—it's not the case that Christian conservatives are all hard-edged libertarians—but if you're asking, why are people who are deeply Christian so unusually hostile, by global standards, to the government redistributing wealth, I think it comes back to a low-church Protestant suspicion of all hierarchies, and of hierarchical power-wielding moral authority. That goes really deep.

Covid was instructive in this regard. According to the standard theory of moral sentiments, as in Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*, liberals are the cosmopolitans, while conservatives focus on purity and fear of contamination from without. That would lead you to predict what happened in the first month of the pandemic, when conservatives were concerned about 'a flu from China', and liberals were like: 'Don't be racist! Only Silicon Valley bros are freaked out about that!' But then it flipped. There were some contingent reasons for that; Trump was president, of course. But the way it flipped also revealed something profound about red America and its ingrained hostility to bureaucratic managerialism. You might think it would be more afraid of disease, but no: it's more afraid of bureaucratic power; the don't-tread-on-me stuff is real, it's culturally ingrained. I didn't foresee how quickly anti-masking would become a thing, but I had friends who said, Americans are not going to go along with wearing masks the way people do in Japan and South Korea. They were right. Americans are not libertarians in the Cato Institute sense of the word, but they are folk libertarians in this sense of impulsive behaviour, which is a feature of American life that anyone who wants to govern the United States, Democratic or Republican, has to be aware of.

Would you grant that there could be an economic component to this? In a country where the welfare state is threadbare, never attaining the dimensions

of western Europe, for a portion of the population, heavily represented in the Republican Party, is it not in their rational self-interest to slash all regulations, supercharge the frontier and go for a competitive-Darwinian outcome, because they might actually have a better chance of getting by under those conditions than by tinkering on the margins?

It's in the interests of some people in the Republican coalition. It's not hard to have an account of why business-class Republicans, country-club Republicans, are interested in slashing regulation. I don't think the material self-interest argument applies as well to middle- or lower-middle-class voters, because most people in that position are not going to be John Galts, building huge businesses in a light-regulation society.

But they could be a car-dealership owner?

The car-dealership owner, yes. But the reason Republicans win elections is because they win the salesmen at car dealerships.

But they might benefit from lower taxes, selling more cars?

That's true of America in the Reagan era, when there was inflation-linked bracket creep and higher marginal tax rates. But the US has lowered marginal tax rates to a point where a lot of Republican voters don't benefit that much from the kind of tax cuts that the first Trump Administration passed. This was part of our argument within the party—that to win those voters, you can't just do tax cuts, because they have a material stake in the welfare state. The left-wing argument about racial polarization—that middle-class and working-class white people don't support welfare-state redistribution because it's seen as going to African-Americans, or to immigrants, and away from white people—makes more sense than the frontier spirit *per se* as a reason why there is no socialism or social democracy in America. Immigration to the US also undermines welfare-state politics, to the extent that each new generation of immigrants is seen as suspicious or not worthy of material support; not seen as neighbours, in the way that Scandinavians traditionally see welfare beneficiaries. That argument would also help to explain why the peak of social democracy in America—from the New Deal through to the beginning of the Great Society—corresponded with an era of low immigration, when American society was seen as primarily white, with a small African-American minority.

But I would view this mostly as a supplement to the cultural argument I was making. If you look at places where there aren't a lot of minorities, and drill down to the granular, you still find this suspicion of the welfare state. The classic example is white Appalachia. Alec MacGillis, a *Times* colleague, wrote about this during the Tea Party debates, showing how working-class whites in Appalachia can be very suspicious of poor whites for being on the draw, for being 'addicted to welfare'. And these are people of the same race, the same religion, neighbours and so on. You see that elsewhere, too. Even at the peak of New Deal America, Social Security was sold as pay-as-you-go—paying in and getting something back. Even at moments in history when Americans were willing to back the welfare state, there was still the idea that you're not getting something for nothing.

But why are Protestants in the US so sceptical of the state, when Protestants in northern Europe are not?

Because, to generalize wildly, Protestants in northern Europe belong to the established religion. Scandinavian Lutheranism was the religion of the state. In America, state-integrated Protestants, like the Episcopalians, were the elites, so they weren't sceptical of state power. The scepticism comes from Methodists and Baptists, the dissenting, nonconformist Protestants. Now, you could say that in England, nonconformists often supported the welfare state; I don't think it's a necessary connection, but if you're looking for the difference between Scandinavian Lutheran attitudes to the welfare state and Southern Baptists' attitudes, it is partially that sense of nonconformism yielding suspicion of state power.

There's an American tradition of writers combining, in different proportions, political analysis and cultural criticism, who come to exercise significant public influence—from Mencken and Lippmann to more recent gadfly figures like Tom Wolfe or William Buckley, or solemnizers like George Will, whom you've mentioned. Are there any forebears or role models for you in this company?

Fifteen years ago, I would probably have said, 'Yes, hopefully'; much less so today. I've talked already about the limits of a newspaper columnist's influence in this era. It's especially hard for a conservative columnist for the *New York Times* to exercise anything like the kind of influence that, say, Lippmann or Buckley enjoyed, because each of them was writing directly for an audience who could put their ideas into effect. Unless

I actually succeed in converting the readership of the *Times* to my idiosyncratic conservative, dynamist and Catholic views, I will always be writing for people who will never fully agree with me, while also being somewhat of an outsider to conservative politics as a whole. Generally, America is more resistant than European countries to people moving back and forth between journalism and politics. A figure like Boris Johnson is an imaginable prime minister in a way that William Buckley was not an imaginable president. It's true that JD Vance was a journalist, but the brevity of his period as a pundit—and the sharpness of his pivot to a more Obama-like role, as a figure who narrates his own life and then turns it into a political story—seems like the exception that proves the rule. Someone who has a TV platform, like Pat Buchanan, can play a role in American politics; if Joe Rogan decided to run for president, it would get some attention. But in terms of shaping power politics directly, there are real limits to what journalists can do. So yes, I see myself in that tradition to some degree, but with a strong sense that it's almost impossible for someone writing about politics to exert that sort of influence in this phase of our history.

What have been the major intellectual influences on you? One was clearly the Franco-American thinker Jacques Barzun, whom we'll come to in a moment. Aside from him, who has made the biggest impression on you in the different stages of your career?

To the extent that my evolution into conservatism was distinctive, it was due to the fact that I came of age in a family who were basically liberal Democrats but became very religious and, by virtue of that, got interested in religious arguments, and so subscribed to *First Things* while still voting for Bill Clinton, which was not the usual way. So, I was a religious conservative before becoming any other kind. Unquestionably the most influential politically connected figure in my teenage intellectual development was Richard John Neuhaus, the editor of *First Things*, though I haven't returned to his work in a long time. Predictable names like C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton loomed large, but they weren't writing about American politics and they were fifty years back. I didn't read Jacques Maritain then, but I read writers who saw their neoconservatism as in continuity with his thinking. He was not a neoconservative, but they adapted certain Maritainian views—on church-state relations, American democracy, how Catholicism should relate to liberalism—to a neoconservative politics.

Is that broadly the First Things *project?*

Yes. That was a primary influence on me—but supplemented, because I had not experienced the seventies and eighties, when a certain conservative synthesis had settled in; I was always a little to the left of that. I retained more of the critique of capitalism, or globalization, than Neuhaus did. He started out as a radical, but became a real neoconservative. Still a defender of some kind of welfare state, but not anti-capitalist. In my early twenties, the chief influence was Neuhaus, plus a dose of Christopher Lasch; that's probably how I would put it. Lasch's later writings gave me a way of synthesizing my neoconservative scepticism of liberal elites with a suspicion of neoliberal capitalist politics, which he maintained to the end, even as he moved right—though never as far right as Neuhaus. So, Neuhaus, Lasch, even Chesterton—also a critic of capitalism, in his own way—were more important influences on me than anyone inside the movement-conservative world, whether Frank Meyer or Willmoore Kendall. I read those people later, but they were not formative influences.

The other distinctive point was that I wanted to be a novelist, not a political journalist. I majored in history and literature. I took political philosophy classes later, which was important for me. I studied with Harvey Mansfield and read his translation of Tocqueville in a seminar with him. I read Strauss and found it helpful. Without being a Straussian, I think that framework is a useful analysis of the ancients and the moderns. But even as I began a career as a journalist, the writers who were most important to me were people like Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell; in American terms, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe; not conventional liberals, but people who were writing critical cultural commentary for a liberal audience. Tyler Cowen once said that after reading my stuff, he thought I was interested in using narrative, in storytelling.

I don't know if that's true.

I don't think it's true of me exactly, but he was picking up on something. I don't tell stories, I write arguments; but I may be shaped more than some political commentators by the idea of what a writer does as a storyteller. In the twentieth century, the most important Christian writers in English were novelists: Tolkien, C. S. Lewis—*The Chronicles of Narnia*,

and then, for the deep cuts, *The Space Trilogy*, particularly *That Hideous Strength*, which is so like what we're doing now—even Dorothy Sayers; they definitely had an influence.

Then later, Fukuyama's *End of History*. I read it in the late 1990s, well after it came out, and just thought: this is right—this describes the world. In a way, my *Decadent Society* (2020) is a sequel to *The End of History*, asking what the end of history looks like twenty years on. Even if we're maybe exiting the Fukuyamian dispensation, I'd still maintain his book was a profound account of what the world looked like after the Cold War. Peter Thiel's essay, 'The End of the Future', was very influential for my thinking about decadence. I had been enough of a religious conservative to take for granted that, whatever else was happening, growth and technological change were accelerating. Without endorsing the entire Thielian world-view—God knows, it's hard to parse what exactly that is; I'm not a Girardian, or anything like that—but some of his writing about the limits of Silicon Valley in the early 2010s was important for me in raising questions about that growth narrative.

The Decadent Society, *your panoramic critique of the condition of America, draws its master concept from Jacques Barzun's* From Dawn to Decadence *(2000), which traced the arc of Western culture from the creativity of the Renaissance to the catastrophe of the First World War, which left the public mind maimed and disoriented, producing the exhausted stasis of a consumerist 'demotic society'. You take Barzun's idea that decadence need not mean a downward fall—it can instead involve a levelling off into futile repetition—but give it a far more materialist twist, freeing it from his* Kulturkritiker *aversion to mass industrial society. In your account, this yields a compelling picture of economic stagnation—the long downturn, as anatomized by Robert Gordon or Tyler Cowen—combining with demographic decline, institutional sclerosis and cultural-intellectual mediocrity to produce a society that is 'comfortably numb'. Two questions about Barzun's influence. First, when did you encounter his work—as a student at Harvard? Second, on your differences with Barzun: he was ninety-three when he published his vast tome on decadence, you were forty-one when* The Decadent Society *appeared, and you took a much less hostile view of popular culture. Did that contrast matter to you, or not much?*

I probably encountered Barzun's argument when it came out and returned to it, as I returned to Fukuyama, in gathering my own thoughts on the subject in the early 2010s. In terms of contrasts, I'm just doing

a very different kind of work. He was a prodigious scholar of Western culture and I'm a newspaper columnist, which meant I wouldn't be doing his kind of sweeping cultural analysis. I tried to broaden some of the concepts that he applied primarily to culture, to encompass politics, technology, sociology and other developments—so a broadening of his basic idea, but on a shallower scale than he attempted. On popular culture, I'm not actually sure what I think of my own views on it. There is a kind of small-c conservative lament for the decline of high culture that underestimates some of the values of popular culture and I do somewhat self-consciously try to avoid being the kind of stuffy reactionary who insists that everything has been downhill since *The Rite of Spring*. Not that that's what Barzun thought—

Well, he does talk about cultural stasis.

Yes, he has a more characteristically European view of the American contribution to Western culture.

Which would be negative?

It would be negative, yes. I'd concede the general point that there is a certain kind of decline going on, from the masterworks of Victorian fiction or Italian opera, to the great American novel and the high tide of Hollywood in the 1970s; some falling-off in artistic sophistication. But I do think the best of American popular culture strikes a certain balance appropriate to a democratic age, between making art that is serious and making art that is for the masses. Because of that, I would place the date of full exhaustion somewhat later than Barzun does. It might also be a symptom of a decadent age that even critics of decadence still want to insist that some forms of art in their own time are better than they actually are. Do I overrate *The Sopranos* because I myself am decadent? Maybe.

Surprisingly, in your first Times *column after the 2024 election, you suggested that history could now be moving into a new, post-decadent era—Trump's second win signalling that thirty years of convergent neoconservative-neoliberal government was truly over, along with social-liberal hegemony and US expansion abroad. The argument that a new era is beginning is plausible enough. But if tariffs are not a serious answer to economic slowdown, if Musk's Department of Government Efficiency is rendering institutions more sclerotic,*

and if Trump himself is cultural nullity writ large, then, according to the benchmarks of The Decadent Society*, doesn't Trump's return represent a deepening of decadence, rather than an escape from it?*

There are different ways that decadence can end. One is acceleration, renaissance, dynamism. The other is that decline becomes collapse. The point of the decadence thesis is to describe a society that is neither in catastrophic crisis, nor accelerating towards a radically different future. When I wrote the book in the late 2010s, I was confident that the thesis applied to a lot of different aspects of American life, including the first Trump presidency—it was a rebellion against decadence that participated in decadence itself. Since then, some things have changed. First, there is a more radical technological breakthrough on the horizon than there has been since the internet, and arguably since the mid-twentieth century, depending on what happens with AI. If you look at technology alone, America is less decadent in 2025 than it appeared to be in 2018. We're closer to self-driving cars, to big medical advances. In the book, I made only a passing reference to AI. Like everyone else, I don't have a strong sense of where it's going. But even the AI we have right now is enough to be a turning point in a lot of different ways. So, technologically, it feels like we're exiting decadence.

Sociologically, in large parts of the world, decadence is deepening into collapse. This is the demographic question that I'm obsessed with, but I think correct to be so. When I was writing *The Decadent Society*, fertility rates had settled somewhere between 1.2 and 1.8 births. From my perspective, that's a zone of sustainable stagnation—a society that gradually slows down, gets older, gets more sclerotic, but keeps going. But in the last five to ten years, there's been a step change, for reasons that may be partly to do with Covid, but also to do with smartphones. The range is now 0.7 to 1.4 births. South Korea is the prime example, but you see it in Latin America, in Argentina and Chile. That's a range that is heading towards collapse—nations become unsustainable in that environment. So there again, the decadence thesis no longer applies.

You've written a lot about falling birthrates, favouring a cultural explanation. But isn't the political economy of the developed world a more immediate cause, pushing couples to work full-time while failing to offer them affordable childcare?

You can frame it in material terms. Modernity grants life without children more extensive pleasures than existed for most people in the past—you can take a vacation, you can summon up any movie ever made on Netflix. There's much more that you can do instead of having kids. It also removes the strong economic incentive, the prospect that kids are going to work on your farm or run your business. There are more economic costs to having kids and fewer economic benefits. That's not a complete explanation, but it's a strong one. The question then is what pushes against this tendency? The left tends to say, this is a material problem and so it requires material solutions. I agree with some of that argument. But the evidence is that those policies cost a great deal. You can't spend $2,000 per child and expect to get anywhere.

Some conservatives would say that the core issue in modern life is intentionality. There's an interesting divide here. On the libertarian pro-natalist right, there are some who argue that people do think intentionally about having kids but they leave it too late; what's needed is a technological solution, pushing the menopause out. For me, it's a cultural question: you need norms and scripts that encourage people to think intentionally about having kids. Even in a world where everyone got fifteen more childbearing years, you would still need to create stronger cultural structures that encourage family formation. How you do that is, of course, an impossible question. Then there's the reality that, as I mentioned, something has changed in the last five or ten years that is *not* about political economy. The Scandinavians were doing okay, and now they're not. East Asia was doing badly, now they're doing terribly. Maybe it's something else, but it seems likely to be a question of technological shock. But if people are not having kids because digital life makes it impossible for the sexes to get together, then redistribution—giving them all an extra $5,000—is not going to help. And this is where I really don't have definitive answers. But it is killing us, literally, in ways that I wouldn't have anticipated even ten years ago. So, with technology we're exiting decadence upwards, towards dramatic change. With demographics we're exiting it downwards, towards collapse.

And politics?

With politics, I'm just not sure. Trump and the populist revolts have succeeded in defeating attempts to restore the status quo. With Biden's win

in 2020, Trump could appear as a spasm of resistance that had failed, and we were going back to the post-Cold War normal. We're not in post-Cold War normal any more, and I don't think it's coming back. We're in a weirder zone; and, once the left figures out what it's doing, any left-wing politics is also going to be weirder than resistance liberalism. During Trump's first term, the internet still acted as a tool of political consolidation and control. A few social media companies policed speech; there were some wacky outsiders, figures like Bronze Age Pervert, but they were marginal to the culture. In the last four or five years, it feels like that has broken down and the media landscape is now totally fragmented, in ways that no one can police. It's, like, Hey, antisemitism! There's antisemitism on Joe Rogan; you know, Luigi Mangione has a lot of fans. There is no mechanism to police that sort of weirdness. So, in that sense, politics is more destabilized than it was even in Trump's first term.

Does that mean that a new form of politics has emerged—a post-decadent politics? If DOGE is tremendously successful, and Republicans sweep the 2026 midterms and consolidate a new majority, then maybe you could say that. I would not bet on it at the moment. It's unclear what the effects of tariffs, DOGE, deregulation and everything else will be. But what I would bet on is more actual political instability, as opposed to fake political instability, over the next ten or twenty years. So, at the very least, decadence is being shaken. At the same time, American culture still feels decadent to me—movies, TV, everything. The internet is a tool of decadence, it traps everyone in an eternal present and kills off certain options for creativity. I don't see anyone finding a way out of that yet. So, if you asked, what's the most persistently decadent part of American life right now, I'd say pop culture and entertainment.

A few responses to that. First, why should AI not be as much a tool of decadence as the internet? As you know, it just takes what's already there, in the sense of being trained on an extant digital corpus. It's literally decadent in the sense that you only get what you already have. And in the way that the internet didn't really grow the economy as much as everyone thought, why won't we see the same—with the main difference being that we'll never talk to a real person at a call centre again? Second, and more broadly, one thing you mention in The Decadent Society *as a possible exit from decadence is space exploration. But what could be more tellingly decadent than a latter-day resuscitation of this burned-out dream of the American mid-century? Isn't reviving that frontier a kind of 'greatest-hits' retrospective enterprise? Surely*

the most striking example of a nation's emergence from decline in recent decades is that of China, which did so by incorporating elements quite foreign to its previous traditions: Soviet state socialism and Western-style capitalism. If American society were to emerge from decadence, why should we think it would do so by harking back to its own national traditions, rather than something completely different?

To work backwards: generally, escapes from decadence are remixes, they're neither whole breaks nor whole returns. So I would argue that China's emergence from decadence was a mixture of adopted Western elements from outside, state socialism and Western capitalism, with a revival of a particular version of Confucianism—capitalism with Confucian characteristics. That has hit some limits, but it did produce something distinctive for a while. The Renaissance itself was a merger of recovered Greco-Roman culture with new scientific advances; it looked back and it looked forward. With the space programme: if all we do is go back to the moon and potter around there—and maybe that's all we can do—then that would seem decadent; just re-playing the greatest hits. A Mars colony doesn't seem decadent, but the question is: can you get one?

Something similar applies to economic policy. I wrote a column at the time of Trump's second inauguration, about Musk and Vance: the populist, protectionist Vancean impulse and the vaulting Muskian impulse of technological ambition. I argued that if conservatism was going to be successful, it would be through some new mixture of the two that would be different from the fusion of the 1950s. Now, there's a version of that which could be unsuccessful; where tariffs slow growth and kill the stock market; where thousands of government employees get fired, everyone hates that and it fails. But if you're looking for an escape from decadence, you're looking for remixes, taking things from the past and marrying them to new ideas. The same would be true on the left; you would expect a new and successful left-wing politics to draw from the New Deal and Civil Rights traditions, but also import some entirely new model of politics: to be non-decadent, it would have to do something new.

On AI, I think it depends on how far the technology actually goes. If it stops where it is now, then I agree, it seems likely to resolve itself back into decadence, into internet slop—AI scriptwriters for terrible Netflix shows, no one ever speaking to a real person again, and so on. If it goes

further, though, even if it has bad social effects—even if it destroys us all—it wouldn't be decadent. If we've invented a robot mind capable of curing cancer, I don't think that's decadent any more. But there's a related point, which gets us back to demographics. AI could deepen decadence to a point where it just yields collapse: a world of AI porn, AI girlfriends, AI entertainment, AI old-age retirement homes, and so on. That's a world that gets everybody to South Korea really fast. It's not a terrain of stagnation; it's somewhere worse. Even a limited form of AI probably gets us somewhere worse than the decadence I was describing in 2018.

How does the rise of charismatic Christianity fit into this? What are its political effects? And why, in this secular age, is this extreme form of religious expression, which seems at once anti-modern and almost postmodern, so successful—in the Americas, and in Africa, as well?

You could say that it is well adapted to the landscape of religious competition, in a way that more hierarchical forms are not. It's non-denominational, it's start-up-oriented, it's entrepreneurial and merges well with a gospel of upward mobility, an emphasis on getting your life in order—quit drinking, get a job, these kind of things. In that sense, it's more nimble and individual-oriented than other forms of Christian faith. And then, in the marketplace it supplies a real proof of concept in a secular world, in that you are clearly more likely to have a religious experience in a Pentecostalist church than in most Protestant and Catholic ones. And that's important, not just as marketing, but as a counterpoint to disenchantment. The world may seem secular and disenchanted, but you can go to church on Sunday and speak in tongues. You're going to get a word from the Lord, the Holy Spirit will enter into you. That's a powerful thing to offer. As a kid, I saw it happen to my own parents. That's not the only reason that I'm religious today, but I am, in my own way, a testament to the effectiveness of charismatic Christianity as a counter to a disenchanted world.

In terms of its political effects: the problem with supernaturalism is that, as an epistemology, it lends itself to a general openness to weird beliefs in every shape and form. It's anti-intellectual. Once you've accepted that the pillars of secular knowledge have various holes in them, you see the holes everywhere. This isn't just true for religion. People who have one bad experience with the medical consensus become open to every weird idea about medicine—this is RFK Jr, all the way. Once you have

accepted that the supernatural can intrude on your life, you become more open to every kind of strange theory. I think it is correct to think that the supernatural can intrude, but it does also create epistemological dangers for thinking about politics. Under decadent conditions, fewer people are going to believe in the devil; under non-decadent, revivalist conditions, more people will believe in him. But with that come big risks that don't obtain at the end of history. The end of history is a tamer and safer world.

How would you characterize the divergent ideological families of the right and far-right clustered around the second Trump Administration? How stable is this coalition?

During Trump's first term, there was a lot of intellectual ferment on the right, partly because there was so little content at the top that everyone could project their own theories—Oren Cass and Julius Krein versus, say, Sohrab Ahmari, Adrian Vermeule and Patrick Deneen. The second Trump Administration has more energy at the top that people want to associate with. But an unsuccessful government will quickly alienate many of the groupings that currently support it. In addition to the older tendencies, you could distinguish three new factions. First, there's a kind of neo-neoconservatism which is really just anti-woke liberalism that's moved right. Let's call that the *Free Press* constituency. Then there is the alienated-populist masculinity constituency, the Joe Rogan constituency. The *Free Press* grouping is more likely to become alienated and swing politically away from MAGA. The Roganites are more likely to become alienated and depoliticized, or else could drift towards conspiratorialism. You see some of this already, with Rogan entertaining the podcaster Darryl Cooper, who's into quasi-antisemitic conspiracy.

Then there is a technocratic faction, in parallel to the Ezra Klein–Derek Thompson abundance-agenda liberals, coming out of Silicon Valley. These people expected Musk to be their champion, to some degree, and are currently perturbed and disappointed by what DOGE is doing. They are state-capacity libertarians, very invested in the idea that the government should spend less on old-age pensions and more on scientific research. I think they are torn right now between justifying some of the things the Trump Administration is doing, and feeling that it's all just about Elon's obsession with headcounts in Federal agencies, which is not what they're all about. Of the older groups, religious conservatism,

which I suppose is where I belong, is adrift right now. There is a cultural interest in religion, which may be a post-decadence indicator. But religious-conservative *politics* doesn't know what it's doing right now. It's won some victories and is playing defence around them, on abortion, for example. But it has jettisoned some of its compassionate conservatism and is subordinate to populist impulses. Religious conservatism has a lot of voters behind it, but is not a big player in the debates of the Trump Administration.

Who in your view should be regarded as the Trump Administration's key intellectuals? Would Vance, not just as office holder but as writer and thinker, be a significant figure?

How much influence Vance will have remains to be seen. The people with the most influence over policy right now are Trump himself, Stephen Miller and perhaps the Vice President. Of course, we're only a couple of months in, but overall I don't think this is an administration that's trying to translate some broader intellectual programme into policy. The things it's doing bear some resemblance to some of the ideas that were argued about by populist and nationalist intellectuals, by the people writing for *American Affairs*, by Yoram Hazony. Those views have had some influence, but to understand the fundamental formula, it's better just to think of it, so far, as an expression of Trump himself. There's a particular vision of government reform, embraced by Musk, that dovetails with older libertarian small-government ideas. But it's a weird fusion of that with Musk's Silicon Valley 'fire ten people and then rehire them' model. I don't think you would have predicted the DOGE experiment by reading the journals of the right from 2016 or 2020. You might have predicted it by combining a little Grover Norquist with what Musk did at Twitter.

There was a lot of intellectual work done on the right around the idea of how to capture and reshape institutions. If there was a through line of new-right projects and arguments, prior to Trump's return to power, it was the idea that the GOP should not just be a limited-government party—it was interested in using the tools of government to advance its own ideas. A lot of what is being done now is just a return to government cutting, but with a stronger dose of the friend-enemy distinction. It's cutting plus trying to figure out how to purge your ideological enemies from the government. But that combination is ultimately much narrower than what my reading of the new right would have been. The

ambitious thing would have been to use the Department of Education to further a conservative view of what study could be. Dismantling the Department of Education is just what Reagan wanted to do: it's typical fiscal conservatism. The fact that we're back to 'if we cut this everything will work out well' is a disappointment. Remaking the Federal bureaucracy is not what's happening, as far as I can tell, with the National Institutes of Health cuts or Centers for Disease Control reorganizations. It's just saying, 'How many people can we fire without having the institution stop working?' None of that seems like the culmination of a grand intellectual new-right project. It's classic conservative government-cutting married to trying to eliminate wokeness and DEI.

To the extent that there is a bold new set of ideas, it is arguably the policies on trade. There, you do have a group of dissident intellectuals, from Oren Cass to Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro, and some figures on the left, who are having their moment. The President does seem to want to reorder the global trade landscape, but even there, is it actually their ideas at work? Or is it just that Trump himself has believed that trade deficits are bad since the 1980s and now he's in power, he's going to do something about it? There are ways in which, even there, the intellectual argument feels stapled on to Trump's own impulses and desires. There are these factions, there are the populists, there is the tech right; it's hard to say where religious conservatism is going; it's hard to say exactly where libertarianism is going. Finally, I'd just say again that we're only two months into the Administration, so all analysis will probably look a bit foolish a year from now.

Your brief in the New York Times *is essentially domestic politics and culture, but as current crises on campus show, historically not for the first time, wars abroad can generate turbulence at home. Trump and Vance have launched an unprecedented attack on the liberal-imperial ideology that has long served to hallow American overseas power, replacing its pastoral-custodial pieties with national-imperial swagger. Should one of these discursive brands of empire be regarded as preferable to the other? There have been quite a few critics of* US *foreign policy, many of them more conservative than radical in outlook—Barry Posen, John Mearsheimer, Christopher Caldwell, David Hendrickson, Benjamin Schwarz, Christopher Layne—with little time for either. How far do you differ from them?*

I think of myself as a custodial realist rather than a custodial liberal, if that makes sense. The writers you've named have pungent critiques

of the failings of American empire. My take on this is similar to my view on decadence: a system can be non-ideal, but you don't just want to unwind it; you need to be careful while you're changing it. For all its flaws, the American empire is a force for a certain kind of stability in the world. Trump is right that there are a lot of free-riders in the system but we've also benefited from it a lot; we're not doing badly. I'm sceptical of attempts, left and right, to leave the empire behind. I'm attracted to the version of Trumpian foreign policy that wants to rebalance American commitments rather than abandon them. I'm sympathetic to the view that Europe needs a stronger security architecture while the US operates more in the Pacific, at least on a ten- to fifteen-year horizon, because the big challenge is managing China. But within Trumpism there is also something more like a McGovernite 'Come Home America' plus a dose of Monroe Doctrine imperialism—it wants to withdraw and simultaneously consolidate American power. Greenland and the Panama Canal are synecdoches for that impulse. Let the Europeans and East Asians take care of themselves, but, by God, we're going to control our own hemisphere. I have some long-term sympathy for that vision of a greater North America, but I don't think tariffing Canada and bullying Denmark is a good foreign-policy strategy. I would prefer the realist mode to the Jacksonian mode. But we may be getting full Jacksonianism.

How would you weigh the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, with reference to a decadent empire's ability or inability to maintain a Pax Americana?

One could imagine a synthesis of Biden's Ukraine policy and Trump's impulses that would be correct. The US overextended itself in making guarantees to Ukraine that it was never going to be able to fulfil; like our failures in Afghanistan, that was an example of imperial overreach. Once Russia invaded Ukraine, it made sense to support the Ukrainians. The failure of the Biden Administration was not recognizing the moment to cut a deal—which is hard to do. But there was a window, when Ukraine had regained a certain amount of territory, when the Administration should have said, OK, this is the frontier of our empire. Ukraine is never going to be in NATO, it's not going to get all its territory back; but they could have cut a deal to end the war in a way that would have allowed Ukraine to retain territorial integrity. There are people in the Trump Administration who want to do that. But there is also an impulse to just wash our hands of this. The outcome will depend on which impulse

prevails. But Russia is in a better position now than it was two years ago. A Harris Administration would have ended up pushing in a similar direction. But Trump's wash-his-hands impulse might leave Ukraine in a more unsustainable position than it should be.

And Gaza?

There, too, there's a version of the Trump position which says we're broadly on the Israeli side, but we're not letting them just set the agenda, that could be correct. But the absence of a solution for Gaza is an intractable problem. Biden was in an impossible position, caught between his own base and the Republican Party, and his own senility and inability to be an effective actor on the world stage, which made America basically a bystander. Notwithstanding rising sympathy for the Palestinians, America's going to retain a basic pro-Israel alignment for the next twenty years, but within that it needs to exert more influence over Israel than Biden was able to do. But toward what endgame, I don't know. If I knew that, I'd be Jared Kushner.

To describe Washington's role in the war in Gaza as that of 'bystander'—given that the US has supplied Israel with tens of thousands of massive bombs and the aircraft dropping them to obliterate the Strip, together with the requisite diplomatic coverage operation at the UN and elsewhere—isn't that a euphemism of the kind you otherwise tend to avoid?

'Bystander' in the sense of the Biden Administration not exerting any clear strategic influence over Israel, over the conduct of the war or over the larger regional drama. That largely reflected Biden himself being effectively checked out as a major actor in his own presidency. The US remains a patron of Israel and remains directly involved in the conflict. By virtue of being a hegemonic power, the US is not a bystander in any absolute sense.

So, you'd say that under Biden, the unique and extremely supportive relationship of the US to Israel went on autopilot?

Yes. It would have been very surprising if the fundamental US alliance with Israel had been adjusted negatively after the attacks of October 7th, given America's longstanding conflict with Iran. What was notable was

that the US seemed to exert no tangible influence on the war. It seemed to have no concrete sense of what it wanted strategically from Israel, or as an outcome to the conflict.

But under another leader—a President Bernie Sanders, for example—do you think the relationship would have been adjusted as the casualty toll mounted in Gaza?

A President Bernie Sanders might have exerted a stronger restraining influence to limit the scope of the war. I don't think he would have radically changed America's overall relationship with Israel, though this is obviously highly speculative. But just as Trump struggled in his first term, I suspect there would be more foreign-policy constraints on a President Sanders than some of his supporters imagine. I don't think that as president he would have ended up taking an especially radical line. It would be more like one standard deviation to the left, whatever that means, of Biden's policy. I'll be honest, I haven't studied all of Bernie's pronouncements in the last six months, but he seems to me to be somewhere between the overtly pro-Palestinian campus left and the hawkishly Zionist Democratic establishment.

In 2020, you wrote that the protest wave of that summer represented a second defeat of Bernie Sanders's attempt to return the left to its pre-seventies emphasis on class struggle, an effort that was vanquished by a more recent race-and-gender approach. At this point, do you see the movement behind Sanders as a flash-in-the-pan, or as something that will re-emerge in American politics in one way or another?

I think it will re-emerge, but material conditions are not propitious at the moment. There was a window for aggressive economic-policy ambition in the mid-2010s, created in part by an environment of persistently low interest rates, which helped give rise to both Sanders and Trumpian populism. The dilemma for the economic left now is that under inflationary conditions, where do you find the money? That's part of the appeal of MMT: you don't need to find the money, you can just spend it. But MMT always had a proviso, that you can spend the money until you get inflation. One of my basic beliefs about all economic-policy visions is that they can be directionally correct without being comprehensively correct. So, MMT as a descriptor of the world from 2011 to 2020 was directionally correct: there really was a lot more fiscal space

than either the Tea Party right or the Obama Administration thought. But then the situation changed, and MMT doesn't have a lot to say about an inflationary environment.

Here we can perhaps see the resilience of decadence. Just as I don't know how Musk can actually cut Medicare and Social Security to make his libertarian transformational change, I don't see how the Democratic Party can get Americans to sign on to the tax increases necessary for a Sanders programme. The Sanders vision worked in an environment of fiscal space, and it could make a big comeback when those conditions return—but they're not returning yet. With this caveat: if there's a big AI-driven step change in growth, that could create such a space, because it will create new inequalities, new sources of wealth and therefore, maybe, new demands for redistribution. But you need something like that. Sanders can't just walk out there tomorrow and win the presidency on Medicare for All, because there is not a strong enough constituency. For that to change, you need either borrowing space, new forms of wealth that are amenable to taxation or a 2008-level economic crisis. Absent that, I don't think you can conjure that constituency into being through the force of eloquence alone.

independent thinking from polity

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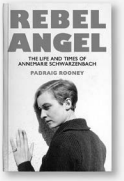

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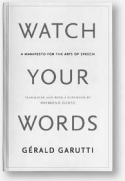

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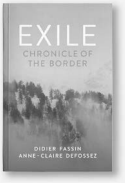

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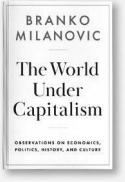

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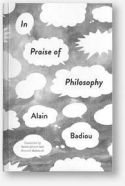

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WOLFGANG STREECK

THE ROAD RIGHT

In early march 2025, as Chancellor-in-waiting Friedrich Merz laid the groundwork for a massive German military build-up, sidelining the newly elected parliament to push through fiscal reforms that would double the annual defence budget to €100 billion, the Euro-establishment was in celebratory mood. Merz's rearmament drive was 'a stroke of commendable boldness' and 'a fantastic start', declared the *Economist*. 'From Paris to Warsaw, Brussels and beyond', Merz's move had understandably produced 'giddy excitement'. The *Guardian* hailed it as a 'bold and necessary leap', a 'chance to renew mainstream politics' and 'unleash the radical centre'. For the *FT*, it represented nothing less than 'the reawakening of Germany'; for *Le Monde*, a 'major and welcome turning point'. The measures may have required certain 'democratic gymnastics' to bypass the freshly elected Bundestag, *Le Monde* conceded, but 'the times call for boldness', and 'the new dynamic in Berlin should be encouraged'. For *El País*, '"Germany is back" means "Europe is back"!' Merz's leadership 'points the way for the rest of Europe.'[1]

I. PRELUDE

How did we get here? It is worth rewinding to 6 November 2024, when Germany's 'traffic-light coalition'—red for the SPD, yellow for the FDP, green for the Greens—came to an end after SPD Chancellor Olaf Scholz fired his FDP Finance Minister, Christian Lindner. At issue was Lindner's refusal to support a 'reform' or 'suspension' of the *Schuldenbremse*, or debt brake, a fiscal rule against high public borrowing that was written into the German Constitution at Merkel and Schäuble's behest in 2009. The background to the Scholz–Lindner fall-out was a dispute over how to fund additional German military aid to Ukraine, as demanded by Lindner and the Christian-Democrat opposition. Scholz refused to

pay more out of the federal budget, as under the debt brake that would mean cutting social spending. Lindner, on the other hand, insisted that the debt brake must be observed, precisely because more aid for Ukraine would have meant less aid for the SPD. Even more militant than Lindner in defending both Ukraine and the debt brake was Merz, the leader of the CDU–CSU opposition.

It was not, however, the unfolding fiscal crisis, nor the apparently inexorable process of global warming that dominated the 2025 election campaign, and certainly not in the decisive weeks leading up to polling day on 23 February. Nor was it economic stagnation, the long goodbye to prosperity, the rise of poverty, the accelerating decay of Germany's physical infrastructure—bridges, railways—or the decline of primary and secondary education. Instead, the main election issue by the end of 2024 was the far-right Alternative für Deutschland and what role it should be allowed to play in German politics. The 2024 Euro-Parliament vote and three regional elections in the East made clear that the AfD was not just here to stay but could score a major victory in the Bundestag. Under Merkel, and with her prodding, the self-proclaimed 'democratic' parties of the centre had sworn to have no contact with the AfD, declaring it *tabu* (from the Polynesian for 'untouchable'). This may have been an attempt by Merkel to contain the political damage of her open-border virtue-signalling of 2015, which had given the AfD its finest hour up to this point. The anti-AfD covenant always benefited the centre-left more than the centre-right, as it deprived the CDU–CSU of the option of forming a coalition, or threatening to do so, with a party outside the centre-left—one of Merkel's lasting legacies for her party, which she had never much liked. It was only logical for the centre-left and the left to insist that 'all democratic forces' keep the AfD strictly incommunicado, thereby locking the CDU–CSU into something like a centre-left Babylonian captivity.

From the start, the AfD question was intertwined with the immigration question, the AfD's favourite and essentially only political issue, dramatized as the election came closer by reports of a number of random knife

[1] See: 'Can Friedrich Merz get Europe out of its funk?' and 'A fantastic start for Friedrich Merz', *Economist*, 5 March 2025; 'The Guardian view on Germany's new coalition: unleashing the radical centre', *Guardian*, 19 March 2025; 'The reawakening of Germany', *FT*, 5 March 2025; 'A major and welcome turning point in Germany', *Le Monde*, 7 March 2025; 'Germany is Back', *El País*, 20 March 2025.

attacks and car-rammings by Syrian, Afghan and Saudi refugees. In time, this developed into an entrenched conflict between the AfD, with a zero-immigration platform, and a heterogeneous centrist camp superficially united on a complex mix of German and European measures for immigration control, impracticable enough in reality to amount to a policy of almost-open borders plus court rulings on deportations. Both internal disagreement and external similarity among the parties were covered up by rhetoric that declared the AfD's anti-immigration—and anti-immigrant—demagoguery to be incompatible with the *freiheitlich-demokratische Grundordnung*, or liberal-democratic basic order, of the German Constitution. The AfD's real goal, it was suggested, was the overthrow of democracy and the establishment of a racist-cum-fascist system like the Nazi regime after 1933. Egged on by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), a subordinate agency of the Interior Ministry charged with making democracy *wehrhaft* (militant), the parties of the centre committed themselves to maintaining a *Brandmauer*, or firewall, between themselves and the AfD. After some to-and-fro, the CDU–CSU decided that it could not afford to remain on the sidelines, due in part to the lasting influence of its Merkel wing. This raised a problem for its leadership, in that the positions of its base on immigration were in large part identical with those of the AfD. Yet as long as the AfD remained *tabu*, with the centre-left attentively protecting its pro-democracy centre-right coalition partner from fascist temptations, there was no way for the CDU–CSU to make use of this electorally, let alone act on it in government.

2. MOVEMENT

The situation escalated when in January 2024, the exorcism of the AfD evolved from a bureaucratic exercise into a popular movement, after a pro-democracy government-funded non-governmental organization named Correctiv published a report on an allegedly conspiratorial 'secret' meeting of a handful of AfD members and sympathizers three months earlier. This had taken place in a hotel in Brandenburg which, as Correctiv did not fail to point out, was near the site of the Wannsee Conference, where in 1941 Eichmann and his fellow mass-murderers had planned the extermination of European Jewry. Details are contested and under litigation. What is not disputed is that one of several

presentations was given by a well-known Austrian *völkisch* extremist, author of a book on how to bring about the 'remigration' of immigrants, including ones with a German (or Austrian) passport.

Over the following months, remigration, up to then a technical term for the voluntary return of migrants to their country of origin, became the keyword for a broad protest movement. Organized by the established parties, the trade unions, the churches, federal state governments, local communities, schoolteachers, writers, artists, actors and musicians of all sorts, rallies were staged in a nationwide *Kampf gegen Rechts*, or fight against the right. Slogans were raised against *Verfassungsfeinde*, or enemies of the constitution, and for *Vielfalt*, or diversity, drawing liberally on key phrases of German anti-Nazi memory culture, such as *Nie wieder*, never again, and *Nie wieder ist jetzt*, 'never again is now'. All in all, between January and June 2024, more than three million people took part in about 1,200 anti-AfD demonstrations across Germany. In the weeks before the February 2025 election there was another, smaller wave—although in Munich alone more than 200,000 people demonstrated for 'diversity and democracy' and against a *Rechtsruck* (shift to the right)—celebrating the anniversary of the movement and protesting against the demands for 'remigration' in response to the knife and car incidents.

It was around this time that Merz and his team must have concluded that their participation in the *Kampf gegen Rechts*, and the political polarization it generated, was benefiting only the forces to their left and the AfD itself. The CDU–CSU's core voters were disappointed by its alliance with the SPD and the Greens, guardians of the immigration *status quo*. Shortly before election day, the memory of a January knife attack in Bavaria still fresh, Merz felt it necessary to make a dramatic gesture to convince voters that with him as Chancellor things would change, and fundamentally so. As proof, he had his parliamentary group table a Bundestag resolution on immigration reform, technically non-binding, that was both largely identical to the official AfD position and not far from a legislative proposal of the sitting government that had been under discussion in the relevant committees. Although Merz's draft included an explicit denunciation of the AfD, the latter happily voted in favour. As a result, the resolution passed only because of the AfD's support—precisely the situation that was to be avoided at all costs under the *Brandmauer* covenant. The parliamentary leader of the SPD declared that the vote had

'opened the gate to hell'. A few days later, savouring what he thought was a victory, and hoping to show that he was not to be intimidated, Merz reintroduced the same text, this time as legislation—only to discover that enough members from his own party had deserted him for it to be defeated, despite the unanimous support of the AfD.

3. RESULTS

The CDU–CSU under Merz came first in the national elections (Table 1), with 28.5 per cent of the vote—4.4 points above its disastrous performance of 2021, when it ran an inept candidate who couldn't decide whether he was a copy of Merkel or her opposite. But Merz was also 4.4 points below Merkel's 2017 result, her last and worst. Together, the three governing parties lost no less than 19.7 per cent, or one fifth of the electorate. The SPD, which in 2021 had benefited from the CDU–CSU's incompetence, was facing a potentially terminal crisis, like European

TABLE 1: *Bundestag Election Results, 23 February 2025*

	2017	*2021*	*2025*
Turnout	**76.2**	**76.4**	**82.5**
CDU–CSU	32.9	24.1	28.5
SPD	20.5	25.7	16.4
Grüne	8.9	14.8	11.6
FDP	10.7	11.5	4.3
Linke	9.2	4.9	8.7
AfD	12.6	10.3	20.8
BSW	-	-	5.0
Others	5.0	8.7	4.6

social-democratic parties almost everywhere since the turn of the century. The FDP was wiped out, with little chance of resurrection for at least the next four years.[2] One clear winner was the AfD, which doubled its vote compared to 2021 and became the second-biggest party in the new parliament with 20.8 per cent, the *Brandmauer* and militant democracy notwithstanding. Another winner was Die Linke, or the Linkspartei, with 8.7 per cent. Somewhere between winner and loser was the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), founded in January 2024, which ran for the first time and ended up at 4.97 per cent: better than any other new party in the history of the Federal Republic, but still short of the 5 per cent threshold for parliamentary representation.

To understand the results of February 2025, it is helpful to relate them to the dynamics of the party campaigns, especially on the margins of the political spectrum, which are particularly important for a multi-party system, such as has recently emerged in Germany. One rather dramatic shift compared to 2021 was turnout, which rose by 6.1 points, from 76.4 to 82.5 per cent: both the highest turnout and the highest increase since 1983. There can be little doubt that this was related to the intense popular mobilization over the preceding year, focused on the AfD and how to treat it—as political competition in a democratic system or as an enemy of the state. In early 2024, the most respected public opinion poll, Allensbach, saw the SPD frozen at 15 per cent, the Greens roughly at the same level as 2021 and Lindner's FDP already looking hopeless (Table 2). Support for the CDU–CSU opposition was at 32 per cent, a remarkable 3.5 points above its election result a year later. The AfD had already improved significantly on its 2021 figures. The brand-new BSW was riding high and the Linkspartei had fallen far below the 5 per cent threshold. Nine months later, once the traffic-light government had fallen apart, the Greens were paying the price for their *Energiewende* de-carbonization policy, the CDU–CSU under Merz was eyeing an absolute majority, the BSW seemed on course for a glorious future and Linkspartei had disappeared from Allensbach's screen altogether.

All this, however, was about to change dramatically. As the AfD-cum-immigration debate hotted up in the final months of the campaign, the CDU–CSU lost almost 10 points between 22 November and 23 February,

[2] Lindner had taken a—supposedly intellectually demanding—*sommelier* training course while serving as Finance Minister, which doubtless made his departure from politics more palatable.

Table 2: *The Campaign*

	Poll 22 February 2024	*Poll 22 November 2024*	*Result 23 February 2025*
CDU–CSU	32	37	28.5
SPD	15	15	16.4
Grüne	14	10	11.6
FDP	6	4	4.3
Linke	3	-	8.7
AfD	18	17	20.8
BSW	7	7.5	5.0
Others	5	9.5	4.6

Source: Allensbach; wahlrecht.de/umfragen/

whereas the AfD added another 4 points to its already record-high popularity. The Linkspartei made a surprising comeback while the BSW lost one third of its support. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the spectacular decline of the CDU–CSU, the equally spectacular return of the Linkspartei and the further rise of the AfD are related to the same overall complex: the unprecedented polarization produced by the broad mobilization around the AfD and immigration. Evidently, record voter turnout boosted both ends of the political spectrum—the AfD on the one side and, to a lesser extent, the Linkspartei on the other—while Merz's desperate final manoeuvres cost him pro-firewall and anti-'remigration' votes, which went either to the SPD or Linkspartei. Compared to four years earlier, the SPD lost votes to the CDU–CSU, in particular. The AfD won voters from the CDU–CSU in addition to the SPD, while managing to turn out non-voters. The Greens lost out to the Linkspartei and, less so, to the CDU–CSU. The Linkspartei won over Green and, to a larger extent, SPD voters. BSW's first-time supporters were drawn mostly from former abstentionists, SPD and Linke voters, and secondarily from the FDP, CDU–CSU and Greens; few came from the AfD.

4. LINKSPARTEI AND BSW

Only a handful of votes—around 9,000 according to the latest count—would have been needed for BSW to get into the new Bundestag. Together with the resurrected Linkspartei, the combined left would have held about 15 per cent of the seats, a larger share than the Greens. In everyday parliamentary business, the Linkspartei and BSW could have put pressure from the left on what would then have been a three-party coalition of CDU–CSU, SPD and Greens, acting as an alternative parliamentary opposition to the AfD. Disagreements notwithstanding, in particular on immigration, they could have emphasized social policy and defended the welfare state against the emerging warfare state, perhaps even winning back to a two-party left some of the many workers that voted for the AfD. The far-right party won 38 per cent of workers in this election, with the SPD down to 12 per cent and the Linkspartei and BSW at 8 and 5 per cent respectively. Given the political consequences of the exclusion from parliament of almost 5 per cent of the electorate on the left of the spectrum, it is not surprising that there were suspicions of vote-rigging or miscounting, intentional or unintentional. Investigations are underway—recounts are carried out routinely in Germany—but they are unlikely to find evidence that would make the Federal Constitutional Court annul the results.

There were both structural and conjunctural reasons why the BSW was forced to fight an uphill battle. Building a new party is difficult everywhere, but even more so in Germany, where parties need functional regional sub-organizations in sixteen federal states to contest a federal election with any prospect of success. By the time of the 2025 vote, the BSW had not yet benefited from the generous subsidies that the German state pays to established parties. It also lacked a supportive social milieu from which to draw activist volunteers who could have spread its message. Moreover, party leaders had adopted a highly restrictive member-admission policy, afraid of competing parties or intelligence services placing *agents provocateurs* in its ranks. Had the election taken place as scheduled, in autumn of 2025 rather than early spring, BSW would have had a whole year after the Eastern Länder elections to build up an effective party organization. Lack of time also stood in the way of recruiting a collective leadership that could have relieved the burden on Sahra Wagenknecht, the party's only major figurehead, just as

it hindered the development of a more elaborate policy programme and election platform, especially on the critical issue of immigration.

There were other factors as well—some cultural, some political. Among voters aged 18–24, the BSW scored a measly 6 per cent while the Linkspartei won 25 per cent. (The other winner in this category was the AfD, at 21 per cent. There is an interesting parallel here with 2021, when half of the youth vote divided almost equally between two other outsider parties: the FDP and the Greens.) It would appear that for young people, Wagenknecht's trademark high heels and unadorned skin stood little chance against the sneakers and tattoos of the new lead candidate of Linkspartei, Heidi Reichinnek, a hitherto unknown East German with, it turned out, considerable charismatic appeal, who was buoyed by a much-admired social-media campaign.

Perhaps most importantly, there was the second inauguration of Trump, in January 2025. His apparent determination to end the war in Ukraine took much of the wind out of the sails of a party that had made peace in Europe its central political theme. Credibly switching to other issues seemed too difficult in short order, at a time when immigration and *Kampf gegen Rechts* were becoming the main topics of the campaign. As Merz pushed his anti-immigration resolution through the Bundestag, he gave Reichinnek an opportunity to record an impassioned speech against the impending return of fascism in Germany, which went viral among young people on TikTok. With polarization reaching new heights, the BSW's position on immigration, which is explicitly not open-border—unlike that of the Linkspartei, which is open-border effectively, although not explicitly—failed to cut through. Meanwhile Reichinnek's rhetorical performance attracted an unprecedented influx into her party, with membership growing from 21,000 to 81,000 between 19 January and 25 February, prefiguring its strong electoral revival, especially among young voters.

5. OUTCOME

With all votes counted, the upshot was an alliance between a non-winner, the CDU–CSU, and a loser, the SPD, consummated under the shotgun of Donald Trump. That there will be only two, not the dreaded

three parties in government is unlikely to make much of a difference; disagreements, especially among the rank-and-file of the coalition parties, will still be ample. And there will be no lack of crises to deal with, if not necessarily to resolve—low economic growth, ongoing demographic decline, unwanted immigration, global and local warming, crumbling bridges, cancelled trains, a decaying education system, growing poverty, rising costs of debt servicing, fiscal problems at all levels, including the EU—which will continue to erode popular confidence in the state, the government, the parties and the mainstream media. To these may be added the new Trumpian uncertainties, some of them particularly relevant to Germany, about the future of the European inter-state system, its internal structure and external position. Will there be a new Iron Curtain, this time along Russia's western border, lowered by the West? Will the US continue to act as external unifier for Western Europe, or will the states begin to assert their national interests? Will Germany flex its muscles as a European hegemon, leading a 'coalition of the willing' or not-so-willing in a *Großraum*-like 'zone of influence'? Or will the EU itself emerge as a supranationally centralized and militarized bloc, *à la* von der Leyen, subjecting its members to a Brussels discipline slanted towards French, Polish or Baltic rather than German interests? And so on.

Some of the problems facing the new less-than-grand coalition reflect the present stage of decaying capitalist democracy, and can be found in similar forms elsewhere. Yet one homemade difficulty is that, given the constitutionalization of state policy in Germany, effective government often depends on getting the Bundestag to pass constitutional amendments. For this, the two-party coalition will need the votes of either the AfD—though any attempt by the CDU–CSU at bringing it in will be a *casus belli* for the SPD—or the Greens, plus at least six votes from the Linkspartei. With the latter commanding a blocking minority on constitutional amendments, the predictable result is likely to be continued parliamentary stasis, just as under the traffic-light coalition. This will help the AfD to rise further in the polls, nipping at the heels of the CDU–CSU as the biggest party. There will also be elections at the federal-state level in which voters will have the chance to punish the parties of the central government. In other words, it is possible that the new coalition will end prematurely, like its predecessor.

A major political issue in the new Bundestag will be continued efforts, above all by the SPD, Greens and Linkspartei, and more half-heartedly by the CDU–CSU, to exclude the AfD from the governance of the Bundestag, if need be—*Not kennt kein Gebot*!: necessity knows no law—in contravention of extant rules of procedure, even though it is the largest opposition party. Examples include denying it the post of Bundestag vice president and not allowing its members to serve as committee chairs. Whether the Federal Constitutional Court will stand for this remains to be seen. To the extent that it does, the 'democratic forces' may be tempted, especially as their electoral fortunes decline, to try to have the AfD banned by the Court—something that both the Greens and Linkspartei would strongly support. Unleashing the repressive power of the state on the enemies of the Constitution would serve not least to divert attention from the intractability of the problems besetting politics today. On the other hand, as the experience of 2025 suggests, 'militant democracy' supplemented by 'Fight the Right' rallies may backfire and help the AfD grow further, though it will have as little to contribute as the centrist parties, right or left, to solving the crises of unreformed capitalism. If support for the AfD continues to rise, the Constitutional Court may at some point be forced by the government to deal with the intriguing question of when a political party is too big to be banned by a group of eight judges appointed by its rivals.

6. PUTSCH

This, then, was the tawdry background to the 'bold' rearmament moves applauded by Europe's opinion makers. Merz instituted preparations for a CDU–CSU–SPD government immediately after the February election, in what was described as a 'good and constructive atmosphere'. With Trump playing hardball with America's European allies and Ukraine losing ground, party leaders agreed that time was of the essence. Germany had to be *handlungsfähig*, 'capable of acting'—first and foremost, to arm Ukraine; then, in sketchier scenarios, to re-arm Germany in order to keep Putin out of Berlin, or to turn the EU into an *ersatz* NATO under German leadership. Facing an estimated €100 billion deficit on the €500 billion federal budget, Merz, until then a passionate advocate of German-style fiscal rectitude, all of a sudden decided it was imperative to dispose

of, rather than just reform, the same debt brake that as opposition leader he had sworn to defend come what may. He thus set about unravelling a constitutional work of art that, in quieter times, had taken party leaders three years' hard graft to put together.

Given the character of German politics, however, there was no route out of austerity without changing the Constitution, which required two-thirds majorities in the Bundestag and Bundesrat. This called for a demanding and expensive exercise in consensus-building. Not even the SPD went along unconditionally, having reason to suspect that Merz would use rearmament as an opportunity to cut social spending. Moreover, there were grave concerns over the national infrastructure, which has deteriorated at an accelerating pace since the happy days of Merkel and Schäuble. The Greens, whose votes were also needed, were waiting in the wings with their primary issue, the global climate crisis. And, last but by no means least, the democratic sovereign having unnecessarily complicated matters, the package would also require the support of six members from the Linkspartei, and who knew what they would demand?

Two questions, then, were foremost in the minds of the masters of the new coalition-in-the-making: first, how to reassure the prospective supporters of fiscal reform, both inside and outside the two future parties of government, that the concessions promised in return for their votes would in fact be delivered; and second, how to build the two-thirds majority in such a way that the concessions would not detract from its fundamental purpose, namely to bail out Ukraine and beef up NATO. As to the first question, various ideas were suggested on how to protect social spending from competition with arms buying; how to expand and ringfence the infrastructure budget; how to spend more on climate protection, to bring in the Greens; and how to link all of this to the Eurozone debt regime, also to be loosened although not by too much, so that Germany would not suffer from a further decline in Euro-area creditworthiness and rising interest rates, let alone have to bail out fiscally irresponsible member states.

Given the breathtaking sums involved—'whatever it takes', according to Merz, availing himself of Super-Mario Draghi's magic spell—the solution was found remarkably quickly. First, defence spending in excess of 1 per cent of GDP was exempted from the debt brake, meaning that there

are now no limits to paying for tanks and bombs with credit. Second, a special fund of €500bn was created, funded by debt that would also be exempt from the brake, for public investment in infrastructure such as roads, railways, education and digitization, to be spent over twelve years. To appease the Greens, €100bn of this will be devoted specifically to climate protection, while €100bn was allocated to the federal states, to secure the two-thirds majority in the Bundesrat, and to local communities. The fund prevents this infrastructure spending from having to compete with other forms of public spending in the regular budget, on areas like social policy, and vice versa. At the time of writing, some of these details are still to be hammered out; later they will need to be disentangled by students of advanced capitalism's fiscal crisis.

The state of emergency, says Carl Schmitt, is the hour of the executive—or, in this case, of the executive-in-waiting. While the new fiscal constitution is daring enough, to get it onto the books the makers and shakers of the would-be coalition, acting like a secret *Comité de salut public*, performed a manoeuvre that only those with years of training in public law could distinguish from a putsch. According to the German Constitution, a new parliament must convene thirty days after its election at the latest. Until it does, the old parliament still has full powers but, in deference to the latest expression of the will of the people, it does not pass legislation. Not so this time. In the glare of Trump's headlights, the CDU–CSU–SPD proto-government resolved to have the new fiscal constitution passed by the old parliament in two special sessions a few days before its expiration date—legislation full of specific long-term spending commitments, written into the Constitution, and thereby protected against new majorities in future elections. The Linkspartei, AfD and BSW went to the Federal Constitutional Court to ask for an injunction ordering the majority to leave fiscal reform to the new Bundestag. In vain: within the thirty-day limit, they were told, the old majority, if it is also able to muster a bare majority in the new Bundestag sufficient to set the date of its convention, is free to use whichever of the two parliaments best suits its purpose.

Why the haste? Why should the 2021–25 MPs, many of them already in semi-retirement, be given no more than a day or two to study some of the most complex legislation since Merkel's bill to rescue Greece, the Euro and the German and French banks all in one (passed just a few hours after it was made available to representatives)? It is likely that

Merz, having presented himself as the staunchest defender of the debt brake during the election campaign, was afraid that his party might revolt against this 180-degree pivot, and was keen to get the matter over and done with. There was also the fact that, in addition to the CDU–CSU's *tabu* on the AfD, imposed by its left-liberal Merkel faction, it also has a *tabu* on contacts with the Linkspartei, demanded by none other than Merz himself and enforced all the more by his right-wing faction in retaliation for the AfD ban: never talk to them, never do anything in government or parliament that could be done without them, whatever it may be. While it was possible to pass the new fiscal rules in the old parliament without either the AfD or the Linkspartei, in the new parliament passing it without the former would only be possible with the support of the latter. And this, in turn, would have blown up the fragile peace inside the CDU–CSU with respect to its membership of the 'pro-democracy' camp.

7. NOT QUITE THERE YET

The new financial constitution on the books, and the first formal consultations between the leaders of the two prospective governing parties concluded, formal coalition negotiations could begin. We're in Germany, so sixteen issue-specific working groups were set up, with sixteen members each, nine from CDU–CSU and seven from SPD, all in all 256 representatives from every level of German politics, from local communities to federal government. On the afternoon of 24 March, the groups sent their final reports to a central negotiating committee, with agreements and disagreements carefully recorded. While these reports were kept out of public view, disagreements were rumoured to be many, meaning a lot of lengthy bargaining sessions for the leaders. (German coalition agreements can easily run to more than 200 pages, setting out in detail what will be addressed and how in the coming legislative term.) Since the SPD had already won more than it could have dreamt of in the new fiscal constitution—protection of social spending, long-term public investment, a 'reform' of the debt brake practically amounting to its abolition—it had little reason to make concessions to Merz, while he had little left to offer.

Merz's rivals in the CDU–CSU were quick to complain about the concessions he made in order to get his fiscal package through under the short

remaining lifespan of the old parliament. He will get little if anything in return under the new one. In fact, due to the SPD's hard bargaining, by the end of March 2025 it seemed unlikely that a Merz government could be formally installed before Easter, as Merz had hoped. In the meantime, Scholz remained the acting head of government, representing Germany in international forums like NATO and the EU. As time passed, and the public caught up with the fact that the stable government it had been promised was not easily forthcoming, opinion polls uncovered ominous trends. By the first week of April, surveys reported that the CDU–CSU was down to 25 per cent, while the SPD had dropped to 15 per cent. Die Linke had risen to 10 per cent, while support for the AfD had grown to 24 per cent.

WANG XIAOMING

ON CIVILIZATION AND ITS BARBARISMS

In 'the standard of civilization', Perry Anderson convincingly demonstrates that the notion of international law commonly appealed to today was developed by the European powers largely to serve their own interests; lacking the legislative and enforcement capabilities necessary to embody true international justice, it has principally served as a tool of imperialist rule in its various forms.[1] If we recognize this, the issue then becomes: how should we take our investigation further? It is a particularly pressing question for Chinese society since, for over a century, China's path to modernization has primarily involved learning from the West—whether from Europe and America or the Soviet Union. However, even as we've continued to follow the West, more and more Chinese thinkers have come to realize that, in several respects, the West is deeply flawed.

In this context, there is a risk that our thinking could swing to the other extreme. We might come to believe that learning from the West was a mistake and that we should return to 'the East'; that our own system is best after all. We might conclude that notions like international justice and world peace are all nonsense; that the unchanging pattern of world power since ancient times has been the law of the jungle, where the strong prey on the weak. If that's the case, shouldn't we strive to become the dominant force in the jungle? And if that means baring our teeth and roaring at weaker neighbours, why should we hesitate? This way of thinking could extend into domestic questions. If international relations are governed by the survival of the fittest, then isn't it natural for our own society to be rigidly hierarchical, with the winners taking all? If that's how things have always been, and always will

be—just as the sun rises every day in the east—then what reason could there be to criticize it?

No one with any awareness of Chinese public opinion in recent years would say this is overthinking. The rhetoric of 'self-confidence', heavily promoted by official media; the stream of aggressively nationalistic online commentary; the relentless expansion of the 'competition first' mindset; the near-systemic indifference to vulnerable groups across society—all this suggests that our society has gone a long way down the road of narrow market utilitarianism.[2] And the common-sense argument, 'But look, Westerners are like this, too!', has undoubtedly been a major justification for confidently continuing down this path. When we adopt a vision for society, we instinctively seek a real-world model for it. The Soviet Union in the 1930s, China in the 1950s–70s, the US or the West in the 1980s–2000s, were all seen in many parts of the world as such examples. As each was discredited over time, to varying degrees, it delivered a blow to those pursuing that model of society.

Arc of modernity

Fortunately, other responses are available to us. I would like here to return to the debates of some of the first Chinese thinkers to grapple with these questions. We can locate their starting point—the onset of modern Chinese thought, in the sense of tackling the problems brought about by the rise of industrial capitalism in the West—in the 1880s and 90s, when external powers wrenched Chinese society away from its previous trajectory, and China's governing class—the gentry—was obliged to respond. It was widely recognized that China could no longer continue along the old course, and that fundamental changes were necessary if it were to embark on a new path. 'Modern' for these thinkers thus meant, first, a comprehensive reimagining of what the new China should look like; and second, the practical plans that were needed to bring this about.

On this definition, their modern age is still in many respects our own. Only when society has re-stabilized on a long-term basis, when both government and people can agree that the direction of the country is

[1] Perry Anderson, 'The Standard of Civilization', NLR 143, Sept–Oct 2023.

[2] Since the mid-2010s, the state media has cited several of Xi Jinping's speeches as the foundation of the 'self-confidence' theory, often summarized as the 'Four Confidences': 'confidence in our path', 'confidence in our theory', 'confidence in our system' and 'confidence in our culture'.

no longer an issue, will the modern era come to an end. That day has obviously not yet arrived. China is still changing rapidly, and its people still cannot agree where it should go. Many have begun narrowing the question to, 'What should China do?' rather than, 'What should China be?'. Moreover, China is not the only country that is still in the modern era; the same can be said of Korea, Vietnam and India, as well as most African states. As a global historical period, the modern era has lasted far longer than we thought; the 'post-modern' is only a local sensibility.

The arc of modern Chinese thought can be roughly divided into three periods. The first is the sixty-year stretch from the 1880s–90s to the 1940s–50s, the 'early modern' stage. During this period—which included the shock of the first Sino-Japanese war and the punitive 1895 Shimonoseki Treaty; the aborted Hundred Days' Reform of 1898, cut short by Court conservatives and the Empress Dowager's coup; the 1911 Revolution, the civil war and the Japanese invasion—'socialist' ideas in the broadest sense sprang up everywhere. They channelled the enormous energy of the struggling social forces towards various reforms and organizations, producing what can justly be called 'the Chinese revolution', in the largest sense of that term.

The second period lasted about forty years, from the 1940s to the 1980s. At its start, the Chinese revolution gave birth to a revolutionary party which truly unified China. Using the tremendous power of the state, it began to build a society that was clearly oriented towards communism. However, as this construction got fully underway, various non- and anti-socialist elements began to emerge: large-scale industry, in state-capitalist style; a modern bureaucratic hierarchy; political corruption, in a system with heavily concentrated power; the degeneration of revolutionary ideology. This gigantic project of social transformation gradually became 'left in form, but right in essence', deviating from its original intention. New contradictions accumulated and the revolutionary energy that Chinese society had once possessed gradually dissipated. The actual end of the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s and the tragic events of the spring of 1989 were two striking manifestations of this. This evolution was not linear; it was blocked in some fields and paused in others. Of course, the effects were also two-way: as non-socialist or anti-socialist factors expanded in the political and economic system, radical elements in culture and politics rose up to confront them. When these in turn went too far, degenerating into the 'ultra left', they triggered reverse social impulses, further confusing the camps of 'left' and 'right'.

The third period comprises the decades from the 1990s to the present. Compared to the previous eras, this can be described as a one-note tune. Chinese society stopped seeking different paths and instead turned right, in a sustained and comprehensive manner. The logic of capital quickly became the basic logic of the culture as a whole—not just of the economy. Politically, the theory of the American model and that of statism with Chinese characteristics seemed to be competing, in sharp opposition to each other; but in fact they largely crowded out the space for other ideas and provided *de facto* mutual support, joining forces to shrink the imaginative world in which it was possible to dream of the future. This was the first fully fledged turn to the right in modern Chinese history. It remains to be seen what new forms of social energy it may spark from the residue of the older Chinese revolution.

Early imprints

The early generation of China's modern thinkers left a series of firm imprints on the ideological landscape. Above all, they defined a new overarching question. In a society like China's, which had maintained a strong sense of integrity over a long period and almost never truly broke apart, a single ideological theme can retain enduring appeal; the most energetic thinkers are most keenly aware of it and engage with it repeatedly. From this perspective, the emergence of a new theme is the first indicator of an epoch of novel ideas. By the mid-1890s, from the most important court officials to common people in the countryside, growing numbers began to preface their thoughts with the phrase, 'A change that has not been seen for three thousand years'. The profound sense of crisis, which had previously been registered only by a small group of intellectuals in the capital, could now be felt by almost any educated person. 'Where is China going?' emerged as the new ideological theme, fast becoming the predominant one for serious thinkers.

Impressively, those who first outlined the new theme were quick to realize the enormous intellectual dilemmas and practical obstacles that it posed. Three will be signalled here. First, there was the problem of how to use the country's traditional culture—or how to do without it. Thousands of years of continuous civilization had accustomed Chinese thinkers to painting the future in the colours of the past. Since the Spring and Autumn Period, or around the 5th century BC, almost all new ideas had been based to some extent on these old foundations. However, from the 1880s onward, it was increasingly hard to rely on inherited social

structures, customs and values. When the western wind was about to blow off the roof, how could one maintain one's composure, leaning against the door frame and gazing into the far distance? The experience of contemporary reality, urgent and intense, would become the first basis for thought. Yet without an inventory of historical memory, and with no time to obtain reliable references from other sources, the lived experience of Chinese thinkers during this period would inevitably be messy and shallow. The difficulties of relying on such experience to understand reality and imagine the future are obvious.

The second dilemma was how to relate to the West. From the 1880s on, this 'West'—including Japan, its Asian version—became the most influential factor in the lives of most Chinese intellectuals. This involved a double blow. On the one hand, the clearer it became that the country's traditional culture could no longer help it gain a foothold in the harsh new world, the more likely these thinkers were to posit the West as the prime model. At the same time, the more they experienced the full force of Western oppression and aggression, the more natural it was for them to turn against it, not wanting China to become a 'yellow-faced Westerner'. This caused profound internal conflicts. How to view 'the West' became a major problem in imagining a new China—and a new world.

The third dilemma for these gentry thinkers was the social question. Many shared the general belief that the people's hearts were 'corrupt', in three senses: the moral, cultural and physical levels of the Chinese population were thought to be low; their political, economic and military capabilities would therefore be poor; and the existing institutions were incapable of raising them up. This was tantamount to saying that there were no readily available resources for creating a new China. If everything had to start from scratch, how could the first steps be taken?

One can readily imagine how brave and tenacious any thinking must be in face of such quandaries. Yet early modern Chinese thought rapidly demonstrated a series of important characteristics. The first was that it tended to side with the oppressed and to think from the perspective of the disadvantaged. In part, as in many non-Western regions of the world, this was a reaction against imperialist aggression and the result of being 'beaten'. However, one particularly pernicious aspect of capitalist-imperialist expansion was the spread of a notion of Western 'civilization' that served to confuse the minds of its victims: they forgot that they were being bullied because they were weak and instead came

to believe that they had attracted the attention of the 'advanced' countries because they were ignorant and backward. In other words, imperialism's barbaric expansion was interpreted as the global spread of a superior civilization. As a result, many colonized countries and oppressed peoples gradually accepted—or even subscribed to—the law of the jungle as the modern world order. While their bodies remained oppressed, their minds sided with the oppressors.

Early modern Chinese thought was different. Although it was determined to learn from the West, the understanding that 'weakness leads to being beaten' did not slip into the mentality of 'weakness is due to backwardness' and 'backwardness deserves to be beaten'. On the contrary, it kept in mind its own identity as a victim of bullying. The more it experienced the humiliation of weakness, and learned about the plight of other weak and troubled peoples, the more it distrusted the world order dominated by the great powers, which it rejected as a whole. It was this refusal to accept the law of the jungle that gave birth to the great ambition of modern Chinese thought—the determination not just to learn from the West to create a powerful new China, but to use the strength of this new China to help dismantle the jungle-like world order.

Pioneers

The first generation of thinkers, while calling on China to learn from the West, did not see those countries—chiefly, Britain, France, Germany, the US—as representing the pinnacle of human civilization. Nor did they believe that the new world order shaped by the West was one to which non-Western countries should unquestioningly conform. On the contrary, many approached the project of building a modern China with mixed emotions. One of the first to express this contradiction was the translator, travel writer and founder of China's first daily newspaper, Wang Tao.[3] As a pioneer—indeed, forerunner—of the new thinking,

[3] Wang Tao 王韬 (1828–97). Born in Changzhou, Jiangsu. Worked for thirteen years as a translator for British missionaries in Shanghai. In 1862, wanted by the Qing authorities after giving tactical advice to the Taiping, fled to Hong Kong; worked there with the Scottish scholar James Legge, translating Chinese classics. In 1867, sailed to Europe (on Legge's invitation) via Singapore, Ceylon and Cairo; published his impressions as *Jottings from Carefree Travel*, the first Chinese travel book on Europe. In 1874, founded in Hong Kong the first Chinese-language daily paper, the *Universal Circulating Herald*; editorialized for a reform agenda and constitutional monarchy. In 1884, returned to Shanghai, founded the Tao Garden publishing house; editor-in-chief of the Shanghai paper, *Shen Bao*.

who had himself travelled extensively in France, Britain and Japan, Wang was one of the most vocal proponents of learning from the West. Yet the first reason he gave for this pointed directly to the brutal nature of the era's international law:

> What they call the 'Law of Nations'（万国公法）only applies among nations that are militarily strong and economically prosperous, when their powers are balanced and equal; otherwise, this law is disregarded at will and manipulated to serve their own purposes.[4]

For Wang Tao, however, China had become inescapably entangled in the modern world dominated by the West, where reason and justice were the monopoly of 'the power-matched'; therefore, she had to become one of those powers, and to achieve this, it was imperative to learn comprehensively from the West. In Wang's reasoning, the need to learn from the West was deeply intertwined with a reluctant recognition that 'we have no choice but to adapt to the rules of barbarism'.

A decade later, the Naval officer, translator and educationalist Yan Fu restated Wang Tao's sense of contradiction at a deeper level.[5] Like Wang, Yan had travelled abroad—he spent two years at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich—and saw learning from the West as the quickest way to achieve modernization. In fact, he went well beyond Wang on cultural questions, arguing that much of the school curriculum should be taught in Western languages. Given his influence in Chinese society at the time—above all as a leading critic of the 1895 Shimonoseki Treaty, which imposed heavy reparations on China, as well as the loss of Taiwan and the Penghu Islands—Yan's bold appeal could be considered the first blueprint for China's complete Westernization.

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[4] Wang Tao, 'On Reform and Self-Strengthening', in Wang Xiaoming and Zhou Zhan'an, eds, *Selections of Modern Chinese Thought, Vol. 1* [中国现代思想文选, 上册], Shanghai 2013, p. 10; henceforth, SMCT, 1. Translation: NLR.

[5] Yan Fu 严复 (1854–1921). Born in Houguan, Fujian. Entered Fuzhou Naval College at thirteen; studied English and Western science. Sent by the Qing government to the Royal Naval College in Greenwich in 1877; would later translate Smith, Mill, Montesquieu, Spencer and Huxley. Leading opponent of the 1895 Shimonoseki Treaty; influential articles in this period included 'On the Urgency of World Change' and 'A Decisive Argument for National Salvation'. In 1897, founded *Guowen bao* [*National News*]; supported the Hundred Days' Reform. Later served as principal of the Imperial University of Peking (now Peking University). After the 1911 Revolution, became a restorationist; a founder of the pro-royalist Chouan Hui committee in 1915. Died in Houguan in 1921.

Yet even Yan Fu expressed a certain reluctance towards adopting the West's barbaric rules. He often pointed to the incomprehensibility of the evolutionary forces that had shaped the new era: 'The changes in the world—no one knows their ultimate cause', he wrote. Or again: 'By and large, the origins and ultimate essence of the universe are beyond human comprehension, which is to say that they cannot be named, theorized, or proven.'[6] Yan's agnostic plaints seem designed to alleviate the moral anxiety—shared with many of his contemporaries—about whether adapting to this 'changed world' was ethically justifiable. At the same time, they vividly reveal the inherent tensions in his attitude to the West.

Gold and iron

The next generation would go much farther. Let's take the case of Yang Du, literary scholar turned political economist, constitutional monarchist and leader of the Chinese student body in Tokyo in the early 1900s.[7] Yang was the author of a seminal manifesto, 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron' (1907), originally serialized in five parts in the students' magazine, *Zhongguo xinbao* [*New Journal of China*], which he edited. The 'Doctrine' was another proposal for how China could modernize, its core ideas modelled on the experience of Western powers. First, however, Yang provided an overview of the global situation. He declared in ringing tones that the so-called modern order was essentially a 'barbaric world', dominated by the 'civilized nations' of the West and governed by the law of the jungle, where the weak are prey to the strong.[8] This perspective was widely shared by Chinese intellectuals of that generation.

It's worth noting that the modern terms for 'barbarism' and 'civilization' used by Yang Du and others only began to appear in Chinese newspapers

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[6] Respectively: Yan Fu, 'On the Urgency of World Change', SMCT, 1, p. 16; Yan Fu, 'Introduction XVIII to *Evolution and Ethics*', SMCT, 1, p. 44.

[7] Yang Du 杨度 (1875–1931). Born in Xiangtan, Hunan. In 1903, placed second in national examination on political economy, but faced political persecution as a supporter of Kang Youwei. Fled to Japan, launched the constitutional-monarchist *Zhongguo xinbao* [*New Journal of China*] with Chinese students in Tokyo, published his 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron' there, January–May 1907. Returned to Beijing in 1908, worked with the conservative general Yuan Shikai. Appointed director of the National Bureau of Statistics in 1911. Leader of the Chouan Hui, backing Yuan's attempted restoration of the Empire; after Yuan's death in 1916, retreated into Buddhism. Later moved left, joining the KMT in 1922 and the CCP, on Zhou Enlai's introduction, in 1929. Died in Shanghai in 1931.

[8] Yang Du, 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron', SMCT, 1, pp. 190–1.

in the late 19th century, though they rapidly spread. A functionally similar set of distinctions had emerged in classical Chinese texts around 300 BC, contrasting China as a highly civilized (Huaxia 华夏) agrarian society with the 'barbarian' (Yi 夷) nomadic societies around it. This 'Huaxia–Yi' dyad, which persisted into the Qing Dynasty, made early modern Chinese thinkers receptive to the modern 'civilization–barbarism' duality, even though the basic meanings of the concepts were clearly different. The criterion for Huaxia–Yi was the existence of a Chinese-style culture in the form of dress, etiquette and so on, whereas that for the 'civilization-barbarism' duo was the international law of the jungle.

In his 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron', Yang Du still used the term 'civilized' to describe the Western powers—primarily Britain, France and the US—that had constructed and dominated this 'barbaric world'. He called them 'civilized nations' because, in his view, these countries had achieved an *internal* level of 'organization in politics', 'completeness in education', 'industrial development' and a 'culture of harmony and well-being among their citizens' that justified the term.[9] As a Chinese intellectual, Yang naturally detested many of the actions of the imperialist powers, but he did not let this blind him to the fact that many aspects of Western society were 'superior to those of our country' and worthy of study and emulation. More importantly, Yang went on to analyse the relationship between the 'internal' civilization of these Western powers and the overall barbarism of the world they dominated. In his view, that barbarism—the fact that countries had to fight for survival—had compelled them to unite their people to build strong national states. The most effective way to do so, he argued, was to establish a legal system tending toward equality, granting citizens civil rights and thereby fostering a sense of national identity. In other words, it was precisely the 'barbaric' nature of the modern world that pressured these countries to develop internal forms of organization that leaned toward 'civilization'.

From today's perspective, Yang Du's explanation may seem simplistic. But at the time, it was remarkably effective in reconciling two seemingly contradictory feelings about the modern West. Thinking those countries were highly advanced and worthy of emulation? Absolutely correct. Feeling that they were bullying us and being outrageously overbearing? Also correct. For Yang Du, the simultaneously civilized and barbaric features of the West were two sides of the same coin, mutually

[9] Yang, 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron', pp. 190–1.

reinforcing one another. Yang's explanation pointed to a further political rationale for 'why civilization is necessary in a barbaric world'. The clearer it becomes that a nation must join the barbaric competition of the modern world, the more this nation needs to create a civilized internal system. If Chinese society were organized domestically according to the law of the jungle, it would be impossible to build a strong and stable national power; and in international competition, China would inevitably fail.

This argument undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for advocating reform through Westernization. It allowed the humiliation and indignation felt by the Chinese people in the face of imperialist aggression to be absorbed into the drive for modernization, rather than channelled by conservative or xenophobic forces. Beginning with the reformist scholar Kang Youwei, Chinese thinkers advocating the need to learn from the West repeatedly used the examples of Vietnam, Korea, India and Turkey to paint the tragedy of 'certain destruction without reform', while exaggerating the optimism of 'rapid national strength through reform'.[10] Their strategy was based on a Yang Du-style perspective on the modern West.

War and revolution

Of course, Yang Du's approach could not resolve the anxieties indicated by Yan Fu's 'unknowability' of the modern world. While the New Culture Movement of the mid-1910s, leaning heavily on one-sided comparisons—the West excessively praised, China ferociously criticized—sparked another wave of support for comprehensive Westernization, the devastating outcome of the First World War came as

[10] Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927). Born in Nanhai, Guangdong. Studied under the Confucian scholar Zhu Ciqi, also reading Buddhist and Daoist classics. Prolific writer, constitutional monarchist and utopian Confucianist; led protests following the 1895 Sino-Japanese War. In 1898, key figure in the Hundred Days' Reform; the Empress Dowager demanded his execution. Fled abroad, travelled widely—the Americas, Southeast Asia, India, Europe—while drafting his utopia, *Datong shu* [*Book of Great Unity*]. Returned to Shanghai in 1913 and launched the magazine *Buren* [*Unbearable*], explaining: 'Seeing the hardships of the people, I cannot bear it; mourning the loss of the country, I cannot bear it . . . hence the magazine is called *Unbearable*.' In 1917, supported Zhang Xun's imperial-restoration attempt. Died in Qingdao in 1927.

a severe counter-shock.[11] It forced the Chinese intelligentsia to confront the contradictory reality of the modern West and re-think that relationship. I will cite just two examples here. The first is Zhang Junmai, a philosopher deeply devoted to Western political culture.[12] In early 1922, he argued that having witnessed the tragedy of the Great War and the 'crisis of European culture', the Chinese should move beyond the naïve mindset of 'whatever the Westerners do, we must do the same'. The need instead was to 'raise demands from within our own national spirit' to determine the direction for 'building the new culture of our nation in the future'.[13]

The second thinker is Liang Qichao, perhaps the most influential writer on political reform in the early 20th century.[14] Based on his analysis of

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[11] Not all the early modern thinkers—even those who leaned toward socialism, predominant in Chinese thought at that time—would distance themselves from the 'barbarism' of international affairs. Among others, Liang Qichao, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 and Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, later the first leader of the Communist Party, supported China's entry into WWI to regain the coastal areas controlled by Germany before 1914, then taken by Japan. Consciously or not, they thus avoided mention of the War's barbarity, as of the Entente Powers' holdings of Chinese territory.

[12] Zhang Junmai 张君劢 (1887–1969). Born in Baoshan, Jiangsu. Studied at Waseda University, Japan, and University of Berlin. Returned to China in 1916, editor-in-chief of *Shishi xinbao* [*New Current Affairs*]. In 1919, protested at the Versailles Peace Conference's high-handed treatment of China; 1921–23, worked with Rudolf Eucken in Jena. In 1923, founded a political institute in Shanghai to study democratic constitutions, closed by the KMT in 1927. In 1932, co-founded the China National Socialist Party, later the China Democratic Socialist Party. Attended the UN founding conference in 1945; drafted the constitution of the Republic of China in 1946. Fled to Hong Kong in 1949; died in San Francisco in 1969. Works include *The Chinese Culture of Tomorrow* (1936), *The Way to Establish the State* (1938).

[13] Zhang Junmai, 'The Crisis of European Culture and the Direction of China's New Culture', *Selections of Modern Chinese Thought*, *Vol. 2* [中国现代思想文选下册], SMCT, II, p. 406.

[14] Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929). Born in Xinhui, Guangdong. Studied under Kang Youwei at the Wanmu Caotang in Guangzhou; joined Kang's protest against the Shimonoseki Treaty. Founded *Shiwu bao* [*Current Affairs*] in Shanghai. Fled to Japan after defeat of the Hundred Days' Reform; toured Canada, the US, Australia. In 1902, founded *Xinmin congbao* [*New People's Gazette*] in Japan, publishing debates on revolution vs reform, democratic republic vs constitutional monarchy. In 1913, returned to China to lead the Progressive Party, initially supporting entry into the Great War. In 1915, organized the National Protection Army to oppose Yuan Shikai's restoration. Works include *A Comparative Study of Pre-Qin Interstate Political Philosophy* (1922) and *A Survey of Chinese Scholarship over the Past 300 Years* (1924).

the global trends following the First World War, Liang made a prognosis that today seems little short of amazing: 'The social conflicts and calamities produced by global industrial civilization will continue to shift and accumulate in China as a final gathering place'—and thus, 'the survival or demise of global capitalism may ultimately be decided by the outcome of the class struggle between labour and capital in our country'.[15]

If, for Yan Fu, the moral anxiety triggered by Westernization was primarily tied to the question of 'whether we should adapt to the barbaric rules of the new world', the two examples above indicate that by the early 1920s, the focus of the problem had shifted to 'whether it is possible to change these barbaric rules'. It was this shift that brought to the forefront a critical issue that Yang Du had avoided when elaborating his 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron'. Yes, to survive in the modern world, China would have to modernize, to build up sufficient brute strength and sharp enough fangs to resist the Western powers. But if this process of 'barbarization' was successful, would China gradually get used to preying on the weak and begin oppressing smaller nations and peoples? And if China didn't want to be like that, how could it 'barbarize', as it was being compelled to do, without turning into another jungle beast?

In 1908, the year after Yang Du published his 'Doctrine of Gold and Iron', Lu Xun, then studying in Japan and soon to become China's most significant modern writer, offered his response to these questions.[16] In face of the onslaught of imperialist powers, 'as fierce as tigers and wolves', China must certainly rise in resistance and drive them away; however, there should be a limit to this resistance. China should only 'drive them back to their homelands'. It 'must not succumb itself to beast-like tendencies'. In other words, the Chinese people must never become 'beast-like patriots'. How, then, can one avoid this? Lu Xun argued that

[15] Liang Qichao, 'Reply to Zhang Dongsun on the Socialist Movement', SMCT, II, pp. 140, 147.

[16] Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936). Born Zhou Zhangshou in Shaoxing, Zhejiang. Educated in Nanjing, studied medicine in Japan, 1902–09. Taught in Hangzhou, Shaoxing and elsewhere; joined the Ministry of Education in Beijing. In 1918, published the first vernacular novel in modern Chinese literature, *Diary of a Madman*, under pen name Lu Xun. Wrote many essays in addition to stories, novels and translations; edited journals, including *The Wilderness*, *Yusi* and *The Torrent*; member of the Chinese Freedom Alliance and the League of Left-Wing Writers, widely recognized as a standard-bearer of China's free-thinking cultural left. Died in Shanghai in 1936.

the key lay in maintaining a sense of self-reflection and recovering the original spirit of kindliness and peace: 'Turn inward and reflect upon oneself, this is the enemy of beastliness.'[17]

In 1924, the year before his death, the Kuomintang leader Sun Yat-sen delivered a series of speeches on nationalism.[18] Sun not only reiterated a view similar to Lu Xun's—that China's goal should not be to use its national strength to become top predator in the jungle-like world—but went beyond it, arguing that Chinese nationalism could only fulfil its 'heavenly mandate' by working with other oppressed peoples to eliminate the savage rules of the modern world and create a truly civilized 'universal harmony'[大同]. To achieve this, Sun proposed a method similar to Lu Xun's 'turn inward and reflect upon oneself': always 'remember the pain of suffering under the political and economic oppression of the imperialistic powers'. He firmly believed that as long as the Chinese did not forget this suffering, the country would not 'imitate the imperialism of the great powers, follow their path, and

[17] Lu Xun, 'On the Criticism of Evil Voices'(破恶声论), in *Collected Essays,* Vol. 11, eds Xu Guangping *et al.*, Beijing 1959, pp. 31–2. Lu Xun's call for self-reflection was based on his view at the time that China's long agrarian history had cultivated a collective temperament of mildness and peace in its people, who lacked the fierce nature of 'tigers and wolves'.

[18] Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925). Born Sun Zhongshan in Xiangshan, Guangdong, into a family of Hakka and Cantonese descent. In contrast to the gentry background of most thinkers of this generation, Sun's father was a smallholder. However, Sun's elder brother Sun Mei had left for Hawaii at the age of seventeen and prospered there as a plantation manager, store owner and rancher. In 1878, the teenage Sun joined him and was educated in English. Studied medicine in Hong Kong, graduating in 1892; against the constitutional reformism of Kang and Liang, Sun developed a politics of revolutionary republicanism, calling for the Qing Dynasty's overthrow. Fled into exile after defeat of the 1895 Guangzhou Uprising, travelling through Europe, North America and East Asia. In 1905, founded the Tongmenghui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance) in Japan. With other anti-Qing groups organized uprisings culminating in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution and proclamation of the Republic of China, with Sun its provisional president. Sun relinquished the presidency to ex-Qing General Yuan Shikai, who had been charged with getting the Qing court to abdicate, but then proclaimed himself Emperor, opening the era of civil war. In 1923, Sun forged an alliance with the fledgling Chinese Communist Party, reorganized his forces in the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China) and began construction of a national army. A series of speeches in China and Japan outlined his ideas on popular rights, multi-ethnic national unity, anti-colonialism and pan-Asian independence. Died in Beijing in 1925.

repeat their mistakes', even after China itself had grown strong and was no longer subject to imperialist oppression.[19]

At this point, the meaning of 'civilization', within the political rationale of 'why civilization is necessary in a barbaric world', becomes clear. The 'civilization' pursued by modern Chinese thought encompassed more than internal social structure; it also had international and global dimensions. Merely ending the law of the jungle within domestic society was insufficient. As Yang Du understood, internal civilized structures could easily become an organic part of the global law of the jungle. Only when the entire global framework has achieved a state of 'universal harmony' can human society truly enter the stage of civilization. And the 'civilization' discussed here summarizes a state that could roughly be equated with socialism in its broad sense.

Chinese thinkers and revolutionary leaders in the 1910s–30s were often keenly aware of the risks of becoming 'beast-like patriots' in the process of modernization. The strategies they proposed were not all focused on national introspection. For example, the classical philologist Zhang Taiyan worked tirelessly to build a modern Chinese state, while simultaneously exposing the toxicity of such a state and outlining ways to delimit its power.[20] The agrologist Zhang Shizhao developed a thoroughgoing critique of industrial expansionism, calling for modernization based on the 'spirit of agriculture'.[21] The 1920s also saw local movements

[19] Sun Yat-sen, 'The Sixth Lecture on Nationalism'(民族主义第六讲), SMCT, I, p. 228.

[20] Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936), aka Zhang Binglin. Born in Yuhang, Zhejiang. Studied under the classical Yu Yue. Worked with Liang Qichao in Shanghai, 1896–98; fled to Japan, met Sun Yat-sen. Imprisoned in Shanghai, 1903–06, for his writings. Returned to Japan, joined the Tongmenghui, edited its paper, *Min bao* [*The People's Newspaper*]. Among key essays of this period, see 'On the Nation', 'Five Negations'. In 1911, a founder of the Republic; put under house arrest by Yuan Shikai in 1913. Secretary-General of the Military Government during the Constitution Protection War (1917–22). In 1935, founded National Studies Society in Suzhou, teaching Chinese classics; edited the journal *Zhiyan*. Died in Suzhou in 1936.

[21] Zhang Shizhao 章士钊 (1881–1973). Born in Changsha, Hunan. Studied at the Lianghu Academy and Nanjing Military Academy. In 1903, editor-in-chief of the Shanghai newspaper *Su bao*. Later studied in Japan and the UK. Returned to China in 1911, editor of *Minli bao* [*People's Independence News*]; president of Beijing Agricultural University. After 1949, a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress; director of the Institute of History and Culture.

for rural reconstruction, animating villages in Hebei, Shandong and Shanxi provinces, continuing on a smaller scale in Sichuan even during the 1937–45 war against Japanese aggression. They manifested a broad-minded approach on both cultural and practical issues, helping to open up new areas for discussion.

Reflection after setbacks

There are many reasons to return to this early period of modern Chinese thought as we grapple with the problems of the contemporary world—not least, that it was the most open, most creative era, most directly expressing the original vitality of the Chinese revolution in ideas and practice that developed from the 1880s and 90s. We should note, too, the extraordinary resilience of this thinking: the vitality of an idea was not judged by its immediate success or failure; on the contrary, failures were taken as fresh starting points. The journey of the Chinese revolution was full of setbacks, military, economic and social; it was a process of 'repeated defeats, repeated battles'. Tackling negative real-life experience was thus a central task.

Wang Tao was a pioneer in this regard. Drawing upon an evolutionary theory of 'Dao', not unlike Marx's theory of history, he argued that the penetration of Western powers into China could provide an opportunity to unite the world of the future. Few thinkers of later generations were able to match his survey of the general trends of the age, as if viewed from a high mountain. Wang Tao's method—interpreting 'regression' at the micro level as a manifestation of 'progress' at the macro level—was followed by various revolutionary forces in the 20th century. Zhang Taiyan's 'theory of world-weariness' in his 'Five Negations' (1907) argued instead that notions of progress were one-sided illusions. But he used this as the yeast to cultivate a positive sense of struggle. This was a more robust endeavour than Wang Tao's: rather than relying on 'optimism', it was based on creating an active spirit driven by pessimism, one that would be particularly resilient and could withstand repeated setbacks and failures. Lu Xun's 'resistance in despair' was a prominent example.

These efforts to grapple with negative experience contributed to the special quality of early modern Chinese thought. It often used 'reflection after setbacks' as a process of self-improvement. This was not the general idea of learning from one's mistakes, which often leads to the

cancellation of the original goal, but rather looking for the possibility of success in failure; turning every retreat into a forward movement of ideas that brings one closer to that goal. Many important intellectual advances were achieved this way: the theory of 'revolution' after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, the rise of the New Culture Movement after the political corruption of the early Republic, the discovery of the revolutionary energy of the peasantry after the 1910s. The ability of Chinese thought in this era to wrestle with such problems was truly remarkable. It may give us the confidence to say that, in the ever-changing and unpredictable contemporary world, we too are not empty-handed.

As this brief overview makes clear, modern Chinese thinkers did not advocate learning from the West because they regarded it as a perfect model; on the contrary, they were quick to recognize its flaws. Yet they did not let the barbarity of the Western powers in international affairs overshadow their achievements in other domains. Using these as a reference, Chinese thinkers addressed the barbarism within their own society and adopted different modes of self-criticism and self-transformation—including a determined effort to learn from the West.

Of course, their ideals were not realized. Sometimes it seems that reality has drifted further away from them than ever. In today's world, large-scale wars continue to rage, to the point where smaller-scale wars don't even make it into the headlines; the ongoing civil war in South Sudan and the border conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan are two recent examples. Governments are expanding military budgets, with the arms industry at full capacity and struggling to meet the demand. Even non-military enthusiasts are discussing weaponry excitedly, while estrangement and distrust between peoples are becoming widespread. The re-barbarization of our societies, both internally and externally, seems to be a major contemporary trend. On the other hand, the disheartening realities we face today bring into sharp relief a principle vividly articulated in early Chinese modern thought: the barbarity of others must never extinguish our pursuit of civilization. Quite the opposite; the exposure of barbarisms elsewhere should only deepen our determination to confront our own.

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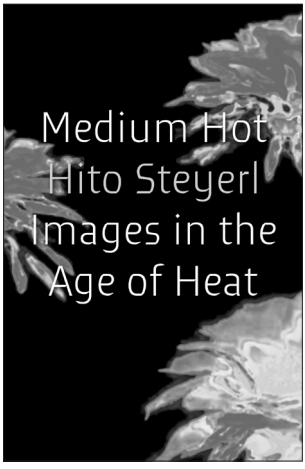

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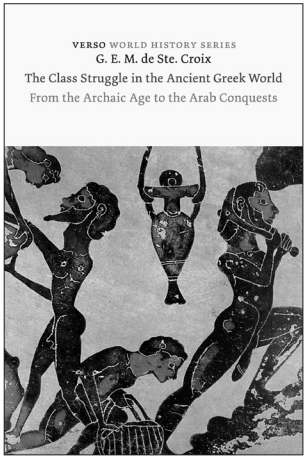

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VERSO

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TRUSTING ART?

A Reply to Malcolm Bull

'Why is there the amount of art that there is?'—the title of Malcolm Bull's stimulating article—is an original, odd, question-provoking question.[1] Not least: how much art is there? We can perhaps imagine a time when one could have totted up all the finished paintings and sculptures coming out of artists' workshops. In our era, however, matters are more ontologically complex. To work out how many works of art exist—and to hazard explanations about why just that many do—we need to agree on what counts as one. This is an issue that acquired a vexatious salience in the twentieth century, after Duchamp signed a urinal 'R. Mutt', titled it *Fountain* and attempted to exhibit it in New York in 1917. Readymades and other avant-garde innovations, Bull argues, have thrown the category of art wide open. Now, he contends, 'anything can be art', including a banana duct-taped to a wall—otherwise known as the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's 2019 piece *Comedian*, which sold at Sotheby's for $6.2 million last November.

Before the twentieth century, artworks were largely confined to established mediums, and to a circumscribed range of specific materials—oil paint on canvas and so on—and tended to be prized in part because they were visibly the results of skilled craftsmanship. Contemporary art, by contrast, can be made out of virtually anything, even nothing much at all: a balloon of the artist's breath. The advent of conceptualism, Hal Foster notes, 'especially as it prompted the "post-studio" and "post-medium" practices of the 1970s and 1980s', permitted 'almost anything—a statement, a snapshot, the slightest gesture—to qualify'.[2] Less the product of virtuosity than choice—or chutzpah—such art can be cheap, even free,

to make (or is the right word 'install' or 'think up'?): Cattelan's $6.2 million banana cost him 35 cents.[3]

Given this seeming free-for-all, why isn't there 'a lot more' art? Bull presents this as a mystery:

> If the artworld is able to make art out of anything, then there would appear to be clear incentives, whatever the criteria invoked, to maximize the quantity of art. Not only is art often considered, especially by those involved in the artworld, to be an intrinsic good, but having more art would mean that the artworld could expand as well, and, given that art objects are often worth more than their non-art equivalents, that there was an economic basis for this growth. The artworld has indeed expanded enormously, and there are now museums of contemporary art in many cities of the world, but it has, nevertheless, not expanded as much as it might have done, given the theoretically limitless potential for growth.[4]

Bull is not after empirical, sociological explanations—hypotheses about why more people don't become artists, and why those who do aren't more prolific—but the abstract laws governing the dynamics of the artworld. The latter was the conceptual linchpin of the institutional theories of art developed by the American philosophers Arthur Danto and George Dickie in the 1960s, when conceptual art was reaching 'both its apogee and crisis', as Tony Godfrey observes.[5] Danto was attempting to explain, Bull notes, 'how it was that something could be art while being identical to something which was not': how it was, to take Danto's example, that Warhol's replica Brillo boxes are artworks while 'real' Brillo cartons in a stockroom are not.

Danto and Dickie both argued that it was the 'artworld' that could turn an everyday object into an artwork, though they meant different things by the term. Danto claimed that 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.' He goes so far as

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[1] Malcolm Bull, 'Why Is There the Amount of Art That There Is?', NLR 151, Jan–Feb 2025.
[2] Hal Foster, 'Exhibitionists', *London Review of Books*, vol. 37, no. 11, 4 June 2015.
[3] Zachary Small, 'Who's Laughing Now? Banana-as-Art Sells for $6.2 Million at Sotheby's', *New York Times*, 20 November 2024.
[4] Bull, 'Why', p. 90.
[5] Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London 1998, p. 6.

to insist that theories 'make artworks possible'.[6] Dickie brought Danto's rather nebulous artworld down to earth: an artwork is an 'artefact' on which 'some society or some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation'. An artwork is an artwork because someone 'vested with authority' 'christens' it so. Such authority, Dickie writes, is 'nowhere codified' but exists 'at the level of customary practice' which 'defines a social institution'. Thus 'it all depends on the institutional setting'.[7] A banana is a banana; the bananas selected by Maurizio Cattelan (*Comedian* was released in an edition of three), promoted by his dealer, sold at Art Basel Miami Beach and Sotheby's, or donated to the Guggenheim, are artworks.

What does Bull himself mean by 'artworld'? He seems to adopt Dickie's 'emphasis on the actual social networks—artists, gallerists, curators, critics, auction houses, museums, academic institutions—that collectively make something into art'. Yet Bull's use of the term suggests a narrower application. The artworld has 'clear incentives . . . to maximize the quantity of art', he writes, because 'having more art would mean that the artworld could expand as well', yet he does not explicitly say what is driving that expansion. The most obvious incentive—the dominant force of expansion in the contemporary world—is the accumulation of capital. In that case, it's not simply that there is an 'economic basis' for the growth of the artworld, as Bull's slightly euphemistic formulation has it, but that the *raison d'être*—the prime mover—of such growth is economic: the acquisition of—and potentially profitable trade in—valuable assets. An artworld set on expanding for the sake of it is not 'an atmosphere of artistic theory' but a capitalist market for art.[8]

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[6] Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 19, October 1964, pp. 571–84.

[7] George Dickie, 'Defining Art', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 3, July 1969, pp. 253–6.

[8] Hal Foster dates the emergence of the modern art market to the 1960s—perhaps not coincidentally the decade that also saw the rise of the institutional theories of the 'artworld' and of conceptual art as a practice: 'The art market as we know it now . . . is an effect of the growth of an international bourgeoisie that emerged in the boom years of the 1960s with surplus capital to expend, some of it on art, particularly American Pop, that brand which, as the art historian Thomas Crow recently put it in *Artforum*, "looked like products being sold like products". The network of commercial galleries expanded greatly at that time, as did the influence of dealers and collectors'. 'The Medium Is the Market', *London Review of Books*, vol. 30, no. 19, 9 October 2008.

In this sense, despite the passing allusion to art as an 'intrinsic good', Bull's overarching question appears to be a hardnosed one, which we might paraphrase as: why isn't the artworld fully exploiting the 'theoretically limitless' opportunities for profiteering—in the form of all the everyday objects that haven't yet been defined and sold as artworks? What regulates—i.e., constrains or inhibits—the size of the market for conceptual readymades? Bull's ingenious answer to this question draws on the work of the Chicago economist Frank Knight, who argued that profit ultimately depends on uncertainty—it 'arises out of the inherent, absolute unpredictability of things'—without which it would be gamed out of existence.[9] Duchamp's urinal, Bull proposes, 'introduced uncertainty' about 'what a work of art actually was'. Yet this profitable uncertainty has to be managed, lest it deter buyers and destroy the market—Bull cites George Akerlof's example of 'the automobile market', in which bad cars ('lemons'), dishonestly sold, tend to drive 'legitimate business out of existence'.[10]

The artworld, in Bull's reading, functions as a 'trust intermediary', offering reassurance that the risk 'involved in treating an everyday object as a precious work of art'—in, say, investing $6.2 million in a banana and a piece of duct tape—is worth taking ('a good bet'). The artworld therefore needs periodic 'injections of distrust'—the avant-garde's offerings—in order to justify its actuarial role. An everyday object like Cattelan's *Comedian* 'introduces uncertainty', and its sale 'completes the cycle, confirming that the artist, the dealer, the museum and the auction house can be trusted after all'. Bull's hypothesis is that the size of the artworld—'the amount of art that there is'—is determined by a 'delicate balance between too little trust, which suppresses demand, and too much, which undermines the unique role of the supplier.' He goes on to explore the dubious fortunes of the market for digital art—Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)—and to consider how far they break free from the 'trust architecture' of the artworld by offering the 'trustless trust' of blockchain technology, an 'anonymous decentralized system' in which, Bull explains, 'nothing is assumed to be trustworthy' except the network, ultimately the algorithm, itself.[11]

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[9] Frank Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, Boston 1921, p. 311.
[10] George Akerlof, 'The Market for Lemons: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 84, no. 3, August 1970, p. 495.
[11] Bull, 'Why', pp. 97, 99, 101.

Yet a more obvious, if less imaginative, answer to the question of why there isn't more art, specifically more 'readymades and other forms of deskilled art', has to do not with the intricacies of trust but the banality of demand. The value of readymades, like that of other commodities, is, one assumes, partly sustained by their scarcity. To present too many everyday objects as artworks would risk flooding the market. Bull himself seems to admit this explanation late on: too much new art 'could ultimately devalue existing art (both aesthetically and economically), making the artworld very cautious in its expansion'. In the course of comparing the art market to that for crypto currencies and NFTs, he thus notes that Bitcoin is 'relatively resilient' because it is capped at 21 million. Toward the end of the article, he also describes the 'traditional art market' as beleaguered by 'chronic overproduction; massive unsold inventory, and poor returns on all but a fraction of products'—which implies that there is already a glut of artworks, and that there isn't an obvious 'economic basis' for the artworld's further expansion.[12]

The uses of bananas

Consider an analogy. Say there were a 'theoretically limitless' supply of oil and that nowhere was out of bounds—it was feasible and legal for oil companies to drill on every piece of land and sea (anything can be art)—but not everywhere was being drilled (there are fewer artworks than there could be). In such circumstances, we would likely not assume that the oil companies were behaving with 'self-restraint', as Bull puts it, but that they had evidently determined that drilling for more oil was not profitable because supply would outstrip demand. Thus even in the real world, where the supply of oil is ultimately finite, OPEC frequently reduces output to shore up prices, and by extension profits. Ostensibly, the artworld, like the consortium of oil companies, recognizes that scarcity—an artefact of demand relative to supply—underpins market value, and thus the need to maintain it, artificially if necessary.

The analogy between oil and art is of course inapt in interesting ways: oil is finite and expensive to extract and refine; art in the age of conceptual

[12] Bull, 'Why', pp. 103, 100, 108. It's perhaps worth noting that Bull's question—why is there not more art?—could in principle be asked no matter how much the artworld had expanded: if the artworld's 'potential for growth' is truly 'theoretically limitless', then it will always be smaller than it could be, and so the question could always be posed.

readymades, by contrast, Bull suggests, is 'limitless' and can be produced for as little as 35 cents. Consider the different sorts of factors that determine demand in each case. The demand for oil is dictated by, among other things, how much people commute and travel, how far we move goods, how much we need to heat and cool buildings, how available and affordable alternative fuels are, not to mention how many states are at war. Oil consumption is a function of aggregate activity, of what billions of people find it necessary or useful or desirable to do. The demand for readymades, by contrast, judging by the $6.2 million purchase of one of Cattelan's bananas—the buyer was Justin Sun, a cryptocurrency magnate—would appear to be far more anti-social and weightless: the whim of one ultra-wealthy individual.

The economic determinants of demand for readymades are more mystifying in part because their 'use-value' is less apparent. 'Art objects are often worth more than their non-art equivalents', Bull notes: they have a higher exchange-value, in some cases exponentially higher (35 cents vs $6.2 million). Yet everyday objects arguably have a higher—or at least more conspicuous and immediate—use-value than their art equivalents. Duchamp's *Fountain* is not a functioning urinal, and Cattelan's bananas are not for eating (though Sun did eat his onstage, claiming 'the real value is the concept itself'; the work includes instructions for replacing the banana).[13] Bull refers, following Danto, to the artworld's 'Midas touch', and it was after all because Midas's wished-for alchemical powers transmuted food into gold—use-value into exchange-value—that he starved. The 'uselessness' of art has classically been seen as the ground of value of a more immaterial kind: aesthetic, ethical, spiritual, social, political. But art is also a commodity whose value is thoroughly worldly: a prestigious luxury, used to display wealth or make more of it—a speculative asset in a sphere that tends to be less regulated and rigorously taxed than the official securities market.

Why did Sun buy the banana? The purchase of *Comedian*, Cattelan's gallerist claims, is itself part of the artwork: 'The fact that somebody buys it makes the piece'.[14] He may be right insofar as the sum Sun paid was in a

[13] Kaye Wiggins and Chan Ho-him, 'Trump-Linked Crypto Founder Eats $6mn Banana on Stage', *Financial Times*, 29 November 2024.

[14] Robin Pogrebin, 'That Banana on the Wall? At Art Basel Miami It'll Cost You $120,000', *New York Times*, 6 December 2019. Eminences in 'Business Art'—Hirst, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami—'work in such a way as to make the market the medium of the art': Hal Foster, 'The Medium Is the Market'.

sense itself what made the work valuable to him: the $6.2 million price tag succeeded in producing headlines that may end up being worth more than the amount he spent eliciting them, if the stunt helps with what Bull calls a 'banana-based rebrand' of Sun's line of NFTs, Tron Bored Apes (he has 'an unsold inventory of thousands of unminted Mutant Apes').

Readymades 'are so rare as to generate headlines', Bull observes, and this tends not to be an incidental feature.[15] If their value in part depends on their publicity, then the economy of attention might also explain why there are not more of them: they would stop generating news stories. Sun presumably figured *Comedian* was a 'good bet' not because he thinks he can re-sell it for more than he paid (though who knows), but because he realizes that money can buy attention and attention can in turn be monetized. Insofar as the wild sum Sun paid for Cattelan's banana attracted attention which can be converted into value, it may not have been so wild an extravagance after all.

On this view, precious readymades may be rare because attention is scarce and valuable. Perhaps then the analogy with oil is more exact or salient than it appeared. '"Data is the new oil" has become a kind of mantra of the age', but in reality information 'is the opposite of a scarce resource: it is everywhere and there is always more of it'.[16] It is attention that is 'like gold in a stream, oil in a rock', a finite resource for which competition is becoming increasingly ferocious, as Big Tech seeks to bore ever further into the untapped crevices of our waking hours.

Indifference

How might we answer Bull's question if we were to take readymades seriously as artworks as opposed to regarding them merely as commercial stunts or speculative assets? That is to say: are there aesthetic reasons—reasons internal to art, reasons relating to what a readymade *is*—why there aren't more of them? What conclusions should we draw from the sale of Cattelan's *Comedian*, not simply about the mechanics of the art market but about the values of the artworld and the laws of art history?

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[15] 'The avant-garde, mass media and scandal have often gone together; the difference today is that the proportions are way out of whack': Foster, 'Exhibitionists'.
[16] Chris Hayes, *The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource*, New York 2025, pp. 14, 5.

As Bull's elaboration of the artworld's 'trust architecture' implies, one reason why there aren't more readymades is that inducting too many everyday objects into the hallowed realm of art could desacralize the category. It seems plausible to imagine that art as a valued cultural practice can only withstand so many of these stunts before the public's patience—and perhaps faith—would be exhausted. But from this point of view—according to which one readymade may have been one too many—the mystery is not that there are not more readymades but that the artworld has gotten away with as many as it has. Or perhaps contemporary misgivings are such that it hasn't gotten away with it. How do we know there aren't already too many, rather than too few, readymades? In *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve argued that the contemporary art public is not indignant or outraged but as 'indifferent' to readymades as readymades themselves are 'indifferent', made from 'indifferent' objects:

> the public at large has lost all interest in contemporary art, in which it sees nothing but the reign of the whatever, while the art establishment works hard to prove to the public, or to itself, that this whatever is not just anything whatever.[17]

Bull faults the institutional theory for failing 'to specify the criteria by which qualitative judgements are made'—the criteria according to which everyday objects are defined as artworks—but he does not remedy this lacuna; his focus is on the 'quantitative dimension'. He doesn't ask whether *Comedian* is a good artwork, or whether we might *want* there to be more art like it. 'One achievement of the avant-garde has been to show that anything can be art', he begins. The tone of this opening statement is somewhat inscrutable, but it is not beyond challenge: is it an unmixed 'achievement'—an unambiguous sign of artistic progress—that fruit can be exhibited alongside, and sold for as much as, a Rembrandt? The impassive omission of explicit qualitative considerations from Bull's article, which seems not to flinch at the prospect of art museums turning into warehouses of bananas, seems itself a sign of cynicism about the artworld, now seen to be little more than an engine,

[17] Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, London and Cambridge MA 1999 [1996], p. 330. In 1961, Duchamp said that 'A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these "Readymades" was never dictated by an aesthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of *visual* indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . In fact a complete anaesthesia': quoted in Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 27.

fuelled by spectacle and fashion, for untrammelled commodification—a cynicism so entrenched it goes without saying.

And whether or not it constitutes an 'achievement', is it entirely true that the avant-garde has shown that 'anything can be art'? That because urinals and bananas have been exhibited and sold—institutionally certified, so to speak—that any everyday object at all could become an artwork? Is it the case that because one of Carl Andre's neat pile of fire-bricks, *Equivalent VIII* (1966), was bought by the Tate in 1972, there are as many possible artworks as there are bricks, or different building materials? Presenting a pile of different bricks would likely not be seen as presenting a new artwork. Justin Sun ate his pricey banana onstage to demonstrate that 'the real value is the concept itself'. One doesn't need to take this stunt seriously to recognize that in practice we do treat Cattelan's bananas as a single conceptual gesture. When Yves Klein held an exhibition of an empty gallery in 1958, it did not give licence to other artists to make similar artworks out of 'thin air', just as John Cage's 4'33" did not lead to a proliferation of silent compositions (that we know of).

If Duchamp's signed urinal opened floodgates of a kind, it didn't make it possible to turn all urinals into artworks. In fact, *Fountain* arguably fore-closed that possibility: although a perennial point of reference, spawning homages made out of bronze for example, the porcelain urinal as an artwork—the urinal as an idea for an artwork—is, as it were, forever taken. Avant-garde art progresses by a kind of one-upmanship—'the negation, critique or calling into question' of 'an existing value or institution', as per the theories of modernism described by Bull. Hence in 2016 Cattelan installed a toilet made out of solid gold in the Guggenheim (as though to literalize Bull's question about whether the artworld has a 'Midas touch').

Cattelan's gold toilet (titled *America*) highlights another feature of this conceptual kind of readymade which casts doubt on the idea that they can be anything at all. Doesn't the efficacy of such works precisely rely on juxtaposing the banality of the mass-produced commodity—as ubiquitous and ignoble as urinals or bananas—with its sacrosanct singularity once it has been canonized an artwork, an object that was traditionally handmade and singular? Readymades highlight the radical difference in value accorded to the object in its functional environment and in a museum (they are thus always self-reflexive). 'Anything' is a

subtly equivocal word: that any old thing can be an artwork does not necessarily mean that absolutely everything can be art. A traditionally precious artefact such as a handmade mahogany armoire would be a puzzling offering. Readymades tend to be not simply commonplace objects, but paradigmatically commonplace ones—vacuum cleaners and urinals, bananas and unmade beds—and are thus pointed, provocative, often ludic choices.

Recognizing art

The question the original institutional theorists of art sought to resolve was: how do we know that—or when—an object is an artwork? How can we be sure to recognize art when we see it now that replica Brillo boxes turn up in galleries? Danto claimed that 'telling artworks from other things is not so simple a matter . . . and these days one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so'. For Dickie, as we saw, it is not 'theory' so much as 'what is done with' the artworks—where they are displayed—that settles the matter. This leads him to claims with extreme implications:

> The Field Natural History Museum in Chicago recently exhibited some chimpanzee paintings. In the case of these paintings we must say that they are not works of art. However, if they had been exhibited a few miles away at the Chicago Art Institute they would have been works of art. (If, so to speak, the director of the Art Institute had gone out on a limb.) It all depends on the institutional setting.[18]

Following Dickie's logic, must we also accept that a Rembrandt displayed in a science museum—or used as an ironing board, as Duchamp considered doing—would cease to be art? The answer Robert Hughes gives to this question in *The Shock of the New* is 'no'. He agrees that Carl Andre's 'array of bricks depends not just partly, but entirely, on the museum for its context', but nothing follows from this: 'A Rodin in a parking lot is still a misplaced Rodin; Andre's bricks in the same place can only be a pile of bricks.'[19] No matter how much history and theory you've mastered, if

[18] Dickie, 'Defining Art', p. 256.

[19] Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, London 1980, pp. 392–4. The idea that artworks can be (institutionally) misplaced—a Rodin mislaid in car park—might give us cause to question Bull's claim that 'There is nothing that is generally considered to be art that the institutional theory cannot account for': Bull, 'Why', p. 90.

you came across Andre's *Equivalent VIII* on a building site, you might not even notice it, let alone realize you were in the presence of art. On the other hand, you might, for such Minimalist sculptures have altered our way of seeing, such that we're more attuned to the aesthetic properties of raw materials and industrial landscapes. Cattelan's *Comedian* might be undetectable in a fruit bowl, but does its dependence on context oblige us to generalize to a definition of art as a whole? Is there nothing 'the eye can descry', as Danto put it—no 'exhibited characteristic', in Dickie's terms—in a Rembrandt painting that makes it an artwork beyond its being hung in a particular building and the beholder happening to be an artworld initiate?

It's not in any case universally true of readymades that there is nothing visible that gives the game away. Duchamp's urinal, after all, was turned upside down and signed. Cattelan's *Comedian* also differs somewhat from its 'non-art equivalents' since it is not just a banana but a banana duct-taped to a wall. What is such an object's natural habitat, its plausible everyday context? The duct-tape, fixing the banana at eye level, is a signal that something is on display. It's not clear we need institutional signals—whether a theory of art or the four walls of a gallery—to infer that such an unusual sight is something like an artwork, understood in the minimal sense of something that someone meant us to look at.

Even though some of the institutionalists' claims can seem wrong-headed or unconvincing, the issue they were preoccupied by—how to recognize art when we see it—is a profound one. It is a question not confined to avant-garde art, even if the latter poses it with special force, since the viewer can't rely on the usual clues such as classic formal properties or traditional materials. There is 'uncertainty involved in treating an everyday object as a precious work of art'—doing so is a 'risk', as Bull observes, but not just a financial one. What does it mean for a work of art to be a 'good bet' in aesthetic terms? What would have to happen for Justin Sun's purchase to be proven a bad bet? Arthur Danto insists that it is 'theory' that takes a readymade 'up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is'.[20] What if Sun, after bringing *Comedian* home—removing it from the artworld's 'atmosphere of artistic theory'—realized with horror that all he'd bought was a banana? Supposing Sun's investment in Cattelan's *Comedian* were

[20] Danto, 'The Artworld', p. 581.

genuinely connoisseurial rather than instrumentally entrepreneurial, he might feel cheated or disappointed by the banana not if he realized it was a banana—how could he fail to have realized that?—but if he realized it was *no more* than a banana: not a work of art.

This risk—not the risk that an artwork will depreciate in value, or even that you'll cease to like it, but that what you thought was art is in fact not art at all—is among the subjects of an essay published in 1967, the year before Dickie's, by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. 'Music Discomposed', though it makes no mention of the 'artworld', is concerned with how to tell the difference between art and non-art, and with the question of uncertainty—not in Bull's sense as an element of institutional logic, a condition of profit, but as an experience, a feature of personal encounters with art. Cavell was not interested in the possibility of misrecognition—the public failing to realize that Warhol's Brillo box is art—but in the 'possibility of fraudulence': the possibility that Warhol's Brillo box *isn't* art, that it is only pretending to be art. Extrapolating from contemporary music, he argued that 'the experience of fraudulence, is endemic' in contemporary art:

> its full impact, even its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed. I do not see how anyone who has experienced modern art can have avoided such experiences, and not just in the case of music. Is Pop Art art? Are canvases with a few stripes or chevrons on them art? . . . the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art . . . Contemporary music is only the clearest case of something common to modernism as a whole, and modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art. (That is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose.)[21]

Contemporary art such as readymades, on this view, radicalizes the 'dangers of fraudulence, and of trust' (they are 'injections of distrust', as Bull puts it). When Piero Manzoni drew lines on sheets of paper and sealed them in boxes in 1959, the viewer, Tony Godfrey explains, 'had to take it on trust that there really was a line inside. He or she had to make an act of faith.'[22] The same is true of the 'invisible' sculpture Walter De Maria made in 1977, 'a hole one kilometre deep into which a brass rod one

[21] Stanley Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated edn, Cambridge 2015 [1969], pp. 174–5.
[22] Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 81.

kilometre long was inserted' and which was then 'capped with a metal plate'. As Robert Hughes notes, 'few works of art have required such an act of faith in their existence' ('which is why', he adds, 'publicity was an essential component of *Vertical Kilometre*').[23] The latter is an extreme instance of a provocatively dubious form.

'A work of art', Godfrey observes, 'normally behaves as if it were a statement: "This is a sculpture of the Old Testament hero David by Michelangelo" . . . We accept it both as a representation and as being *ipso facto* art. In contrast the readymade is presented not as a statement, "This is a urinal", but as a question or challenge: "Could this urinal be an artwork? Imagine it as art!".[24] I would argue that a sculpture by Michelangelo doesn't even behave as a statement: its status as art isn't in question so it doesn't need to superadd a claim to be. If all artworks ask our trust—ask that we make an investment of time and attention that we don't know in advance won't be 'betrayed', in Cavell's terms—they can also earn and repay it. Conceptual artworks like De Maria's *Vertical Kilometre*, by contrast—an artwork which we can't fully see no matter how long we inspect it—can in a sense never earn our trust and never vindicate it, except in so far as we come to the view that abstract reflection on the conceit—including the conceit of having to take the artist's word for it—is interesting and worthwhile. Yet if its 'real value is the concept', as Sun said of Cattelan's banana, then one can't help feeling that the brass 'invisible sculpture' needn't have been made (if indeed it was): you could gain as much by hearing about it.

'Could this urinal be an artwork?', Duchamp asked. 'What about if I make it out of gold?', Cattelan's 18-karat toilet seems to be asking in return. The Ur-emblem of value, a rare metal whose worth is steady enough to underpin currencies and to be a 'safe haven' for investors, gold seems a way of certifying the artwork, of putting its worth, its trustworthiness, beyond doubt. At a recent exhibition of Arte Povera at the Pinault Collection in Paris there was a pile of potatoes among which were nested a few that looked like they were made of bronze, as though to provide the visual confirmation we seek, the something the eye *can* descry that proves it is an artwork. But of course even a precious metal

[23] Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, p. 390.

[24] Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 4–6. Thierry de Duve, by contrast, defines the readymade 'as neither an object or a set of objects nor a gesture nor an artistic intention, but rather, as a statement. It is the sentence, "this is art", such as it is pinned to absolutely any object whatsoever': *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 333.

cannot provide the certainty that it purports to. It can certify an artwork's material value—we can be sure that the toilet and the potatoes are worth their weight in gold and bronze—but it cannot dispel our doubt about its worth as an artwork: whether it is what Cavell calls 'the genuine article', or just a gratuitously flashy, aesthetically bankrupt repetition of a century-old gesture. (Indeed after the likes of Hirst's diamond-studded skull, one may feel that such conspicuously luxurious materials are cheapening, and even underscore, as though compensating for, the vacuity of the object as an artwork.) 'About works of art one may wish to say that they require a continuous seeing of the point', Cavell writes. This is the grain of truth in Danto's notion that 'to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry'. 'Seeing the point', we might say, is seeing something the eye alone cannot descry.

The idea of ownership

If avant-garde artworks are in some sense inherently untrustworthy, whom or what can we trust? Bull argues that we need the artworld as a 'trust intermediary' precisely because we can't trust the artist alone: 'Nobody is likely to hand over a million dollars to an artist in exchange for a banana bought for 35¢ just like that, because the artist might easily change their mind about whether it was really a work of art.' This implies that an object is an artwork only as long as the artist intends it to be, that the artist, were it not for the institutional veto of the artworld, would have the power to retract its status. But Cavell argues that 'the artist himself may not know' if his artwork is 'fraudulent'. 'How can we be sure you're not putting us on?', a resident of Hartford, Connecticut, asked Carl Andre, whose outdoor work 'Stone Field Sculpture', composed of 36 boulders arranged in rows, had been installed downtown. 'Matter-of-factly and with no apparent resentment', the *New York Times* reported, Andre replied: 'I may be putting myself on. If I'm deceiving you, then I've deceived myself. It's possible.'[25]

As we saw, Bull argues that the sale of the object that introduced uncertainty—in this case Cattelan's *Comedian*—'completes the cycle, confirming' that the artworld 'can be trusted after all'. An untrustworthy work like *Comedian* may call for a 'trust intermediary', but for its

[25] Quoted in Randy Kennedy, 'Carl Andre, 88, Austerely Minimalist Sculptor, Is Dead', *New York Times*, 24 January 2024.

sale to confirm that intermediary's trustworthiness, wouldn't we already have to be convinced that it is a 'precious work of art' as opposed to an overpriced banana? To take George Akerlof's example: the purchase of a second-hand car from a car dealer doesn't exactly '*establish* trust' in the dealer, as Bull puts it, though it's true if the car dealer is popular—has lots of evidently trusting customers—then that might encourage new customers to take the risk of trusting it too. Buying a car from a dealer may be an *expression* of trust in the dealer (though it may be closer to an 'act of faith'). But the purchase doesn't itself vindicate that trust; only the car subsequently proving to be in good working order would do that, retroactively. You would think, moreover, that the trustworthiness of the institution—whether the artworld or the car dealer—would be affirmed by the *ejection* of the source of uncertainty—the dodgy car or spurious artwork—not its lucrative sale. Couldn't the sale of Cattelan's banana be seen as a case of the institutional endorsement of ersatz art, which would undermine rather than shore up faith in the certifying authority? The sale of *Comedian*, on this view, would appear to be closer to a successful scam that dents what remains of our trust in the artworld. The source of the 'quality uncertainty', in Akerlof's example, is precisely the existence of dud cars—'lemons'—and dishonest salesmen attempting to palm them off as good ones. In submitting a urinal to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917, 'Duchamp exploited this unacknowledged area of uncertainty' about what art was, 'and his urinal was rejected', Bull notes—not sold for a profit. Can the source of uncertainty in the system—a banana or a urinal posing as an artwork—itself be the source of profit? Trust in the artworld would surely be earned more effectively by a salon of the rejected—an exhibition of would-be readymades, everyday objects that didn't make the cut.

Herein lies what may be some confusion in Bull's comparison between the market for readymades and those for crypto and Non-Fungible Tokens. NFTs—which can be used for anything, from images to songs to concert tickets—are digital certificates of ownership, as Bull notes. Bitcoin and NFTs use blockchain technology to assure users that each coin or token is not a counterfeit or a copy but 'verifiably unique'. What they certify, in other words—what the 'trustless trust architecture' guarantees—is that you own something, not that that thing has, or will continue to have, any worth (just as your confidence that your £10 note is authentic does not protect you from a sterling crash). To take the example of concert tickets, which might be sold as NFTs in future to prevent

the proliferation of scams and illicit resales: what an NFT concert ticket would guarantee is that your ticket can't be copied or faked, not that the concert will be any good.

In 'Music Discomposed', Cavell argues that exposing 'false art' is precisely not analogous to exposing a forgery:

> Showing fraudulence is more like showing something is imitation—not: *an* imitation. The emphasis is not on copying a *particular* object, as in forgery and counterfeit, but on producing *the effect* of the genuine, or having some of its properties . . . there is no one feature, or definite set of features, which may be described in technical handbooks, and no specific tests by which its fraudulence can be detected and exposed.[26]

After all, Warhol's Brillo boxes *are* in a sense forgeries—replicas or facsimiles, just as Koons's stainless steel sculptures that look as though they are made of cheap plastic are in a sense inverted knock-offs. If an auction house were to discover a forged Rembrandt among its stock, we might regard the counterfeit as having generated distrust and its exposure as having bolstered our trust in the auction house, and reinforced our view that such a 'trust intermediary' is necessary. But if experts can determine the provenance of an object—whether it is a genuine Rembrandt or a forgery—what can never be resolved through inspection alone, however expert, is whether Warhol's Brillo boxes are 'precious works of art' or merely pretending to be.

What can the art market learn from NFTs? Bull suggests that

> On the face of it, it would appear that NFTs had solved the problem the artworld could never resolve, the almost limitless production and sale of art with minimal marketing, transaction and storage costs. Warhol provided the model for making reproductions of popular imagery in expensive limited editions. But the new technology means that whereas Warhol would usually only sell an edition of 150 or 250 silkscreen prints, it is quite possible to sell 10,000 unique NFTs of the same line at an equivalent price.

It surely wasn't 'marketing, transaction and storage costs' alone that prevented Warhol from making more than 250 silkscreen prints. Editions of readymades tend to be limited because their value relies on a claim to exclusivity and thus on supplies being limited (luxury fashion brands,

[26] Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', pp. 175–6.

following a similar logic, sometimes destroy unsold stock rather than sell it at a discount). Nor is it true that what distinguishes NFTs is 'minimal marketing'. Rather the opposite: NFTs often rely on intensive marketing—many are arguably no more than marketing. As for storage costs: consider the energy inputs involved in running the enormous servers storing and verifying every transaction ever made on the blockchain.

Although NFTs are unique tokens, the digital artworks of which they certify ownership are not necessarily unique: it could be a 'trading card, where there's 50 or hundreds of numbered copies of the same artwork'.[27] While NFT 'technology does not prevent [an artist's] work from being copied, it does prevent it from being faked, since each token is verifiably unique', Bull writes. But if the work can be copied—if we can all tape bananas to our walls or screenshot a Bored Ape—what is the difference between a copy and a fake? (What would it mean to 'fake' Cattelan's *Comedian*?) Since there is no perceptible difference between your NFT and my screenshot of it, no difference between my banana and the one Justin Sun bought for $6.2 million (or the one he bought the right to replace), what, in buying Cattelan's banana, did Sun buy? What does he now own? 'The real value is the concept itself,' he said. But what is the concept? (What is the concept *of*?) Insofar as a piece of conceptual art like *Comedian* resembles an NFT—'bridges the worlds of art, memes and the cryptocurrency community', as Sun put[28]—we might conclude that what Sun bought—bought into, as it were—is not only the exclusive ownership of a concept, but the concept of exclusively owning a concept: the private knowledge or highly publicized claim that he alone owns the artwork (where 'artwork' means not a banana but the idea of presenting a banana as an artwork). Traditionally, an artwork was a unique object and ownership of it guaranteed exclusive access to it; readymades relinquish actual uniqueness and exclusive access, one could argue, for conceptual uniqueness, verified by institutions. It's as though NFTs have perfected this paradoxical possibility of extracting value from the idea of uniquely owning a non-unique good. Buying unique ownership without exclusive access, we might conclude—formal ownership without content, in a sense—is little more than buying (into) the idea of unique ownership itself.

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[27] Mitchell Clark, 'NFTs, Explained', *The Verge*, 6 June 2022.

[28] Associated Press, 'Why a Crypto Entrepreneur Ate $6.2 Million Banana Art', *Inc.*, 30 November 2024.

In this sense NFTs perhaps distil the logic of much of what drives the art trade in its upper echelons: in buying a multi-million-dollar artwork you are not just buying it, you are buying the idea of owning it—not just buying a vacuum cleaner but the idea of owning a Koons. And part of the point of owning it is to be able to display the fact you own it, as well as, by implication, the vast surplus capital that enabled the purchase, of which your possession of an expensive artwork is a symbol. In this context, the artwork may be a Rembrandt but a $6.2 million banana is just as good. It's owning it that matters, and what owning gets you: to show that you own, to associate with others who own, and, if you're lucky and your asset appreciates, the prospect of owning more.

Nor is this logic confined to the art market, of course. Indeed although Sun's purchase might seem grotesque, spending large sums on ostensibly ordinary objects—objects with an exchange-value far in excess of their use-value—is a pervasive principle of contemporary consumption. As Naomi Klein argued in *No Logo*, in buying Nike trainers one is buying not simply trainers but the swoosh: 'What these companies produced primarily were not things, they said, but *images* of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing but in marketing. This formula, needless to say, has proved enormously profitable'.[29] Insofar as Sun's purchase was part of a 'banana-based rebrand' of his NFT line, one could think of him as buying a logo—an image of a brand—before it has the social cachet that makes it valuable, in order to artificially pump it with that cachet and value: splashing out on the tick before anyone wore Nike.

The most obvious reason why demand for NFTs has plummeted is not because people don't trust each token of ownership is 'verifiably unique'—don't trust the blockchain technology—but because all the tokens are, as Bull notes, 'are bits of code': little more than a location on the blockchain. The value of a line of NFT artworks is dependent on demand for them, and since this isn't underpinned by any use-value—any exclusive right to look at or use the image—demand is maintained by demand itself, hence the bubble and crash dynamics that beset the sector. If one regards *Comedian* as an asset whose worth is a function of hype not grounded in any real-world application, there's some truth to Bull's idea that Sun's purchase 'completes the cycle', since the value of such goods is in effect powered by a kind of tautologous or self-fulfilling

[29] Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, New York 2009 [1999], p. 4.

logic: these objects are worth as much as people think they're worth, as much as they continue to be willing to pay for them. NFTs that provide membership perks—a form of real-world 'utility'—are usually desirable insofar as belonging to that club is desirable, and that too is related to demand: part of what underpins the success of the original Bored Ape NFTs is that possession of one gives you membership of the Bored Ape Yacht Club, which has various supposed benefits, including invitations to exclusive events (desirable because of the club's clientele, which boasts various celebrities). Thinking of such NFTs as essentially membership cards—belonging to a 'community' in the faux-hippie parlance of Silicon Valley—highlights the relative 'indifference' of the digital image, even if it happens to be technically 'unique'.

Dissensus?

According to the institutionalists, an artwork is little more than one decreed as such by fiat. For both Danto and Dickie, the 'artworld' is in effect someone-saying-so: for Dickie the someone-saying-so is embodied in institutions, for Danto it's embodied in the theory and history of art (in effect a canon, the evolving precipitate of value judgements or expressions of taste: the accumulation of certain people having said so).[30] Yet if it's true that the artworld has the authority, in the sense of arbitrary power, to induct objects into art, it doesn't seem self-evident that it has authority in the deeper sense of being able to inspire trust. The headline-making sale of one of Cattelan's bananas—sold as a commodity called 'art'—and the donation of another to the Guggenheim may force us to concede that *Comedian* is part of the history of art, that it has been 'accepted by a public', in Cavell's terms, but it can't rule out the possibility it is 'false art'. Especially when we know, as Bull has argued in the past, that museums of contemporary art 'celebrate capitalism's limitless fecundity in the manufacture of pleasures, its mysterious ability to work without foundations, to turn anything, for no reason, into an exchangeable object

[30] Danto doesn't consider whether his own theory counts as part of the 'artistic theory' that tells us when an object is an artwork, nor whether new artworks can themselves alter 'artistic theory' and the 'history of art'—alter the general criteria for artworks by which individual instances are identified—in the dialectical manner that T. S. Eliot explored in 'Traditional and Individual Talent': 'what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it . . . for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered': T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, John Hayward, ed., London 1953, p. 23.

of value . . . The institutional theory of art on which the [contemporary art] museum is built is essentially a theory of fashion'.[31] The 'indifferent' public has long known that the inordinate market value accorded to certain artworks is an unreliable guide to their aesthetic value, much as stock market valuations are often deliriously untethered from the profitability—let alone social usefulness—of companies. Cavell's concept of 'fraudulent art'—non-art masquerading as art—insists on the possibility of dissent, of scenarios in which art is wrongly elevated by the artworld. The readymade, in Tony Godfrey's view, presents a question about whether it is an artwork or not; it doesn't settle it.

'How can fraudulent art be exposed?', Cavell asks. For Danto, 'theory' and 'history' can show that dubiously ordinary-seeming objects like Warhol's Brillo boxes are *bona fide* artworks; for Cavell, there are no such guarantees. Knowing art when you see it is not simply a matter of heeding institutional clues. We come, or do not come, to 'see the point' of an artwork by way of the uncertain, open-ended business of exercising critical judgement. 'The only exposure of false art lies in recognizing something about the object itself, but something whose recognition requires exactly the same capacity as recognizing the genuine article . . . You often do not know which is on trial, the object or the viewer: modern art did not invent this dilemma, it merely insists upon it.'[32] 'Recognize', after all, can have different senses: recognizing art, in Cavell's conception, is less like recognizing someone you know on the street—realizing something is something, for example that a pile of bricks is *Equivalent VIII*—than like granting something recognition, acknowledging, discovering or determining that something is something.

Danto and Dickie are scrupulously careful not to pass judgement on the artworks they are discussing. 'Never mind that the Brillo box may not be good, much less great art. The impressive thing is that it is art at all', Danto writes, while Dickie boasts that his definition 'does not attempt to smuggle a conception of good art into the definition of "art"'. Bull observes that the 'institutional theory explains very little' since it fails 'to specify the criteria by which qualitative judgements are made'; arguably Danto and Dickie's comments suggest qualitative judgement is not involved at all. Yet although the institutionalists purport to make

[31] Malcolm Bull, 'Between the Cultures of Capital', NLR 11, Sept–Oct 2001, p. 112.
[32] Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', p. 176.

no qualitative claims for the art they are discussing, neither do they brook qualitative counter-claims—since, ultimately, as Cavell's notion of 'fraudulent art' suggests, whether something is 'art at all' is often precisely what is at issue in our assessments of art. Thus, in a pungent review of an exhibition of Cattelan's work at the Guggenheim in 2011, Peter Schjeldahl argued that the Italian's offerings were not works of art but merely 'tendentious tchotchkes':

> Membership in this class [the category of art] is not a high hurdle. Marcel Duchamp's carefully managed readymades clear it . . . Bad art qualifies, too; it mobilizes the aesthetic criteria of badness. Even amid today's pandemonium of bizarre modes and myriad mediums, it would seem to be no easy matter to achieve a high-flying art career with productions of non-art. But Cattelan has an interim laugh—if not the last one—by proving that he has done precisely that.[33]

For Schjeldahl, Cattelan's art—or 'art'— is not good enough to be bad.

The last laugh

In navigating the endemic 'possibility of fraudulence', with no way of outsourcing the task of adjudicating—'no technical handbooks, and no specific tests' by which 'fraudulence can be detected'—'the critic' must learn to trust themselves, Cavell writes elsewhere: you must learn to 'educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust'. This 'trust' or 'authority' in your own experience, he says, is 'expressed as a willingness to find words for it', as 'taking an interest in it'.[34] What words might one find for one's experience of *Comedian*? One might find oneself reflecting on the sterility and cynicism of the artworld. Or one might find the sight of a living, and so dying, thing—the banana growing speckled over time, maybe gashed with brown where the tape is holding it in place, eventually rotting—a moving spectacle, a poignant comment on the way art tries in vain to arrest time and pin down life. The angle at which the banana is taped to the wall conjures up Warhol, as well as the mass-market commodity of the Velvet Underground album cover, while the title of the work also summons the association of bananas (or banana skins) with pratfalls.

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[33] Peter Schjeldahl, 'Up in the Air', *New Yorker*, 13 November 2011.

[34] Stanley Cavell, 'Words for a Conversation', in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge MA 1981, p. 12.

But if *Comedian* is a partial joke, one might wonder who the butt of it is. If the banana is an immanent critique of the artworld as a fatuous system of commodification—a comment on the fact that 'anything can be art' and sold as such—its being so enthusiastically welcomed by that system and so profitably commodified has, at a minimum, ambiguous implications. A hundred years after Duchamp's urinal was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, it's hard to regard similar gestures as critical, a genuine challenge to the artworld; difficult to say, when a banana is sold for millions of dollars, who is having the last laugh. Schjeldahl insisted that Duchamp's readymades did not prove that anything goes: 'Duchamp proved that the boundaries of art are dizzyingly ambiguous; he didn't question their existence'. Whereas Duchamp 'thereby grounded his ironies', Cattelan, 'a darling of jaded art sophisticates' and 'perfect festivalist' 'must simultaneously suggest offensiveness and disarm it, with an invitation to hip complicity'.[35] Hal Foster, too, argued that readymades once 'played ambiguously on the convergence of art exhibition and commodity display', but no longer:

> With Warhol, arguably, there was a moment of disruption in this confusion of positions and values: of artistic and commercial, high and low, rare and mass, expensive and cheap, and so on. There is little tension, and not much insight, now that these pairs have imploded: just a giddy delight, a weary despair, or a manic-depressive cocktail of the two.[36]

Comedian could be seen as a costly, nihilistic joke, one that mocks not only the artworld but other artists, mocks art itself, mocks its audience: snubbing, even ridiculing, our offer of attention, abusing our 'willingness to trust the object'.[37] De Maria's allegedly brass-filled hole, Hughes

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[35] Schjeldahl, 'Up in the Air'.

[36] Foster, 'The Medium Is the Market'. See also Foster's review of a Koons retrospective at the Whitney in 2014: 'In its first incarnation, with Dada, this device was taken to be critical of the cultural-economic system in which it was enmeshed, but by the time of Pop such negativity had all but drained away': 'Jeff Koons', *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 15, 31 July 2014.

[37] In a postscript to *A Story of Art*, E. H. Gombrich writes that 'when I first conceived and wrote the Introduction and the chapter on Experimental Art I took it for granted that it was the duty of the critic and of the historian to explain and to justify all artistic experiments in the face of hostile criticism. Today the problem is rather that the shock has worn off and that almost anything experimental seems acceptable to the press and the public. If anyone needs a champion today it is the artist who shuns rebellious gestures. I believe that it is this dramatic transformation rather than any particular new movement that represents the most important event in the history of art which I have witnessed since this book was first published in 1950': Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Oxford 1978, pp. 483–4

noted, required 'an act of faith'. With an artwork like *Comedian*, it can seem as though there is little left to believe in.[38] And if the artworld needs 'injections of distrust' to justify itself as trust intermediary, then this implies a complicity between artists and art dealers—between those who make art and those who sell it—working together to create just enough uncertainty to sustain profits without undermining demand.

One intriguing thing about Bull's question—why is there not more art?—is that an artwork like Cattelan's *Comedian* could have prompted it. A duct-taped banana does not put one in mind of the exhilarating possibilities for this kind of art so much as their exhaustion. How many more variations on this gesture can there be? How could anyone top this? Who would want to? (As Bull observes, 'the negation of value does not usually lead to its proliferation'.) The effect of readymades is often somehow stumping. Cattelan's *Comedian* can, from a certain perspective, look like a *reductio ad absurdum*, a bathetic culmination, a dead-end.[39]

Danto once argued that it is 'of vastly greater philosophical importance' to explain why a square of primed canvas is an artwork than to identify 'whatever may divide it under the perspectives of connoisseurship from its immeasurably richer ontological peers', such as Rembrandt's painting *The Polish Rider*: 'all that may be pertinent to enjoyment of the latter, to appreciation of style and touch and the delectation of paint and form, will have to be put to one side'. Dickie similarly contended that 'as works of art Duchamp's readymades may not be worth much, but as examples of art they are very valuable for art theory'.[40] If there is something inexhaustible about conceptual stunts—bottomless grist for the philosophical mill—there is theorizing still to be done about particular

[38] 'Trust without suspicion is the recipe for a false and meretricious art; but suspicion without trust is the recipe for a shallow and empty art': Gabriel Josipovici, *On Trust: Art and the Temptations of Suspicion*, New Haven 1999, p. 3.

[39] Danto elsewhere reflected on Warhol's Brillo boxes that with such works 'the history of art attained the point where it had to turn into its own philosophy. It had gone, as art, as far as it could go. In turning into philosophy, art had come to an end': 'Approaching the End of Art', *The State of Art*, New York 1987, p. 216. Schjeldahl said something similar about a retrospective of Carl Andre's work at the Guggenheim. Each object 'presents itself to the viewer with an aggressive air of completeness and finality, as if each were the only, or anyway the last, work of art in the world': Peter Schjeldahl, 'High Priest of Minimal', *New York Times*, 18 October 1970.

[40] Danto, 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 33, no. 2, Winter 1974, p. 140; George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca NY 1974, p. 34.

artworks as inexhaustible objects, ones whose principal interest is not their dubious ontological status as an 'example' of art (isn't Dickie's word itself so tellingly expressive of the 'indifference' of the particular object?) In his fine book *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes that 'we have not succeeded in accounting for the intensity and directness of the effect many works have upon us, often without our possessing any knowledge of their place in the history of art'. These remain 'puzzles', Attridge suggests, 'that have never had fully satisfactory answers.'[41]

Elaborating on his indifference to readymades, Thierry de Duve notes that 'I don't accompany my judgement, "this is whatever", with an outraged judgement, "this is not art!" . . . I know all too well the absurdity of denying that today, those objects that Duchamp chose as readymades are art.'[42] Tyrannized by the publicity of Cattelan's stunt, it may feel futile to claim that a banana isn't art—no doubt continuing to discuss it only cements its place in the history of art, burnishes its spot in the 'atmosphere of artistic theory'. Yet we can determine how to weight it, how much attention to devote to it: not art's final destination, nor the linchpin of our theories, but merely the tip of one of its branches.

Carl Andre, who saw himself not as a conceptual stuntman but as a sculptor, said of one of his floor pieces: 'There are no ideas hiding under those plates. They're just plates.'[43] 'For socialism, the disenchantment of the world has always held a utopian promise', Bull once wrote.[44] Perhaps the utopian promise, or utopian insight, of art that flirts with fraudulence—of the multi-million-dollar purchase of the idea of owning a banana—is to remind us that ownership is just an idea: a fiction. In that case, there's an idea lurking behind that banana after all.

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[41] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, London 2004, pp. 41, 45.
[42] De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 334.
[43] Quoted in Kennedy, 'Carl Andre, 88, Austerely Minimalist Sculptor, Is Dead'.
[44] Bull, 'Between the Cultures of Capital', p. 113.

DAVID HARVEY

ON SRAFFA'S TRAIL

During my first summer term at Cambridge in 1955, the 'Backs'—a vast stretch of grass on the far side of the River Cam—were converted into tennis courts, and I spent many an hour playing there with my fellow students. In the nondescript town of Gillingham, Kent, where I grew up, there had been a multitude of small tennis clubs, which was odd since it was neither prosperous nor culturally distinguished. Gillingham was boringly lower-middle class. My parents had met at a local tennis club sometime in the 1920s. At the end of our street, a garden had been converted into a lovingly maintained grass court and one of my earliest memories is sitting on a blanket there and watching my parents play tennis, in striking white flannel outfits. I must have been four years old, just before the War broke out.

Playing on the Backs, we were frequently watched by a sombre figure, dark and slender, usually dressed in a long black coat and a sort of peasant cap, and even in summer sporting a muffler around his throat. He had piercing eyes, and it was quite nerve-wracking having him stand behind you when you served. Many a double fault resulted from that intense gaze on my back. Worse, when winter came and I switched to playing squash, he would be there in the gallery, staring at us disconcertingly. The presence of this individual was a matter of much comment among my fellow students. Who was this mysterious figure?

In our third year, one of us solved the riddle. The man in black was an Italian economist called Piero Sraffa, who had a research fellowship at Trinity College. He had written an important article in 1926, on the strength of which Keynes had invited him to Cambridge to be a librarian at King's College.[1] As far as anyone could tell, he had written nothing of significance since then. He reputedly hated teaching, which

was presumably why he still held a research fellowship. He had no position in the university's Economics Department, but as a fellow of Trinity, with free board and lodging and access to the college's wine cellar, he could live parsimoniously but well. The post-war cohort of students to which I belonged viewed with contempt the gentlemanly tolerance for eccentricity that allowed a supposedly leading educational institution to keep such unproductive parasites on the books. In the name of meritocracy, modernity and innovation, we were all for sweeping away those encrusted class privileges that defined the university and English society as a whole.

Some years later, I was back in Cambridge for an event. Wandering into one of the many superb bookshops that still existed at the time, I happened upon a book titled *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*, by one Piero Sraffa.[2] It was an exceedingly slim volume and I estimated that Sraffa's productivity must have amounted to three pages a year since 1926. The book was stuffed with mathematical equations of considerable complexity that I would never be able to understand. Later, on an impulse, I bought a copy that I still have on my shelves.

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In the early 1960s, I decided to teach myself some economics. In the summer months, I often found myself driving my Mini across Europe, usually *en route* to Sweden, with a copy of Samuelson's introductory *Economics* in the boot. One summer I drove into East Berlin through Checkpoint Charlie, just after the Wall went up. On the way out, the guards impounded the Samuelson. (I have since fancifully imagined that the corrosive effects of its circulation through the DDR played a role in ending the Cold War.) Deprived of my Samuelson, I determined to read some Keynes and was surprised to discover *The General Theory*'s fulsome acknowledgement of Sraffa's contribution. I also learned that Sraffa was then in the process of editing *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, which was surely no mean task. Sraffa was plainly not as unproductive as I had supposed. My puzzlement deepened when I discovered that Wittgenstein's theory of language games was a result of a

[1] Piero Sraffa, 'The Laws of Returns under Competitive Conditions', *The Economic Journal*, vol. 36, no. 144, December 1926.
[2] Piero Sraffa, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*, Cambridge 1960.

conversation with Sraffa on the train from Cambridge to London. Sraffa had apparently insisted that hand gestures were as much a form of linguistic communication as the spoken or written word. As Wittgenstein put it in his preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> I was helped to realize these mistakes—to a degree I myself am hardly able to estimate—by the criticism which my ideas encountered from Frank Ramsey, with whom I discussed them in innumerable conversations during the last years of his life. Even more than to this—always certain and forcible—criticism I am indebted to that which a teacher of this university, Mr. P. Sraffa, for many years unceasingly practised on my thoughts. I am indebted to *this* stimulus for the most consequential ideas of this book.[3]

With two intellectual giants of the mid-twentieth century expressing such appreciation for Piero, my opinion of him—and of Cambridge—had to be revised.

I then learned that a controversy had erupted in economics, counterposing the MIT economists around Samuelson and the Cambridge school, led most prominently by Joan Robinson, who was advancing interpretations based upon the complicated mathematics that Sraffa had devised. I remembered Robinson as an astonishing presence from my student years. She was a supporter of the Chinese Revolution and wore a Mao tunic and cap around town. I had attended several of her lectures, which were obsessed with Malthusian questions of demographics and the Chinese path. Word had it that Samuelson was intimidated by Robinson, and I could understand why. She was awe-inspiring, both intellectually and as a person. My views on China were profoundly influenced by her stance towards the People's Republic, in a period dominated by McCarthyism and the weird US debate over who 'lost' China (weird, in that it involved imagining a world in which China does not belong to the Chinese).

In 1969, I found myself at Johns Hopkins University, where Owen Lattimore, one of three people charged by McCarthy with responsibility for China's 'loss', had long taught. A formidable scholar of Inner Asia, Lattimore had decamped to Leeds a few years before; but controversy was still rife on campus as to whether he was a traitor. I eventually tracked him down for an interview in Cambridge, where he was happily anticipating a trip to Ulan Bator to receive a medal from the Mongolian

[3] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1952, p. viii.

Academy of Sciences. Reading the transcripts of the McCarran Senate Committee hearings, at which Lattimore was ruthlessly interrogated for eight days without access to legal counsel, confirmed for me that there is no such thing as a serious academic argument that does not have a strong political dimension. Nor is there any protection from the politics of fear that periodically works its insidious way into the seemingly reclusive world of the university. It was the Professor of Geography at Johns Hopkins who sent Lattimore's name to McCarthy.

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The controversy over capital theory to which Sraffa contributed so mightily was of this sort. Sraffa is hard to follow and the mathematics in the *Production of Commodities* is way beyond most people, including myself. But the controversy is vital for understanding how capital works and how economic theory is constructed. I gained some insight into this in the 1980s when I was teaching Marx at Hopkins and writing *The Limits to Capital*. I noticed that someone in the Economics Department was teaching Michio Morishima's *Marx's Economics*.[4] I hunted down Peter Newman, who went out of his way to assure me, rather fearfully I thought, that he had no interest in Marx, but that Morishima's mathematics were remarkable. I found them incomprehensible, but Morishima's conclusions were of great interest because I had already decided that Marx was not an equilibrium theorist. Morishima evaded what I call the 'everything tends to equilibrium' trap, which pervaded the history of economics. He showed that Marx's political economy produces disequilibrium, with either monotonic departures from an equilibrium growth path, or ever-increasing oscillations around it, depending on the degree of capital intensity within the economy.

I had no grasp of the mathematical path whereby Morishima generated these conclusions, but I trusted Newman's opinion of it. If Morishima was correct, then presumably state policies would have to intervene if economic stability was to be achieved. When I mentioned Sraffa to Newman he exploded in righteous wrath. It turned out that he had dedicated a few years to trying to verify Sraffa's mathematical proofs, which he had

[4] Michio Morishima, *Marx's Economics: A Dual Theory of Value and Growth*, Cambridge 1973.

initially thought far-fetched, only to find them impeccable—because, Newman asserted, Sraffa, like Wittgenstein, was beholden to the mathematical genius of Frank Ramsey, who had died at the age of 26 in 1930. The study circle at Trinity that had included Sraffa, Ramsey and Wittgenstein was crucial. Newman, frustrated, published his proof of the correctness of Part One of *Production of Commodities* in a specialist Swiss journal and left it at that.[5] It turned out that I had already been deeply influenced by the intellectual circle at Trinity, for I had relied heavily on Richard Braithwaite—a fringe member—for my understanding of the history and philosophy of science in writing *Explanation in Geography*, my first book.[6]

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Looking back at the Cambridge capital controversies, it is hard to separate out Sraffa's contributions from those of Robinson. Sraffa appears to have avoided controversy like the plague, but Robinson fiercely embraced it. Robinson was not mathematically inclined and preferred, she said, to use her brain and intelligence instead. That meant it was easier for me to follow her arguments. She was not hostile to Marx, and published several articles in journals such as this one, but she did complain about his use of Hegel: 'What business has Hegel putting his nose in between me and Ricardo?'[7] Foundational to her reading of Sraffa was an emphasis upon the rate of exploitation of labour power as the motor for capital accumulation. But she also emphasized the role of the world market and wrote an introduction to an edition of Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital,* which she called 'one of the masterpieces of socialist literature'. By the 1980s this was one of my gospel texts. But here I should pause to acknowledge my own immediate interest in the questions that Sraffa posed.

After publishing *Social Justice and the City*, I resolved to try to integrate Marx's political economy into my studies of urbanization and uneven

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[5] Peter Newman, 'Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities', *Swiss Journal of Economics and Statistics*, vol. 98, no. 1, March 1962.

[6] David Harvey, *Explanation in Geography*, London 1969.

[7] Joan Robinson, 'Open letter from a Keynesian to a Marxist', *Collected Economic Papers*, Volume IV, Oxford 1973, p. 115.

geographical development at a variety of scales, from the neighbourhood to the globe.[8] This entailed grappling with Marx's theorizations of ground rent, merchant capital, state investments, banking credit and finance, all the while confronting the problematics of differential turnover times and the production of time and space, in consumption as well as production. The questions of fixed-capital circulation and consumption-fund formation—for example, housing and the built environment, which formed the second part of Sraffa's book—loomed large in my thinking. I also needed to work more carefully over the circulation and reproduction of labour capacity. These issues were explored theoretically in *The Limits to Capital*, and historically and geographically in *Paris, Capital of Modernity*.[9] If I was to understand the role of capital in the rebuilding of Paris during the Second Empire, or in contemporary New York, then I had to understand what capital was and the different forms it might take in the built environment. If I was to take Marx's path, then I needed to know how Marx's definition of capital differed from that of the bourgeois economists.

Robinson pointed out that the neoclassical 'production function'—where Q, the output, is a function of labour and capital—lacks a satisfactory understanding of the units in which capital can be measured. When capital is in money form there is no problem; but capital also consists of a heterogeneous stock of use values such as machinery, plant and equipment, whose value cannot be established without invoking their impact on the value of Q. In other words, it rests on a tautology. But as Robinson noted, before the economist gets round to querying this, 'he has become a professor, and so sloppy habits of thought are handed from one generation to the next'.[10] The net effect is that neoclassical economic modelling is circular. And Sraffa proved it so.

This is a pretty devastating finding. But the response by bourgeois economists over the years has been to ignore the problem, or to treat it as a 'tempest in a teapot'. As Marx observed, whenever a crisis occurs, bourgeois economists simply complain that it can only be because the economy is failing to perform according to their textbooks. In fact, a few

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[8] David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, Athens GA 1973.

[9] David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Oxford 1982; *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, New York 2006.

[10] Joan Robinson, 'The Production Function and the Theory of Capital', *The Review of Economic Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1953, p. 81.

Marxist economists, led by Ian Steedman's *Marx after Sraffa*, were the only ones to take Sraffa seriously as having undermined one of their key concepts, the labour theory of value.[11] My view was that Steedman is correct if Marx's theory of value is identical to that of Ricardo, the object of Sraffa's critique. This is Steedman's position. But Marx does something different when he insists that the 'socially necessary labour time' that constitutes value presumes sufficient effective demand. If the commodity cannot be sold, then there is no value (it is not socially necessary), no matter how much labour is used up in its production. In Marx's scheme, consumerism can on occasion lead production. From this perspective, the great divide between the utility-maximizing consumerism of the neoclassical paradigm and the class-based profit-maximizing productivism of the Robinson paradigm look more like different sides of a single coin. In my work, I have found this relation enlightening rather than troublesome. After all, urbanization is very much about individual and collective cultures of consumerism to which production incentives attach. To attribute everything to the evolution of the productive forces, as G. A. Cohen did for example in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, is a step too far.[12]

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Sraffa and Robinson both died in 1983. Since then, there has been a small though persistent trickle of articles testifying to the significance of the issues they posed, but no mainstream discussion of their implications for neoclassical theory. It was possible to take a quiet but smug satisfaction in the thought that the economists who so often assumed they were the Brahmin caste within the social sciences had a knowledge structure founded on tautology; but there things seemed to stand. However, in 2003 a helpful article on the Cambridge capital controversy by Avi Cohen and Geoff Harcourt revived my interest in the subject.[13] The essential point they make is that Sraffa correctly exposed a fatal flaw in Ricardian economics. There can be no measure of the value of capital (understood as a free-standing factor of production) that does not depend upon the value of what it produces. All economic reasoning

[11] Ian Steedman, *Marx after Sraffa*, London and New York 1977.
[12] G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Princeton 1978.
[13] A. J. Cohen and G. C. Harcourt, 'Whatever Happened to the Cambridge Capital Controversy?', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 17, no. 1, Winter 2003.

in this tradition is tainted by the fact that it is inherently tautological. This is particularly true with respect to the circulation of fixed capital, the Achilles heel of theoretical economics. The value of a machine cannot be determined independently of the value that the machine helps to produce. The question is whether this flaw carries over to marginalist neoclassical theory. Samuelson eventually accepted that Sraffa was formally correct about Ricardo but claimed to find a way to wriggle out of Sraffa's conclusions. It all came down to how best to interpret Sraffa's mathematical findings and confront the tautologies.

Cohen and Harcourt put it this way: 'Has there been continuity in the evolution of economic theory from Adam Smith to the present, or discontinuity, with the marginal revolution setting neoclassical economics on a different path from earlier classical political economy and Marx?' The neoclassicals envisioned 'the lifetime utility-maximizing decisions of individuals as the driving force of economic activity, with the allocation of given, scarce resources as the fundamental economic problem'. In contrast, the Cambridgians argued 'for a return to a classical political economy vision' in which 'profit-making decisions of capitalist firms are the driving force'. Rates of profit depend upon 'differing power and social relations in production and the realization of profits is brought about by effective demand associated with saving and expenditure behaviours of the different classes and the "animal spirits" of capitalists.'[14]

Evoking 'the spectre of Marx', Robinson had argued that the 'meaning of capital lay in the property owned by the capitalist class, which confers on capitalists the legal right and economic authority to take a share of the surplus created in the production process'. Of course, mainstream economists in the capitalist world would not subscribe *en masse* to Robinson's class-bound surplus-value producing and profit-maximizing vision. The textbook that Robinson wrote with John Eatwell incorporating this alternative vision, *Introduction to Modern Economics*, had very few takers, leaving lifetime individual utility-maximizing behaviours as the only game in town.[15] Indices of consumer confidence have become the bellwether of the present and future health of the economy, and the stock market wobbles accordingly. Once more, politics trumps mathematics.

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[14] Cohen and Harcourt, 'Whatever Happened to the Cambridge Capital Controversy?', p. 207–8.

[15] Joan Robinson and John Eatwell, *An Introduction to Modern Economics*, London 1973.

Sraffa tantalizingly leaves the matter open. Having established 'the central propositions' in the 1920s and elaborated them in the 1930s and 40s, he offered only a 'prelude' to a critique of political economy in the 1950s. It is, he says in the Preface to *Production of Commodities*, 'a peculiar feature of the set of propositions now published that, although they do not enter into any discussion of the marginal theory of value and distribution, they have nevertheless been designed to serve as the basis for a critique of that theory'.[16] Though Sraffa's foundation appears to be solid, the critique itself has yet to appear. I have my doubts that it ever will. It would take the genius of someone like Sraffa, the mathematical brilliance of a Ramsey and the dedicated persistence of a Newman, assembled in an institutional setting of the sort that Cambridge provided in the inter-war years. The capture of the Cambridge Economics Department by the neoclassicals in the 1970s more or less ruled it out.

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In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn persuasively argued that science does not evolve in an incremental, linear way. It had gone through periods when theory and practice were sufficiently aligned to pose and answer key questions of the time. But at some point, anomalies that could not be explained or accurately predicted became more salient. These eventually provoked a revolution in theoretical framings, methods and conceptual understandings, forming a new paradigm. Einstein's physics superseded that of Newton, only to be superseded by Niels Bohr's quantum theory. In each case a new normal science came into being. It is tempting to see the relations between neoclassical and Sraffian economics as evidence of an arrested and incomplete paradigm shift in economic theory. But in the same way that Newtonian mechanics is perfectly adequate to the task of building bridges and knocking them down again—rendering relativity and quantum theory irrelevant to that purpose—so the neoclassical paradigm and its vast trove of data and empirical information may be adequate for a wide range of economic tasks.

But Sraffa had not set out to create an alternative economic theory. He had simply undermined the theoretical basis of the old, both Ricardian and neoclassical. Where, then, are the anomalies that make a revolution

[16] Preface to *Production of Commodities*, p. vii.

in economic theory necessary? In the late sixties, with urban uprisings from Chicago and Paris to Bangkok and Mexico City, the case for a revolutionary transformation of urban economics was for me unassailable. The neoclassical urban economists had nothing meaningful to say about these events in general, or their urban dimensions in particular. I was faced with a theoretical world constituted by thing-like factors of production such as land, labour and capital, whereas I wanted to know what was happening to the labourers, capitalists, financiers, merchants, landlords, state officials, the political class and state and legal officials; to say nothing of exploring the implications of sharp differences within populations based on race, religion, ethnicity, culture and gender. This was the paradigm shift—from objectified things to social relations—that I was searching for in an article that became the transitional piece from liberal to revolutionary perspectives in *Social Justice and the City*.[17] It was not too hard to describe how the 1960s uprisings unfolded. But it was more difficult to explain why they occurred. It was this seemingly intractable 'why' that drove me to interrogate Marx for answers, seeing that neoclassical economics plainly had none.

So, what would Marx have had to say about all of this? Here, I must register two complaints. First, there is an immense literature on Marx in relation to Hegel, and rightly so, but very little on Marx in relation to Ricardo. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx engages deeply with Ricardo throughout whereas Hegel is merely mentioned. Similarly, the second volume of *Theories of Surplus Value* focuses on Ricardo and the Ricardian School of the time, many of whom expressed socialist sympathies on the simple grounds that if value is given by labour input, as Ricardo claimed, then the labourers should surely receive a lion's share of the value they produce. Hence the redistributive socialism of J. S. Mill, and its contemporary version in the work of Thomas Piketty. Second, as Walter Rodney complained, 'there is one common uniting strand to all bourgeois thought: they make common cause in questioning the relevance, the logic, and so on, of Marxist thought'. 'In the English tradition', he continues, 'it is fashionable to disavow any knowledge of Marxism'; 'one knows it is absurd without reading it and one doesn't read it because one knows it is absurd, and therefore one glories in one's ignorance'.[18]

[17] David Harvey, 'Revolutionary and Counter-Revolutionary Theory in Geography and the Problem of Ghetto Formation', *Antipode*, vol. 4, no. 2, July 1972.

[18] Walter Rodney, 'Marxism and African Liberation', *Decolonial Marxism: Essays from the Pan-African Revolution*, London and New York 2022, p. 35.

Exhibit A is Keynes's claim to have never read Marx. But then, Keynes was bourgeois to the core and dedicated his life to saving capital from the capitalists, which was and remains no easy task. For Keynes, though, this was a technical problem.

Keynes did object, however, to the Ricardians' embrace of Say's Law, which states that supply creates its own demand—a tautological claim if ever there was one. Marx dismissed Say's Law as 'childish babble'. Keynes held that its broad acceptance by the Ricardians hobbled economic theory for a century or more. In the 1930s, Keynes sought to revive the reputations of Malthus and Sismondi who had long ago rejected Say's Law since it implied there could be no general over-accumulation of capital or over-production of commodities. Such propositions made no sense in the Depression years, when Keynes was stressing the importance of state-managed effective demand. In the 1980s, after a generation of Keynesian hegemony, his followers were hounded out of policy-making chambers in London, New York, Washington and Basel, and the Economics departments of the major research universities. They were replaced by neoclassical 'supply-siders' armed with a new version of Say's Law and its counterpart, the efficient-market hypothesis. Thereafter it became difficult to think seriously about Keynes, let alone take up the implications of Sraffa's arguments. But here we must deal with the consequences of 'putting Hegel's nose' between us and Sraffa's Ricardo.

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Since Sraffa's work is a critique of Ricardo, the link to Marx is indirect. In the introductory chapter of the *Grundrisse*, however, Marx takes up a critique of the basic categories of classical political economy—production, consumption, distribution, realization, exchange. All of these 'moments' in the circulation of capital are loosely linked in bourgeois economics to form a 'weak syllogism' within an 'organic totality'.[19] 'Capital in general' could only come into being if enforced wage labour pre-existed the rise of capital. This presumably occurred through the buying and selling of labour services supplied by wage workers to the church, the state, the military, rich merchants, the feudal lords and so on. Adam Smith, says Marx, reduces these necessary preconditions to 'a few very simple characteristics, which are hammered into flat tautologies'. Could it be that

[19] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London 1993 [1973], p. 86.

Marx is intuiting here the tautological qualities of neoclassical theory? At several points in *Capital*, Marx hints at the danger of lapsing into tautological reasoning. But the main thrust of his argument lies elsewhere.

In the *Grundrisse*, however, Marx spelled out a mission:

> The exact development of the concept of capital is necessary, since it is the fundamental concept of modern economics, just as capital itself . . . is the foundation of bourgeois society. The sharp formulation of the presuppositions of the [capital] relation must bring out all the contradictions of bourgeois production, as well as the boundary where it drives beyond itself.[20]

Notice here the importance of contradiction. 'We are the last to deny', Marx writes, 'that capital contains contradictions. Our purpose, rather, is to develop them fully. But Ricardo does not develop them. But rather shifts them off . . .' Malthus, on the other hand, 'senses the contradictions, but falls flat when he himself tries to develop them'. Contradiction is not a term to be found in the neoclassical or Ricardian playbook. But it is foundational for Marx's conception of capital.

Marx defines capital as 'value in motion', as a circulation process rather than a thing. It is, he writes, a 'moving contradiction'.[21] It first takes on the money form. Not all money is capital but capital takes on the guise of money capital when the money is used to buy labour power and means of production as commodities in order to put them to work in a labour process organized under the authority (as Robinson had noted) of the capitalist to produce new commodities whose value is expressed in money form after being sold in the market. This converts the value back into the money form, whence it can go back into circulation as money capital once more. In this circulation process, capital takes on different material forms: labour power and means of production, a labour process, new commodities for sale. The different material qualities of each moment matter. A steel works worth ten million dollars is very different from having ten million in cash. The ease of geographical mobility differs markedly from one moment to another.

The incentive that drives this circulatory system is profit, or as Marx prefers to call it in the *Grundrisse*, 'the production and realization of surplus

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[20] *Grundrisse*, pp. 331, 351, 353.
[21] *Grundrisse*, pp. 705–6.

value'.[22] Capital's circulation process is not cyclical. It is constituted as a spiral of perpetual expansion and accumulation of capital. How to absorb this ever-expanding accumulation—a 'bad infinity' as Hegel would put it—was the problem with which both Luxemburg and Robinson grappled. In Luxemburg's case, the answer was colonial imperialism. This was the best explanation she could find. Robinson's support for Keynesian policies of debt-financed state interventions probably arose for the same reasons. For purposes of analysis, it is reasonable to hold certain aspects of a contradiction constant. In Volume One of *Capital* for example, Marx assumes throughout that all commodities exchange at their value (therefore no overproduction or overaccumulation). The question of where the extra effective demand comes from to pay for the expanding production of surplus value is left to be dealt with in Volume Two of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*.

Given Marx's emphasis on contradictions it is useful to give a sense of how they operate. In Marx's scheme of things, the internal contradictions (as opposed to external contradictions such as a viral epidemic) invariably take the same form. Individual capitalists driven by the coercive laws of competition engage in practices that maximize their individual rate of return while producing aggregate results that collectively threaten the reproduction of the capitalist class and its power. The question then arises as to who will rescue capital from the capitalists. In our times the answer is the state. Hence debates over the role of the state and which kind of economic theory will be most effective. In the inter-state system, the individuation of capitalist states depends on the primary contradictions each confronts—say, oil extractivism versus tourism—and the particular strategies they develop to manage these trade-offs. This formulation applies to local governments as well as nation states, making urban entrepreneurialism and inter-urban competition prominent features in the political economy of the present.

But the contradictions need to be systemically situated if they are to be properly understood. The key concept here is that of capital as a mode of production within which wages, profits, exchange, consumption, realization, rents, finance, merchant profits, interest and state functions, including inter-state relations, dynamically intersect with each other to constitute the totality of contemporary capital at a particular place and time. Marx speaks of the different elements—production, distribution

[22] *Grundrisse*, pp. 348–458.

and consumption—as 'moments' in order to capture the transitoriness and contingency of everything within the totality of capital's mode of production. Thus, the moment of 'production' refers to the whole panoply of commodity production processes under the direction and class power of capital, while the moment of 'consumption' refers to how all that is produced in the way of commodities for sale in the market is used up in different ways in all manner of different places and times.

Capital's totality is conceptualized holistically as an organic system in perpetual evolution. This system, says Marx, 'has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or of creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality. The process of its becoming this totality forms a moment of its process, of its development'.[23] While the idea of totality undoubtedly derives from Hegel, Marx re-works and revolutionizes it. For him, the totality of capital is an ever-changing network of historically specific social practices and relations built, evolving and ultimately dissolving, only to be rebuilt again through human action. This network is constantly in the process of growth and transformation—perpetually 'becoming' as Marx puts it—even as it exhibits certain proclivities towards solidity and permanence. Marx's concept of capital's totality is, therefore, open, evolving and self-replicating, but in no sense self-contained, given its internal contradictions and its penchant for disharmony and breakdown. Capital exists as a complex ecosystem of value flows in continuous internal tension, thus forcing permanently revolutionary transformations, such as AI, and continuous historical evolution.

How the coercive laws of competition work is epitomized in Marx's chapter on the working day. The incentive for capitalist producers to extend the working day and increase its intensity tends to deplete the quantity and quality of labour power, culminating in 'death from overwork'—a live category in today's East Asia. The remedy is state intervention ostensibly on behalf of the workers but also to the benefit of capital through the improvement in labour health and quality. Inter-capitalist competition likewise produces continuous increases in labour productivity through technological and organizational innovations which reduce labour inputs and thus reduce the surplus value resulting in an aggregate fall in the rate of profit. Wage repression also reduces consumption capacity,

[23] *Grundrisse*, p. 278.

making the question raised by Luxemburg and Robinson of where the compensatory effective demand might come from a vital issue. In all these cases, the capitalist state becomes critical to regulating the deepening contradictions of capital. Contradictions cannot be eradicated; they can only be managed. But the coercive laws of competition apply no less to inter-state dynamics, say when it comes to acquiring military hardware, space technologies and new technologies in general. Inter-state competition shapes aggregate paths of technological and organizational change in capitalist social formations.

And then there are the contradictions that surround fixed-capital and consumption-fund formation (the consumption fund being all those long-lived items used to support final consumption like cars, houses and kitchen equipment), essential to thinking about the built environment. In his *Stages of Economic Growth*, Walt Rostow identified a critical period of investment in fixed-capital infrastructures as vital in creating the necessary preconditions for 'take off' into sustained economic growth.[24] Marx had long recognized that such investments were essential but noted that it took the mobilization of surpluses of capital and labour at the expense of present consumption to fund such investments. But when capital matures, such investments in increasing labour productivity produce even more surpluses of both capital and labour to fund even more such investments. This expansive cycle is potentially crisis-prone. Marx notes:

> There are moments in the developed movement of capital which delay this movement other than by crises; such as, e.g. the constant devaluation of part of the existing capital; the transformation of a great part of capital into fixed capital which does not serve as agency of direct production; unproductive waste of a great portion of capital.[25]

Capital has a choice as it matures of overaccumulation in real estate, as in China after 2020, or using urbanization as a dumping ground for surplus capital and labour, as in the USA, by building bridges to nowhere. The other form of deliberately wasteful capital flow is into military expenditures, which are equivalent, Marx tells us, to dumping value in the ocean. It is sobering to try to imagine capital's dynamic in the US

[24] W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge 1960.
[25] *Grundrisse*, p. 750.

since 1945 without ever-expanding military expenditure and chronically wasteful suburbanization. If capital is value in motion, then fixed capital slows that motion down, while the same competitive forces that produce a falling rate of profit produce an acceleration in the motion of circulating capital. One part of capital speeds up while the other part slows.

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There occurred an important coda to my Sraffa-driven understanding of all of this in the mid-1990s. My students at Johns Hopkins told me of a new appointment in Political Science whom they found interesting and suggested I teach a course with him. I readily agreed, and so met Mark Blyth. My only stipulation was that we not engage in the usual graduate school seminar practice of pretending to read fifty major authors over a semester. We should each select one book and build the course around reading them carefully together. I had previously done this with Giovanni Arrighi. Reading my *Limits to Capital* along with his *Long Twentieth Century* proved really illuminating. I chose Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. My jaw dropped when Mark chose Keynes's *General Theory*. He hastened to reassure me that he would deal quickly with the technical stuff and concentrate on the psychology and expectations aspects in the latter part of the book. I was still not excited but reluctantly went along. The course got more and more interesting and ended up being, for me at least, a splendid experience. I distinctly remember waking up one morning and realizing I was teaching a class about Keynes, who thanked his good friend Sraffa for his help in writing *The General Theory,* and Gramsci, whose *Prison Notebooks* might well not have been written let alone preserved had it not been for Sraffa's support and help.

This brings me to the *coup de grâce*, as it were, in the history of my encounters with Sraffa, albeit at a distance in space and time. I had long been aware that Sraffa supported Gramsci during his prison years in a variety of ways, such as opening an account in Gramsci's name with a Milan bookstore. But I had never looked into the significance of this in any depth. In 1991, a compact but extremely informative biography of Sraffa by Jean-Pierre Potier was translated from French into English.[26]

[26] Jean-Pierre Potier, *Piero Sraffa, Unorthodox Economist (1898–1983): A Biographical Essay*, London 1991.

The book covers the salient phases of Sraffa's intellectual and political career, documenting his relations with Keynes and the Cambridge economists of the 1930s and 40s, and even more importantly his work with Gramsci, who was a close friend from his student days. Although never a member of the Italian Communist Party, Sraffa was a key figure among the left intellectuals in Italy struggling to combat fascism. In 1924, for example, there was an open debate between Gramsci and Sraffa in which the latter contended that the revolutionary path to communism was effectively blocked by fascism and that priority had to be given to supporting the bourgeois anti-fascist movement, in order to clear the decks for a better organized working-class movement to pursue its goals. Gramsci disagreed, while recognizing that Sraffa held to revolutionary perspectives in the long run.

This debate is taken up in Andy Merrifield's *Roses for Gramsci*.[27] Here is another strange connection born out of historical accident. Andy was a student of mine and we have remained close friends for decades. Having relocated to Rome he decided to write a memoir reflecting on Gramsci's legacy in the current conjuncture. Andy had already written several studies on left thinkers—Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, John Berger—concentrating on their lives and animating preoccupations. His method is to immerse himself in the material circumstances of his subject's life and writings. He uncovered much more detail about Sraffa's role during Gramsci's incarceration, when he offered as much support as he could, at his own expense. The primary contact with Gramsci, however, was his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht. She painstakingly copied out letters from Gramsci to send on to Sraffa. It was primarily she who rescued Gramsci's notebooks after his death and, possibly with Sraffa's help, secured their transfer to Moscow. What role Sraffa played in influencing Gramsci's thinking we shall probably never know, even from the many letters and documents cited in Potier's book and others that are yet to be published. But if Sraffa could influence Wittgenstein, Keynes and Robinson in such fundamental ways, then surely Gramsci would not have remained unmoved. Gramsci, with his interest in the Southern Question, Americanism and Fordism, the organic intellectuals and a host of other topics is one of my favourite Marxist thinkers, and for this I have, I suspect, Sraffa partly to thank.

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[27] Andy Merrifield, *Roses for Gramsci*, New York 2025.

What future might we predict for 'that epoch-making book' as Maurice Dobb liked to call it, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*? That remains an open question. I think it safe to assert, however, that it is more meaningful to work through and with Marx's contradictions than wallow in Smith's 'flat tautologies'. So, here am I, in my ninetieth year, looking back on my career as a geographer interested in explaining, with a little help from Marx, how urbanization and uneven development work, finding myself obliged to some extraordinary scholars, such as Sraffa and Robinson; and to people, events and political currents that open doors to new ways of thinking, hopefully more adequate to confront the central contradictions of our times. It is, however, one thing to open doors but quite another to pass through *en masse*, to explore what might exist on the other side. The American empire that has sheltered capital for so long is starting to crack. This is a moment of opportunity as well as of peril. A little bit of optimism of the intellect is called for, if only to jump-start the optimism of the will.

LOÏC WACQUANT

PUNISH TO RULE

Colonial Penality and the Urban Badlands

> *The colonized world is a world divided in two. The dividing line, the border, is marked by barracks and police stations.*
>
> —Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*

Colonial punishment is of special theoretical and historical interest when it comes to conceptualizing the penal state for three reasons. First, under imperial rule, state violence is *suffusive, explosive* and *multifaceted*, woven into the fabric of the colonial economy, society and polity.[1] Legal and extralegal force are closely enmeshed, as are military and civilian agencies tasked with delivering them. Second, the colonial Leviathan is the quintessence of the racial state: it fashions and defends naturalized social difference and hierarchy. So its erection and operation reveal the organic connection between punishment and race as two interlocking forms of material suasion and public dishonour. Racial hierarchy finds its official expression in the juridical duality of European citizen and native subject. Third, the colonial state not only makes maximal recourse to punishment, which seeps deep into daily life, irrigates subjectivity and stamps the institutional horizon. It also spawns an array of crimes and criminal sanctions specific to imperial possessions that circumvent, indeed violate, the constitutional principles and legal provisions operative in the metropole.

My first contention in this article is simple and straightforward: *penality was central to colonial statecraft* and assumed distinctive forms in the

European periphery—a fact not given its due by the major theorists of imperial rule and routinely ignored by its historians.[2] Thus, in her state-of-the-art review of research on African colonial states, Heather Sharkey insists on the need to cover 'a wide of range of actors' involved in 'the performance of colonialism' and to acknowledge the latter's violence. But she characteristically leaves out of the picture the policeman, the judge and the prison guard, the very agents of official violence.[3] To fill this gap, it is moreover essential to capture the labour of law enforcement carried out by the *penal triad* as such—police, court, prison—as I will endeavour to do here, rather than isolate one or another of its constituents.

My second claim is more controversial and delicate to formulate: the three properties set out above—suffusive official violence, racialization and criminal specificity—infect and inflect the rolling out of the penal state in the urban badlands of advanced society, albeit in a greatly attenuated form. The intensity of criminal construction and sanction is incomparably lower there but their operational logic is analogous, so that one can *leverage the colonial experience* of a hundred years ago to better understand punishment in the underbelly of the post-industrial metropolis today even while recognizing the many historical caesuras that separate them.[4] To leverage is not to conflate: the defamed

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[1] The most powerful expression of this thesis is Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Paris 1961. This article builds on the framework presented in Frankfurt in my Adorno Lectures in November 2024, to be published as *Rethinking the Penal State* next year by Suhrkamp in German and Polity Press in English.

[2] See, to take three leading theorists of the colonial state: Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton 1993; Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, New Haven 1994; and Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton 1996. An exception is Achille Mbembe's *Politique de l'inimitié*, Paris 2016 (English, *Necropolitics*, Durham NC 2019), but its arguments are more allegorical than analytical.

[3] Heather Sharkey, 'African Colonial States', in John Parker and Richard Reid, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History*, New York 2013. The rich works of specialist historians of crime and punishment in the colony, on which I will rely, have not been incorporated into the conceptual canon on empire. Similarly, in his panoramic dissection of 'The Sociology of Empires, Colonies and Postcolonialism', George Steinmetz makes no mention of punishment in any of its modalities: *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 40, July 2014.

[4] For a discussion of the different mechanisms linking the colonial past to the structure and culture of contemporary societies, see Julian Go, 'Reverberations of Empire: How the Colonial Past Shapes the Present', *Social Science History*, vol. 48, no. 1, Winter 2024. I propose a novel one: structural homology.

territories inhabited by the urban precariat disproportionately composed of stigmatized ethno-racial categories are emphatically *not* colonies or postcolonies. But the penal state tends to behave *as if they were*, and it continually reinvents strategies and techniques formerly deployed in empires because it faces the same practical quandary: how to domesticate an unruly population that does not recognize its authority even as it yearns for democratic recognition and civic inclusion?

Comparative history reveals that penality resides at the very core of the colonial state. It is rolled out, not just to deter, detect and sanction crime, but also, and most crucially, to capture and pacify territory alongside military force; to organize space and limit circulation; to effect economic spoliation and labour exploitation; to extract deference, mark identity and uphold the caste order; and to suppress native political aspirations and claims.[5] As in the metropole, it is delivered by the official agencies of the police, courts and prisons when and where these are transplanted and adapted to deal with ordinary crimes such as theft, assault, homicide, etc. But, in addition to the army, it is also meted out by variegated civil administrations and their local intermediaries entrusted specifically with the management of native populations, land and affairs, as well as private parties through explicit or tacit delegation. Founded on exacerbated and special powers, colonial penality is moreover in a state of *constant tension and extension* because the 'colonial situation', as deftly articulated by anthropologist Georges Balandier, is fundamentally unstable and thus inevitably threatened by the

[5] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, New York 1998; Florence Bernault, ed., *Enfermement, prison et châtiments en Afrique du 19ème siècle à nos jours*, Paris 1999; Diana Paton, *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780–1870*, Durham NC 2004; Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, London 2005; Taylor Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India*, London 2010; Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt*, London 2011; Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation*, Cambridge 2012; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940*, New York 2012; Sylvie Thénault, *Violence ordinaire dans l'Algérie coloniale. Camps, internements, assignations à residence*, Paris 2012; Jean-Pierre Bat and Nicolas Courtin, eds, *Maintenir l'ordre colonial. Afrique et Madagascar, XIXe–XXe siècles*, Rennes 2012; Peter Beattie, *Punishment in Paradise: Race, Slavery, Human Rights, and a Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Penal Colony*, Durham NC 2015; and the literature surveyed by Søren Ivarsson and Søren Rud, 'Rethinking the Colonial State: Configurations of Power, Violence, and Agency', *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 33, December 2017.

collective recalcitrance, strategies of resistance and insurgent demands of the colonized.[6]

Like the study of the penal state in the metropolitan core, the study of colonial penality has been hampered by an intellectual disjuncture. On the one side, there is a rich and rapidly growing literature from imperial historians focusing on crime and punishment in colonial societies, but their work scarcely connects with the sociological and legal theories of penality.[7] It finds its main inspiration, rather, in the writings of Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon and Giorgio Agamben, as well as in Subaltern studies. On the other side, the colonial domain has been consistently ignored by scholars of punishment—and this criticism applies to my own work—due to the presentist cast of their investigations and the Eurocentrism of their debates. When it timidly enters their purview, it is in terms of contemporary 'legacies' and 'vestiges' of colonialism rather

[6] The 'colonial situation' is 'a socio-historical framework that superimposes two societies, one dominant and the other dominated, in a relationship of subordination, exploitation and dependency, but also of cultural contact.' This dynamic conflictuality nourishes aspirations to decolonization: Georges Balandier, 'La situation coloniale: approche théorique', *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. II, no. I, 1951.

[7] In addition to the studies mentioned in footnote 5, the key monographs and collections representative of this genre include David Arnold, *Police Power and Colonial Rule: Madras, 1859–1947*, London 1986; David Anderson and David Killingray, eds, *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940*, Manchester 1991; Thomas Holloway, *Policing Rio de Janeiro: Repression and Resistance in a Nineteenth-Century City*, Stanford 1993; Gabriel Haslip-Viera, *Crime and Punishment in Late Colonial Mexico City, 1692–1810*, Albuquerque 1999; Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940*, Berkeley 2001; Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao, eds, *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism*, Durham NC 2007; Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown, eds, *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia, and Latin America*, Ithaca NY 2007; Mark Brown, *Penal Power and Colonial Rule*, New York 2014; Emmanuel Blanchard et al., eds, *Policing in Colonial Empire: Cases, Connections, Boundaries (ca. 1850–1970)*, Berlin 2017; Marie Muschalek, *Violence as Usual: Policing and the Colonial State in German Southwest Africa*, Ithaca NY 2019; Radha Kumar, *Police Matters: The Everyday State and Caste Politics in South India, 1900–1975*, Ithaca NY 2021; Anastasia Dukova, *To Preserve and Protect: Policing Colonial Brisbane*, Brisbane 2020; Samuel Kalman, *Law, Order, and Empire: Policing and Crime in Colonial Algeria, 1870–1954*, Ithaca NY 2024; Marie Houllemare, *Justices d'empire. La répression dans les colonies françaises au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 2024; Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US*, New York 2024.

than its distinctive logics at the bloom of empire.[8] I propose to bring the history and theory of colonial punishment together to draw lessons for the conceptualization of the penal state and for the analysis of the penal management of subordinate categories in the metropolis of the contemporary West.[9]

The penal triad

What the historian Taylor Sherman calls 'coercive networks' anchored by the state were pivotal to the establishment and running of imperial possessions: 'Far from being limited to a single institution, penal practices ranged from firing on crowds and bombing from the air to dismissal from one's place of work or study, collective fines, confiscation of property, as well as imprisonment, corporal and capital punishment.'[10] The colonial state was quintessentially a violent state which deployed its police, courts and prisons alongside its military to subordinate, exploit and exclude the populations native to the lands conquered. Its rule was extended by the leeway it granted local intermediaries and private parties such as settlers to use force to do likewise. It is no wonder that the penitentiaries of the colony were prime targets of anticolonial agitation, as when Indian jails were shaken by the wave of mutinies chronicled by Clare Anderson in *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8*.[11]

The police force was *an essential cog* in the machinery of imperial rule as well as a generative force in the institutional distribution and practical

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[8] See, for instance, Lynsey Black et al., 'Introduction: Legacies of Empire', *Punishment and Society,* vol. 23, no. 5, December 2021, a thematic issue of the journal drawing on southern and decolonial criminology. Mark Brown makes the intriguing but unnoticed argument that the penal surge of the late 20th century in advanced society constitutes a 'recursion' of punishment in past colonies: 'The Politics of Penal Excess and the Echo of Colonial Penality', *Punishment and Society,* vol. 4, no. 4, October 2002.

[9] Needless to say, the exercise of colonial power varied greatly across empires, countries and periods; here I will focus mostly on French Africa and New Caledonia. The summary picture I draw will also necessarily exaggerate the coherence and coordination of colonial rule. One must keep in mind that the colonial Leviathan was despotic but disarticulated, oppressive but scattered, inflexible but fumbling.

[10] Taylor Sherman, 'Tensions of Colonial Punishment: Perspectives on Recent Developments in the Study of Coercive Networks in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean', *History Compass,* vol. 7, no. 3, May 2009, p. 669.

[11] Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion*, London 2007.

deployment of colonial penality, starting with material extraction. In his sweeping comparative study of the French, British and Belgian empires during the interwar decades, Thomas Martin demonstrates that it was vital to the functioning of colonial economies: it safeguarded the flow of resources, broke strikes and assaulted workers' movements.[12] The repression of native labourers even took priority over the suppression of nationalist aspirations. Policemen were the 'violence workers' who translated the formal sovereignty of the invading power into a tangible reality at ground level through the gamut of forceful acts, from threats and arrests to savage beatings and rampant torture, designed to establish 'law and order' and to impose standards of conduct imported from the metropole.[13] Torture was a choice instrument in the panoply of techniques used to instil terror and obtain obeisance from the so-called natives in the bloom of empire—and not just in its phase of open contestation and looming dislocation leading to the chaos of national independence.[14]

The law-enforcement forces were typically composed of an incoherent patchwork of personnel at odds with each other and supplemented by local operators such as guards and foremen on plantations, the private police of companies and vigilante outfits. These operators were sometimes recruited among 'minority' groups to exploit ethnic divisions and often from isolated regions of the hinterland with scant opportunities to enter the capitalist sector of the colonial economy. In France's African possessions, white Frenchmen from the mainland occupied the higher ranks and oversaw African patrolmen, auxiliaries and constables, highlighting the decisive 'contribution of the natives' (*concours des indigènes*) to the ground-level enforcement of the colonial order.[15] Repeated efforts to unify and standardize procedures and practices within and across imperial possessions were largely unsuccessful, and policing generally followed parochial traditions and rules. Some policemen freshly arrived

[12] Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*.

[13] The notion of 'violence worker' is elaborated by Martha Huggins and colleagues in *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities*, Berkeley 2002. See the creative use to which it is put by Deana Heath in *Colonial Terror: Torture and State Violence in Colonial India*, Oxford 2021.

[14] Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962*, New York 1977; Georgina Sinclair, *At the End of the Line: Colonial Policing and the Imperial Endgame, 1945–80*, Manchester 2006; Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad*, Princeton 2008.

[15] Bat and Courtin, eds, *Maintenir l'ordre colonial*, p. 210. A panoramic view across empires is offered by Blanchard et al. in *Policing in Colonial Empire*.

from the metropole took to learning native languages, tried their hand at ethnography, surveyed the land and extracted data in an effort to make the social landscape legible in the interests of more efficient control.[16]

In his intriguing monograph on the genesis of the different law-enforcement occupations in Togo under German rule starting in 1884 and then French tutelage from World War One until independence in 1960, Joël Glasman confirms that the police operated as an administrative agency with a broad portfolio: to respond to crime, collect taxes, oversee native populations drawn into forced labour and repress local revolts. For this, it unfurled military discipline and tactics that normalized violence against these populations.[17] Similarly, Marie Muschalek documents how the ordinary violence perpetrated by the *Landespolizei* was key to establishing and enforcing colonial rule in German Southwest Africa—today's Namibia—between 1907 and 1915. The banalization and bureaucratization of brutality by its uniformed force, taking the form of kicks, smacks and beatings, with the help of shackles, whips and guns, were integral to the construction, not only of the local social order, but also of the local Leviathan itself: 'Instead of being built primarily on formal, legal and bureaucratic processes, the colonial state was produced by improvised, informal practices of violence.'[18] In others words, *brutal penality drove statecraft from below*.

The colonial police typically displayed indifference and apathy when it came to crimes against indigenous individuals or groups while displaying diligence when the victim was European. The court acted accordingly. In the Indian subcontinent under British tutelage, white judges and white juries treated with extreme leniency the violence of unruly whites—planters, police, prison guards, soldiers and vagrants—trained on the 'natives', effectively placing the perpetrators *exlex*. The result was that arbitrary and explosive brutality was not exceptional but normal, woven into the fabric of everyday life. It upheld a shifting but omnipresent racial hierarchy that consistently placed ordinary Indians at the bottom of the scale. What is more, the vision of violence

[16] On the epistemic dimension of imperial rule, read Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton 1996; and Edmund Burke, *The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam*, Berkeley 2014.
[17] Joël Glasman, *Les Corps habillés au Togo. Genèse coloniale des métiers de police*, Paris 2014.
[18] Muschalek, *Violence as Usual*, p. 26.

was culturally and legally bifurcated. Thus, on the plantations, while 'European violence was viewed as a rational and necessary mode of labour control, peasant attacks were generally called acts of insubordination, fanaticism or insanity.'[19]

Similarly, adjudication by the courts was *racially bifurcated*, with different penal codes and tribunals set up for native defendants and for white settlers. In the French possessions of sub-Saharan Africa, *tribunaux indigènes* run by white judges handled offences committed among Africans and took into consideration local customs, institutionalizing 'legal pluralism'.[20] Matters involving Europeans were tried by a separate court applying metropolitan law only. In the former scenario, corporal punishment such as lashing, fines, short prison terms, prison labour and death were mainstays of criminal sentencing as sanctions stipulated by traditional African justice such as banishment, stoning, mutilation and torture were deemed 'contrary to the principles of French civilization', to cite a 1910 government decree. This resulted in stupendous rates of incarceration for Africans, three to six times higher than in Europe. In some cities of equatorial Africa, roughly one-third of the adult male population had served days in prison in 1943.[21]

A second distinctive property of the colonial court in the French possessions of Africa was its weak institutional separation from the police and the prison and its partial short-circuiting by virtue of the native code known as *indigénat,* which made it possible to punish through an administrative route.[22] The penal triad was not clearly differentiated for the simple reason that the same person was the decision-maker for law enforcement, criminal adjudication and incarceration, to wit: the native

[19] Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law*, Cambridge 2010, p. 175.

[20] On this concept and its origins in the colonial domain, see Sally Engle Merry, 'Legal Pluralism', *Law and Society Review,* vol. 22, no. 5, 1988.

[21] Florence Bernault, 'The Shadow of Rule: Colonial Power and Modern Punishment in Africa', in *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Ithaca NY 2007, p. 62.

[22] Gregory Mann, 'What was the *Indigénat*? The "Empire of Law" in French West Africa', *The Journal of African History,* vol. 50, no. 3, November 2009. For a comparison with British colonies on the same continent, see Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, Evanston, IL 1968. For a fine-grained study of the workings of the 'native court', see Richard Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912*, Portsmouth CT 2005.

'chief' at the level of the village and the French civil servant responsible for overseeing a district, or '*cercle*'. As a representative of the governor, trained at France's École nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer and putative 'expert' in indigenous mores, the *commandant de cercle* wielded a multiplex power.[23] This power was at once administrative (he supervised the native chiefs and translators), military (he directed the native police forces and instigated repression), judicial (he sat as judge in the native court, applied the sanctions stipulated by the native code and managed the local prison), and economic (he was entrusted with drawing the census, collecting taxes and organizing forced labour).[24] His most crucial role when it came to the court was to implement the bifurcation of the judicial treatment of colonized (native law) and colonizer (European law).

The *colonial prison* played an integral role in establishing imperial rule, as first revealed by the historian Florence Bernault: 'The prison fed the transformation of the colonized societies and consolidated the profound upheaval brought about by the conquest. A tool of disorder rather than order, a frontier kind of carceral (in Turner's geopolitical sense), it stood as a strategic outpost, an advanced bastion of colonial supremacy.'[25] In its early phase, it served to isolate and deport native political leaders until they submitted. Later, it was deployed widely to impose white domination in every realm of social life, and then to suppress indigenous rebellions and nationalist mobilization through sweeping reclusion.[26] Finally, it was enrolled in the desperate and unsuccessful effort to stem revolutionary uprisings at the crumbling of empire. In Africa, Latin

[23] Véronique Dimier, 'Le commandant de cercle: un "expert" en administration coloniale, un "spécialiste" de l'indigène?', *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*, vol. 10, no. 1, March 2004; Armelle Enders, 'L'École nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer et la formation des administrateurs coloniaux', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 40, no. 2, April–June 1993.

[24] Jean Frimigacci, 'L'État colonial français, du discours mythique aux réalités (1880–1940)', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, vol. 32, no. 1, July 1993, who reports that the *commandant de cercle* was viewed locally as 'king of the bush', the 'true chief of empire' and an 'emperor without a sceptre'.

[25] Bernault continues: 'For the conquest was not limited to the period when territories were taken possession of; it lasted well beyond that, in an ongoing effort to subjugate people and territories. The prison provided a decisive anchorage for these battles': Bernault, *Enfermement, prison et châtiments in Afrique*, pp. 39–40.

[26] The canonical book on the topic is Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille*. An extensive bibliographic panorama is provided by Philip Havik et al., eds, *Empires and Colonial Incarceration in the Twentieth Century*, London 2021.

America and the South Pacific, the colonists built facilities dedicated to the internment of political dissenters, suspected insurrection leaders and 'enemy combatants'. In the British dominions of Africa, the authorities used *ad hominem* ordinances to circumvent juridical rules, nullify the principle of *habeas corpus* and permit the indefinite detention without trial of nationalist figures. The law was thus effectively turned into 'lawfare', in which 'law itself became the tool of conquest and oppression', rather than a protective shield against it, fuel to keep the imperial engine running.[27]

Colonial prisons were typically imposing, highly visible, fortress-like structures towering over other buildings in the city, an architectural testimony of imperial might. They reinscribed racial difference and hierarchy by separating European inmates and establishing different carceral regimens for whites and 'natives'.[28] That these would share a cell was simply unimaginable; they even paced in separate yards. Whites enjoyed individual cells, more food, some medical care, better clothing and sanitary facilities. They were exempt from forced labour whereas Africans were confined in collective chambers and treated as an undifferentiated human mass—it was conveniently believed that they were naturally gregarious and would not tolerate individual isolation. Native inmates were also subject to harsh corporal punishment such as flogging, which European inmates were largely spared.[29] Indeed, the latter were often quickly repatriated to France to serve their sentence because their continued presence among African inmates was socially incongruous and symbolically disruptive.

Punishment was mobilized across the colonies to *extract and discipline forced labour* in the form of mandatory work prestation and requisition (also known as *corvée*), indentured servitude and convict recruitment. Forced labour in its different forms was plugged into the local economy to remedy the endemic penury of workers caused by the formal abolition of slavery, the dispersal and low density of the population, and

[27] Michael Lobban, *Imperial Incarceration: Detention Without Trial in the Making of British Colonial Africa*, Cambridge 2021, p. 15.
[28] Bernault, *Enfermement, prison et châtiments en Afrique*, pp. 42–4.
[29] Africans received harsher physical punishment than whites for the same offence because it was believed that they were less sensitive to physical pain and also that force was the only language they understood.

the latter's reticence to get drawn into the wage-labour economy. In the French empire, the *code de l'indigénat* stipulated *prestation*, the obligation for indigenous males to perform a certain quantum of gratis labour (or toil for a pittance of a pay) ranging from 10 to 60 days each year—not counting 'extraordinary labour requisitions'.[30] The resulting workforce was dispatched to build public infrastructure such as official buildings, roads, bridges, canals, telegraph lines and railways, as well as assigned as needed to private plantations to ensure timely harvests, to dig mines and to unload ships and haul barges for European traders. It was organized militarily and placed under the watch of local 'chiefs' and special supervisors—European and native—as well as local militias tasked with upholding work discipline.

The police and the courts were vigilant about this obligation. To skirt the prestation was not a civil matter but an administrative matter pursuant to the code of *indigénat* which exposed one to arrest, fines and incarceration.[31] The violator could also be beaten and flogged in informally organized public ceremonies designed to communicate to all the imperative of work and the implacability of the authorities. The latter also resorted to collective punishment, fining an entire 'tribe' for the failure of a few men to supply their labour, seizing their crops and animals or confiscating and destroying their property.[32] If a recalcitrant worker could not afford to pay the fine inflicted, he would be sentenced to hard labour inside the walls of the penitentiary.

With assistance from the army, the police commonly conducted raids on villages to corral the men and drag them to the worksite where they were to toil. It also arrested and imprisoned the native farmers resisting agricultural requisitions, which compelled farmers to cultivate cash crops in high demand in the metropole, such as coffee, cotton

[30] At its origins in the 17th century, *corvée* was imposed both in metropolitan France and in its overseas possessions: Anne Conchon, 'La corvée au XVIIIe siècle. Des formes plurielles de réquisition dans les colonies françaises', in Anne Conchon et al., eds, *Travail servile et dynamiques économiques XVIe–XXe siècle*, Paris 2021.

[31] Criminal sanctions were used to enforce indentured contracts and regular employment contracts: Jean-Pierre Le Crom, 'Droit du travail *vs* droit pénal: le cas des colonies' in *Les mots du droit, les choses de justice. Dire le droit, écrire la justice, défendre les hommes*, Paris 2020.

[32] On collective punishment, see Isabelle Merle and Adrian Muckle, *L'Indigénat. Genèses dans l'empire français, pratiques en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris 2019.

and rubber, instead of the subsistence crops they direly needed. Work conditions varied greatly but it is no exaggeration to say that they were invariably despotic and all too often catastrophic: the laying down of the Congo-Océan railway between 1921 and 1934 cost the lives of over 20,000 African workers out of 127,000, killed by exhaustion, extreme temperatures, accidents, falling rocks, mudslides, starvation and disease, with a mortality rate peaking at 49 per cent in 1926, not to mention the squalid and hazardous construction compounds and regular beatings—and murders—by supervisors. So much so that the authorities recruited an additional contingent of Chinese 'coolies', reputed to be more resilient, to try and stem the human carnage.[33] African workers resisted forced labour by every means possible, including the refusal to toil, sabotage and flight. In some large works projects, the desertion rate topped one-half of the labour force—explained away by the colonialist trope of 'negro laziness'.

In the metropole, critics of the regime 'frequently used the word "slavery"—and images of death and dehumanization echoing those of anti-slavery propaganda—to dramatize policies that strayed beyond the bounds'.[34] Forced labour scandals reverberated widely in the European press. As for its advocates, they justified the regime in its diverse forms on material and moral grounds. First, they insisted, it was necessary to recruit the needed workforce and ensure that the colonies were prosperous, pay for themselves or be profitable, thus fostering the economic development of the metropole. Next, forced labour was conceived as a vehicle for 'educating the native', helping him to overcome his natural lethargy and inbred 'slothfulness' (*paresse*), instilling in him such personal virtues as work ethic, a sense of discipline and respect for authority.[35] There was a third benefit to forced labour, excavated by economic historians: it was equivalent to an 'invisible tax' that built up the

[33] Julia Martínez, '"Unwanted Scraps" or "An Alert, Resolute, Resentful People"? Chinese Railroad Workers in French Congo', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 91, Spring 2017; and James Patrick Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism*, New York 2021. In New Caledonia in the interwar decades, the Kanaks, who had to supply 15 days of prestation each year, complained of being 'treated like slaves': Merle and Muckle, *L'Indigénat*, pp. 340–41.

[34] Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge 1996.

[35] Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, Stanford 1997.

fiscal capacity of the early colonial state by supplying the largest share of its budget.[36] In other words, punishment subtended forced labour which built the colonial Leviathan.

Convict labour was similarly instrumental in the running of colonial economies. It served a multiplicity of purposes: first, as punishment to sustain deterrence, inflict retribution and promote 'reform'; second, to offset the cost of penal administration, especially running the carceral facilities; and third, to erect public infrastructure. Forced labour drawn from prison was also impressed into the army, farmed out to settlers and regrouped in mobile camps, 'reservoirs for frontier projects that blurred private and public need for a docile and cheap native workforce'.[37] Penal transportation was itself a distinctive vehicle for colonial expansion around the world. The British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Danes, Swedes, Russians, Chinese and Japanese all dispatched convicts to conquer, settle and till new lands on four continents.[38] Convicts both competed and mixed with other forced labourers such as slaves and indentured servants as well as with indigenous peoples. Their penal peregrinations were accompanied by flows of goods, techniques and ideas across the oceans that tied the world together—contributing to the imperial variant of globalization.

Race was integral to the global system of convict labour: the treatment of hands was differentiated by ethnicity, religion and geographic provenance while racialized visions of criminality, work capacity and moral reformability shaped European privilege.[39] White convicts were viewed as reformable subjects while coloured convicts—particularly enslaved populations and indigenous peoples—were cast as irredeemable or innately criminal. So much to say that the global history of punishment, race and empire are inextricably linked. This is

[36] Marlous Van Waijenburg, 'Financing the African Colonial State: The Revenue Imperative and Forced Labor', *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 78, no. 1, March 2018. The colonies of French Africa and Asia had to be financially self-sustaining as they received no subsidy from the metropole after 1900.

[37] Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, p. 69. The peregrinations of these camps rounding up convict labourers rendered the walls of the prison porous and facilitated mass escapes: Romain Tiquet, 'Connecting the "Inside" and the "Outside" World: Convict Labour and Mobile Penal Camps in Colonial Senegal (1930s–1950s)', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 64, no. 3, December 2019.

[38] Clare Anderson, ed., *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, London 2018.

[39] Anderson, *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, p. x.

also a good illustration of the multifunctionality and double-sidedness of state punishment: at its core, it facilitates material exploitation and enforces sociosymbolic divisions.[40]

We thus come to an implacable syllogism: formal and informal punishment were vital to forced labour extraction and discipline in its many guises; forced labour was vital to the empire's self-appointed project to plunder and 'uplift' the colonized; *ergo* punishment was vital to the colonial enterprise. *Without the penal force of the colonial state, however disjointed, there would have been no empire to speak of.*

The indigenous code

One device has come to signify the ever-present menace and delivery of physical punishment and its entwinement with colonial subjugation and economic extraction in the French and Belgian possessions of black Africa: the *chicotte*, a multistranded braided whip made of raw, sun-dried animal hide used to repress crime, to discipline and drive native labourers, as well as to brutalize them when they failed to reach harvest and production quotas.[41] The device was also used liberally by colonial administrators, missionaries and settlers to repress even minor violations of the informal racial etiquette governing the relations between colonizer and colonized and to terrorize the latter by means of public flogging ceremonies. The role of the *chicotte* was thus not just economic as commonly held: it was deemed by state officials an essential device to extract subservience to French rule and to impose cultural norms intended to 'civilize the natives'.

Administering the *chicotte* commonly resulted in severe injuries, massive bleeding, maiming and even death—it was not rare for victims to

[40] This is in keeping with Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer's materialist theory of punishment for the mobilization of labour, in *Punishment and Social Structure*, New Brunswick [1939] 2005, and Émile Durkheim's symbolic theory of penality as means of communication and community formation in *De la division du travail social*, Paris [1893] 1990.

[41] Anne-Charlotte Martineau, 'Chicotte', in Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce, eds, *International Law's Objects* Oxford 2018; Jean-Pierre Le Crom and Marc Boninchi, eds, *La Chicotte et le pécule. Les travailleurs à l'épreuve du droit colonial français (XIXe–XXe siècles)*, Rennes 2021. Batons, canes and whips were also commonly used and the authorities discussed what implement was best adapted to which category of 'natives'.

receive dozens of lashes. In *King Leopold's Ghost*, Hochschild provides vivid accounts of the horrific floggings in Belgian Congo in the 1900s: 'It took a practiced hand to administer a hundred lashes, for if they were given too quickly, the victim would die.'[42] The *chicotte* was the target of an international campaign to ban it at the beginning of the 20th century, initially centred on Belgian Congo, launched by journalists and diplomats with the support of missionaries and former colonial officials. It was not legally banned until 1959 but its use diminished rapidly. It survives today in the form of the common use of flagellation by public officials as well as private citizens—teachers, husbands, fathers—in many African societies, where it is described by the verb *chicotter*.

The conventional penal triad of police, court and prison does not tell the whole story. At the heart of colonial rule sat variants of *special juridical codes and administrative authorities* regulating indigenous populations and affairs—and assimilated categories such as indentured servants—which were more or less systematized and differentially enforced by the state and its agents depending on location and period. The case of France is emblematic.[43] The set of legal rules and regulations known as *Code de l'indigénat* or *indigénat* was a distinct penal regime, running from 1881 to 1946, which was pivotal to the day-to-day enforcement of the caste order in the French empire. It was initially hatched in Algeria as a special menu of measures fit for the war of conquest for a 'transitory' period of seven years deemed necessary to effect the complete

[42] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, p. 120. Flogging as well as caning in the British empire are well studied. See, for instance, Stephen Peté and Annie Devenish, 'Flogging, Fear and Food: Punishment and Race in Colonial Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2005; David Anderson, 'Punishment, Race and "The Raw Native": Settler Society and Kenya's Flogging Scandals, 1895–1930', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011; Penelope Edmonds and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, '"The Whip Is a Very Contagious Kind of Thing": Flogging and Humanitarian Reform in Penal Australia', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 17, no. 1, Spring 2016; Steven Pierce, 'The Suffering Subject: Colonial Flogging in Northern Nigeria and a Humanitarian Public, 1904–1933', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 66, no. 2, April 2024.

[43] Gregory Mann, 'What was the *Indigénat*? The "Empire of Law" in French West Africa', *The Journal of African History*, vol. 50, no. 3, November 2009. For a detailed discussion of *Eingeborenenrecht* in German colonies, see Alison Redmayne and Christine Rogers, 'Research on Customary Law in German East Africa', *Journal of African Law*, vol. 27, no. 1, Spring 1983.

'pacification' of that territory.[44] It was then exported to other French colonies, as a juridical exception to metropolitan law, that is, a provisional mesh of rules, edicts and procedures governing native populations, but it was repeatedly prorogated for seven decades.

Codifying and regularizing existing practices, *indigénat* sported three distinctive features: it stipulated specific crimes unknown in mainland France that only natives could or would commit; it dictated distinctive forms of punishment that the metropole would never impose, pursuant to special powers granted to the colonial governor; and it was enforced, not just by judicial authorities, but also by colonial administrators, their underlings and their native intermediaries, in violation of constitutional norms. Most of all, this special penality served as the institutional framework organizing the relationship between the colonizing state and the colonized population. As the historian Sylvie Thénault puts it, 'these disciplinary powers were the major plank of the penal regime of *indigénat*. They were probably its most massively used component and hence they embodied colonial arbitrariness in the eyes of those who were its victims.'[45]

First, *special offences*: according to a decree of 1887 supplemented in 1892, the native crimes specific to the South Pacific colony of New Caledonia included, *inter alia*, failing to obey orders proffered by administrative agents and to show proper deference to the same; skirting restrictions on travel and residence (being outside of one's assigned district without proper authorization); being in public space in the city after eight in the evening or entering a drinking establishment; violating standards of dress ('nudity' on the roads or in towns); practising sorcery or accusing another native of sorcery; brush-clearing by fire and bearing native weapons in European settlements.[46] The economic and political tenor of colonial penality was made transparent in 1915 when the code was

[44] Thénault revises this account by showing that a similar regime, more extensive and better articulated with precolonial institutions, was instituted simultaneously in Indochina. In both the African and the Asian case, *indigénat* was merely legalizing the existing practices of imperial authorities: Sylvie Thénault, 'L'indigénat dans l'Empire français. Algérie/Cochinchine, une double matrice', *Monde(s)*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017.

[45] Thénault, 'L'indigénat dans l'Empire français', p. 23.

[46] Isabelle Merle and Adrian Muckle, *L'Indigénat. Genèses dans l'empire français, pratiques en Nouvelle-Calédonie*.

extended to cover the refusal to provide labour prestation, to pay the head tax, to supply information requested by the authorities and the making of 'public speeches aiming to weaken the respect due to the French administration'.[47] The vaguest statute concerned 'causing public disorder' in European settlements, a crime that allowed the authorities to arrest and sanction any native virtually at will.

Second, punishment under the native code was also exceptional in the literal sense of *evading the juridical principles and norms of the metropole*, such as the individualization of sanctions and the right of appeal. In addition to routine brutality, it included internment, which took three forms: incarceration, house arrest and internal or external deportation; individual and collective fines; and property confiscation. Fines and days of prison were massively used to enforce labour prestation, collect the head tax, maintain spatial segregation and curtail interethnic sociability.[48] Internment and deportation were used repeatedly to undercut rebellions and to overcome the resistance of Kanak chiefs to colonial rule.

Third, punishment in the colony was deployed by *specially designed agencies* beyond those of the judicial system of the metropole. In New Caledonia, the enforcement of *indigénat* was entrusted to a web of native authorities created expressly for the purpose of colonial rule, 'tribes' assigned to a specific 'reservation' and put under the tutelage of a 'paramount chief' and a 'petty chief', themselves answerable to an inspector of native affairs.[49] After 1900, the gendarmes distributed across the island took the lead in surveilling the natives and implementing the statutes.

The violent administration of *indigénat* was far from bureaucratic in the Weberian sense of the word. Rather, it was rife with mismanagement, maltreatment and incompetence and it allowed wide discretion and rampant abuse by its agents, which created a climate of terror among the Kanaks. The paramount chiefs were granted the right to punish petty chiefs and the villages they oversaw. They were entrusted with the enforcement of the law as well as the supervision of everyday interactions

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[47] Quoted by Isabelle Merle, 'De la 'légalisation' de la violence en contexte colonial. Le régime de l'indigénat en question', *Politix*, no. 66, 2004, pp. 154–5.

[48] Merle and Muckle, *L'Indigénat*, chapters 6 and 7.

[49] As in other colonies, 'tribes' and 'chiefs' were colonial inventions that supposedly harnessed the 'customary' sociopolitical institutions of the Kanaks.

between European settlers and Melanesian natives to uphold racial etiquette: 'A glance misinterpreted, a cap not removed, a bad-tempered gesture on the part of the *indigène* can immediately result in a penalty of up to 15 days' imprisonment and a 100-franc fine.'[50] The local gendarmes could arrest whomever they wanted when they wanted on the flimsiest pretext and inflict excessive if not extravagant sanctions in the form of fines and days of incarceration. Moreover, the application of the code was not just capricious: it was without recourse. This motivated critics of colonial law in the metropole to denounce the *indigénat* as a 'juridical monstrosity': arbitrary, extreme and plain illegal.[51]

In some colonies, such as French Indochina, West Africa and New Caledonia, the *indigénat* led to open conflicts between magistrates and civil administrators of native affairs. The former viewed the repressive powers wielded by the latter as 'an infringement upon their prerogatives' and accused them of overextending their authority. The latter, in turn, denounced the inefficiency of judicial procedures due to the rights they granted the natives, which they deemed excessive.[52] In other colonies such as Algeria, magistrates and administrators worked hand in hand, and the regime was imposed with dogged rigidity and systematic brutality.[53]

Due to its sheer harshness and capricious enforcement, the *indigénat* generated collective sentiments of injustice, fear and defiance among the Kanaks. As a result, the regime was constitutively precarious and so it had to be continually adjusted and extended. For instance, to resist the imposition of the head tax the Kanaks not only dissimulated and manipulated their identity; they also fled and emptied their villages when the gendarmes came calling to collect it. Because it created a proclivity toward the arbitrary use of police power, *indigénat* created a tension 'between the state's desire to provide itself with the means to establish and maintain domination over the colonies, and the risk of encouraging abuses of power to the point of threatening that same domination

[50] Merle and Muckle, *L'Indigénat*, p. 148.
[51] The expression 'juridical monster' was used by metropolitan critics of the regime as early as the 1880s: Merle, 'De la 'légalisation' de la violence en contexte colonial,' p. 148. See also Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *De l'Indigénat, anatomie d'un 'monstre juridique.' Le droit colonial en Algérie et dans l'Empire français*, Paris 2015.
[52] Thénault, 'L'indigénat dans l'Empire français', p. 37.
[53] Thénault, *Violence ordinaire dans l'Algérie coloniale*.

as a result of the "exasperation of hatreds"'.[54] This tension, however, did not undermine the import of colonial penality to the *fabrication of subjects in lieu of citizens*. Administrators and gendarmes wielded 'a right to punish and a right to intern, arbitrary, striking here and there, and always hanging like a sword of Damocles over the fate of the individuals potentially concerned.'[55] The ever-present possibility of cruel and indiscriminate punishment diminished the material cost of ethno-racial control but it meant that colonial power could never achieve even minimal legitimacy in the eyes of its subaltern population. In the words of the historian Ranajit Guha, colonial penality *bought dominance but undermined hegemony*.[56]

The multifaceted deployment of the police, the ethno-racial bifurcation of the courts, the extended use of the *chicotte*, the unrestrained recourse to incarceration and special native codes disclose that colonial penality was key to the running of the imperial economy, the crystallization of the caste order in imperial possessions and the formation of the local Leviathan. It also shaped public culture and fashioned the subjectivity of colonist and native alike, infusing them with precarity, anxiety and tension.[57] Punishment was integral to imperial rule and its inflections help define the specificity of the colonial state.

We can synthesize the relationship between the penal state and the colonial order in diagrammatic form, as in figure I below. This figure applies only to the 'native' because *criminal justice is split by the juridical opposition*

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[54] Merle, 'De la "légalisation" de la violence en contexte colonial', p. 149. A similar tension characterized the deployment of punishment in India under British rule, where 'violence simultaneously menaced and maintained the empire.' Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*, p. 146.

[55] Merle and Muckle, *L'Indigénat*, p. 219.

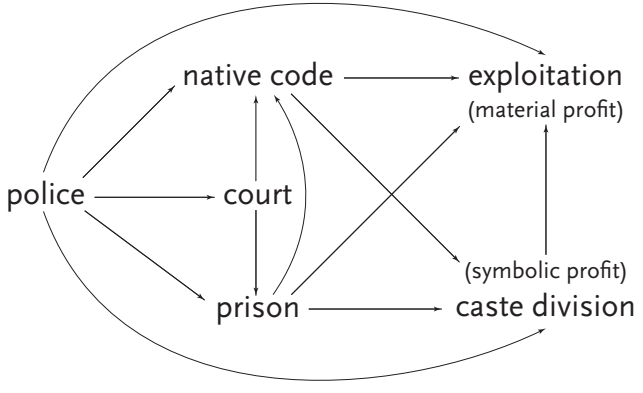
[56] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge MA 1997. Reflecting on the history of colonial law enforcement in imperial France, Samuel Kalman notes: 'In an ironic twist, the very things that seemingly protected the imperial project—military barrack and police stations, the omnipresent *tricolore*, military parades—only heightened the desire for freedom of the colonized denizens of the empire'. 'Policing the French Empire: Colonial Law Enforcement and the Search for Racial-Territorial Hegemony', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2020, p. 1.

[57] Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Rêverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham NC 2015. Achille Mbembe captures the colonial state's abiding sense of powerlessness and ignorance in *Sortir de la grande nuit*, Paris 2013.

between citizen and subject. For the European *citizen*, endowed with full rights, the articulation of police, court and prison is the standard linear sequence found in the metropole: police > court > prison (with feedback loops) and the penal state serves primarily to protect the social and moral order as stipulated by criminal statutes. For the 'native' *subject*, the architecture of penalization is structurally different and, in addition to suppressing crime, its overt purpose is to buttress caste division and to foster economic extraction.

The police is the most ramifying instrument in the panoply of imperial punishment. It enters into everyday life and regulates social interaction between white citizen and coloured subject, bolstering the racial dualism that grants the colonizer a monopoly over ethnic honour (symbolic profit); it funnels unruly native bodies into the court and the prison; it directly subtends the native code and intrudes into the economy to facilitate exploitation (material profit). The prison also plays a multiplex role: it receives bodies from the police and the court; it supports the native code as well as ethno-racial hierarchy; it furnishes convict labour to the economy and stifles resistance from workers. As for the native code, it greases the wheels of exploitation by extracting forced labour and solidifies the caste order by stipulating racialized norms of conduct. The court plays the role of dispatcher between the police, the prison and the native code.

FIGURE 1: *The penal state and the colonial order*



Like any model, this expanded political economy of colonial punishment, taking into account both 'material and ideal interests' (to speak like Max Weber) is a simplification of a dynamic nexus that is inflected locally by the particular configuration of agents on the ground that crucially involved native intermediaries and authorities which collaborated with imperial rule—what Mahmoud Mamdani calls 'decentralized despotisms'.[58] But it can serve as an analytical guide for further historical investigation and comparison between countries, epochs and social formations, including contemporary societies. In particular, it recommends bringing together the three components of the penal triad, police, court and prison, along with the native code, and thus helps us to better capture the specificity of the *colonial penal state as the very foundation and enforcement agency of the division between native and citizen*.

Neighbourhoods of relegation

What theoretical lessons can we draw about the penal state by scrutinizing punishment in the imperial possessions of centuries past? First, the extreme case of the colony in the gamut of social formations spotlights the centrality of penality to state formation and to the functioning of a society founded on a vertical dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. Punishment is rolled out by the state but, in turn, its implementation remakes the state from within and enlivens it as the official agency wielding material and symbolic violence. It entails the creation and deployment of specific agencies, policies, categories and discourses that modify the structure and functioning of the bureaucratic field. There is thus a *recursive relationship* between the state and punishment which standard approaches to 'law and society' and 'punishment and society' miss because they cut the Leviathan out of the analytic equation.[59]

Penality is also organically connected to the structure of social and symbolic space in that the definition of crimes, the hierarchy of sanctions and their practical delivery follow, and in turn contribute to entrenching, the salient cleavages of society—specifically, the dual opposition of castes based on naturalized ethnicity buttressed by force and the law.

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[58] Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 26.

[59] The absence of the state is characteristically conspicuous in Kitty Calavita, *Invitation to Law and Society: An Introduction to the Study of Real Law*, Chicago 2016; and in Jonathan Simon and Richard Sparks, eds, *The Sage Handbook of Punishment and Society*, London 2012.

There is thus a correspondence *between the 'mode of punishment' and the 'mode of stratification'*, and not the 'mode of production' as Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer contend in their classic tome *Punishment and Social Structure*.[60] In particular, penality operates as an engine of racialization inasmuch that it inflicts on its targets a public stigma that marks them out as fundamentally different and vituperates them as agents of disorder, material and symbolic. It strives to contain not just dangerous classes, but also 'dangerous races'.[61]

Next, this colonial excursus confirms that penality fulfils *crucial extra-penological functions* far beyond crime control. It reveals how the penal Leviathan penetrates the lower reaches of society, makes them legible and tractable to a degree, and advertises the power of the ruler to the people.[62] Punishment sustains economic exploitation, bolsters social divisions, defends civic exclusion and communicates normative injunctions, thus fostering the reproduction of the social and moral order at large, and not just public order and physical safety as criminologists and common sense would have it.

Finally, the colonial experience teaches us that the punishment apparatus is tasked, at bottom, with *capturing and corralling bodies out of place*, that is, persons and populations failing to keep their appointed position in symbolic, social and physical space by dint of their identity, condition or conduct.[63] Penality helps fabricate (quasi-)subjects *in lieu of* citizens in that it abridges the rights and prerogatives of those it targets. This is particularly salient in the context of empire but it is just as true in advanced societies, where arrest, criminal conviction or incarceration translate automatically into the downgrading of one's civic status and

[60] This 'correspondence thesis' is the core argument of Rusche and Kirchheimer in *Punishment and Social Structure*, considered the definitive statement of the Marxist approach to punishment, even though a close reading reveals it to be Weberian.
[61] Loïc Wacquant, *The Invention of the 'Underclass': A Study in the Politics of Knowledge*, Cambridge 2022, pp. 133–40.
[62] James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven 1998.
[63] For illustrations from five colonies, see Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao, eds, *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism*, Durham NC 2005. For a parallel with African Americans in the postbellum South of the US, see Christopher Muller and Daniel Schrage, 'The Political Economy of Incarceration in the Cotton South, 1910–1925', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 127, no. 3, November 2021.

the truncation of one's rights. By the same token, penalization generates among its client population collective emotions of dread, distrust and defiance of authority, which paradoxically undermines the state's legitimacy and thus weakens political rule from within. This paradox expresses the structural duality of state punishment: it is a *public good* for the dominant but a *private bad* for the dominated.

Coming to the implications of this analysis for the sociology of the punitive containment of urban marginality in the 21st century, it is imperative, *in principio*, to resist the hasty and faulty assimilation of the zones of perdition of the post-industrial city to colonies, archeo or neo.[64] Several properties of place and state combine to refute this equation. Four pertain to the territory policed and its population:

1. unlike the colony, the American hyperghetto, the French *banlieues*, the British 'sink estate', the German *Problemviertel*, the *utsatta områden* of Sweden, etc., do not constitute sites of economic extraction;

2. their population is ethnically heterogenous and class homogenous whereas their colonial counterpart was the obverse: the different colonized ethnicities were amalgamated, in imperial eyes, into the category of the 'native' and treated as such;[65]

3. their dwellers are formally endowed with full civil and political rights (even foreigners and refugees enjoy extended legal

[64] In France, this assimilation is defended by the Parti des indigènes de la République, for whom today's urban periphery is but an extension of the French colonies of yesteryear, as Sadri Khiari argues in *La Contre-révolution coloniale en France: De de Gaulle à Sarkozy*, Paris 2009. In the US, the black ghetto was characterized as an 'internal colony' controlled by whites by, among others, Kenneth Clark, Robert Blauner and Black Panther leaders Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, New York 1967. The notion is incorporated and updated by the rhetoric of 'racial capitalism', deemed operative in yesteryear's colonies as in today's metropole. It finds hyperbolic expression in Ida Danewid, 'The Fire this Time: Grenfell, Racial Capitalism and the Urbanisation of Empire', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2020.

[65] The exception here is the American hyperghetto, which is doubly segregated by race and class and therefore ethnically homogenous, as shown in Loïc Wacquant, *The Two Faces of the Ghetto*, forthcoming.

protections and prerogatives), which limits their possible abuse by the state;

4. residents can and do escape the neighbourhood by climbing up the class structure to lose themselves in the broader society, shedding territorial stigma and expanding their life chances, which the subaltern populations of the colony could not do.

In addition, four key properties pertaining to the late-modern state further differentiate the predicament and treatment of the residents of neighbourhoods of relegation from the subjugated populations of empire:

1. the colonial Leviathan operated largely as a 'delegated state' in which non-state agents, planters, employers, militias and settlers wielded violence in its name whereas the contemporary state keeps a tight hold over legitimate violence;

2. the late-modern state deploys, not just a penal arm, but also educational, public health, housing and social welfare arms that evidently did not exist in the colony; it weaves a social and economic safety net that limits destitution and provides de facto entitlements; Foucauldian biopolitics supersedes necropolitics à la Mbembe;

3. the colonial state was strong in terms of 'despotic power' but weak in terms of 'infrastructural power'; the contemporary Leviathan is the exact opposite: it can penetrate deep into the underbelly of the city through its bureaucratic tentacles but it must contend with the contrarian claims, consultation and mobilization of civil society; [66]

4. the contemporary Leviathan is both oppressive and protective, a source of violence and a shield against violence, and state violence is correspondingly not doxic, as it was in the tropics, but *scandalous*

[66] This distinction is elaborated by Michael Mann in 'The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1984, pp. 188–9: despotic power is 'the range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups', whereas infrastructural power consists in 'the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm'.

(in the etymological sense of causing discredit and damage to reputation) whenever it demonstrably exceeds the bounds of the law.[67]

In sum, the material foundation of relegation in today's districts of marginality is class, inflected by ethnicity and compensated by the state, whereas the basis in the colony was race, inflected by class and sponsored by the state, and by its penal wing in particular.[68] At the same time, one cannot but be struck by the operational parallels between the respective justice triads of settler colony and urban badlands—with the proviso that official violence was diffuse in the former and is strictly targeted in the latter. To put it provocatively, in the depths of the metropolis, today's penal Leviathan *behaves like a neo-colonial state without a colony*, wielding a form of authority that its targets do not recognize and delivering punishment that deviates from its own legal promulgations. Hence the constant oscillation between festering official violence fuelled by routine judicial discrimination and the denunciation of official violence taking the form of seething discontent and periodic riots.[69]

Much as imperial punishment was an exception to metropolitan justice, the accelerated and simplified 'street penality' abridging rights that applies to the urban precariat turns out to be a deviation from full-fledged criminal justice experienced by bourgeois defendants—what I call 'paper penality', justice administered by the books, granting full substantive rights to middle-class defendants. The first pertains to *Polizeistaat*, the second to *Rechtsstaat*.[70] Together they constitute a

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[67] This is an inverted derivation from what Bourdieu calls the 'fundamental ambiguity' of the state: 'The State is a Janus such that one cannot enounce a positive property without simultaneously enouncing a negative property, a Hegelian property without a Marxist property, a progressive property without a regressive, oppressive property': Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l'État. Cours au Collège de France (1989–1992)*, Paris 2012, p. 161.

[68] Here again the US hyperghetto is an exception as it follows the colonial pattern: race first, class second and the state as aggravating institution: Wacquant, *The Two Faces of the Ghetto*, chapter 9.

[69] Éric Marlière, *La France nous a lâchés! Le sentiment d'injustice chez les jeunes des cites*, Paris 2008; Julien Talpin, *La Colère des quartiers populaires. Enquête socio-historique à Roubaix*, Paris 2024.

[70] Markus Dubber, *The Dual Penal State: The Crisis of Criminal Law in Comparative-Historical Perspective*, New York 2018. Dubber portrays this distinction as purely juridical. I contend that it replicates a socioracial dualism.

variant of 'legal dualism' based on class and place which operates as if defendants were subject to two legalities. This dualism, observed in all advanced societies, cannot but evoke the two-tiered criminal justice based on caste characteristic of the colony with its division into European and customary law.

Special crimes, special punishment and special administering agencies characterize colonial penality. Consider the parallels with street penality in the underbelly of the post-industrial metropolis. It comprises a litany of special crimes occurring out in the open such as 'loitering', 'causing a disturbance' (*tapage*), disorderly conduct, congregating on street corners and in the entrance hallways of buildings, acting as part of a 'gang' or a 'criminal association' (a vague entity in many cases) or 'driving while black' (racially skewed police stops and detention pursuant to minor traffic violations)—crimes that are fictitious or non-existent in other parts of the city. It also involves special punishments such as pretextual 'stop and frisk' searches followed by identity checks that are so many occasions for abusive treatment and arrests without cause and records, and body searches in public which amount to state-sponsored sexual assault.[71] Drawing on his ethnography of law enforcement in an impoverished *banlieue* of Paris, Didier Fassin enumerates the abrasive acts routinely suffered by its boys and men at the hands of the police: 'Harassment, provocations, threats, humiliation, racist insults, unwarranted checks, unjustified searches, abusive fines, painful handcuffing, pointless arrests, arbitrary police custody, beatings that leave no trace, sometimes even the use of torture, all these documented practices being concentrated on the most vulnerable segments of the population.'[72] None of these acts would be committed against a well-to-do resident of a bourgeois neighbourhood by virtue of differential policing by class and place.

Just as colonial penality was enforced by dedicated agencies of the state, policing neighbourhoods of relegation relies on special units, such as the infamous BAC (Brigades Anti-Criminalité), who behave like urban cowboys in France's urban periphery, and the BRR (Brigades de Reconquête

[71] See Peter Moskos, *Cop on the Beat: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District*, Princeton 2008, on the American case and Didier Fassin, *La Force de l'ordre. Une anthropologie de la police des quartiers*, Paris 2011, on the French case. See also Koshka Duff and Tom Kemp on 'Strip-Searching as Abjectification: Racism and Sexual Violence in British Policing', *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2024.
[72] Didier Fassin, *Punir, une passion contemporaine*, Paris 2015, p. 51.

Républicaine), deployed in a selection of officially designated 'sensitive urban zones' by national city policy;[73] and the anti-crime and crime-suppression units, strategic response groups, gang units and SWAT teams (Special Weapons and Tactics), who act similarly in the United States. In both countries, there has been a surge in the militarization of policing and riot units have been dispatched for ordinary law enforcement and surveillance—mirroring the meshing of police and army in law enforcement in the colony.[74]

Everyday police abuse is in turn validated by assembly-line judicial processing through accelerated tracks dedicated to low-level street crime, *comparution immédiate* in France and plea bargaining at the first hearing in the US. More revealing yet, these procedures invariably convict the teenagers and men arrested for minor offences: they are presumed guilty as charged on both sides of the Atlantic and they can rarely convince a judge that their version of the story is the truth. It is especially difficult to obtain verdicts against police abuse even when documented by witnesses and video recordings. Periodic police raids, called *opérations coup de poings* in France and sweeps in the US, wreaking social havoc and material destruction, translate into indiscriminate arrests. These are often accompanied by prearranged and sensationalistic media coverage designed to showcase the determination of the authorities to restore the law in a territory deemed beyond it. Finally, the massive show of force by law-enforcement in reaction to riots roil the poor segregated districts where the police, court and prison are the everyday face of the state to the jobless youth who reside there.

Accordingly, the first reaction of the target population of neo-colonial policing is often to give up their rights and flee, to avoid contact with law-enforcement. In the French urban periphery, the bitter joke is that young boys and men run away from the police who run after them only because they are running away. But the consensus among those fleeing

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[73] Created in 2018, the BRR (Brigades for Republican Reconquest) are formed by all-volunteer veteran police staff tasked with the mission to restore the authority of the state. They are assigned to some fifty QRR ('Neighbourhoods of Republican Reconquest'), especially trained to handle tense situations of confrontation with criminals and rioters, to proactively deter crime, to fight illegal trafficking and to back up the BAC.

[74] Fabien Jobard, 'La police en banlieue après les émeutes de 2005', *Mouvements*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2015; Trent Steidley and David Ramey, 'Police Militarization in the United States', *Sociology Compass*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2019.

is that 'you should bolt before the police even when you are innocent'.[75] The infraction of *refus d'obtempérer* (refusal to defer to a police order or refusal to come to a halt when driving, punishable by up to one year in prison, surpassing 25,000 cases a year) has become an obsession in the journalistic and political fields and, though this is not proffered openly, most assume that the culprits are young 'Arabs and blacks' from the stigmatized *banlieues*.[76] Likewise, a common criminal offence in and around the poor segregated districts of Californian cities is section 2800.2 of the California Vehicle Code, which prohibits evading the police while operating a motor vehicle and is punishable by up to four years in prison when it entails a chase demonstrating 'wanton disregard for the safety of persons or property'. Here again, young men in the long shadow of the penal state flee as a matter of course when the police comes onto the scene. Is this not eerily reminiscent of the Kanaks who fled their villages when the gendarmes showed up to collect the head tax?

Diligent and repeat incarceration is another modality of penalization in precincts of urban perdition that evokes the deployment of the prison in the colony in its heightened frequency if not its modality. First, carceral facilities are typically segregated along ethno-racial lines for purposes of order maintenance by the correctional officers and safety provision by the inmates themselves, who regroup with co-ethnics in a bid for everyday solidarity and collective defence.[77] Next, most prison inmates in advanced society come from a small number of destitute districts in the dual city and return there after they are released. As a result, the black American hyperghetto and the derelict French *banlieues* have each become linked to the carceral archipelago by a relationship of structural interpenetration and cultural osmosis, tight in the former and loose in the latter.[78] Neighbourhood and prison permeate one another in the

[75] Kamel Boukir, 'Le politique au bout de la matraque. Fuir la police, obéir, résister: entre déviance et citoyenneté', *Politix*, no. 125, 2019, p. 141.

[76] There is a strong taboo on mentioning publicly the ethnicity of offenders among state officials, journalists and the police. But the periodic link made between crime and immigration in discourse is enough to flag it without having to verbalize it.

[77] Didier Fassin, *L'Ombre du monde. Une anthropologie de la condition carcérale*, Paris 2015; Michael Walker, *Indefinite: Doing Time in Jail*, New York 2022.

[78] Lucie Bony, 'La prison, une "cité avec des barreaux"? Continuum socio-spatial par-delà les murs', *Annales de géographie*, no. 702, 2015; Loïc Wacquant, *Racial Domination*, Cambridge 2024, pp. 311–49.

nethermost regions of social and physical space. The former feeds the latter, which in turn spills over back onto the street, creating a syncretic culture of aggressive masculinity and defiance of authority, nourishing a vicious cycle whereby festering marginality and penal escalation continually reinforce each other.[79]

As in the colonies, the belligerent penalization of poverty in the stigmatized zones of perdition of the post-industrial city *undermines the legitimacy* of the state in the eyes of their residents, especially the young jobless men who are the target of constant police harassment, insult, provocation and degradation. This fuels bitterness, resentment and a desire for vengeance that simmers in the form of running skirmishes with law-enforcement personnel and explodes periodically into outright riots.[80] Owing to these abrasive relations, stamped by mutual scorn, these youths have come to see the police ('pigs' or 'po-po' in the US, '*keufs*' or '*lardus*' in France) as an enemy force invading their stomping ground to impose an arbitrary rule. By routinely abridging their substantive rights as citizens or denizens, the penal Leviathan reduces them to the neocolonial status of *quasi-subjects in a republic*—a civic anomaly. This is all the more grating inasmuch as, like colonized populations before them, the residents of districts of dereliction aspire to full civic inclusion and recognition by the very authorities who ignore or mistreat them.

There is yet a final twist in the similarities between yesteryear's colony and today's urban badlands: in both problem territories, the rolling out of penal policy discredits the state among its target population but, by the same token, generates support among the colonizer and among the broader post-industrial citizenry, respectively. For the colonizer, the delivery of wanton force and boundless brutality was rightful, reassuring and required to effect economic spoliation, enforce caste domination and secure political exclusion. It was demanded, approved and amplified by the settlers. Similarly, the implementation of aggressive policing,

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[79] A paradigmatic demonstration is Patrick Lopez-Aguado, *Stick Together and Come Back Home: Racial Sorting and the Spillover of Carceral Identity*, Berkeley 2018. It is revealing that youths from the French urban periphery liken jail to a '*cité*' (their public housing estates of provenance) or 'best of the *cités*'.

[80] Éric Marlière, 'Les "jeunes de cité" et la police. De la tension à l'émeute', *Empan* no. 67, 2007; Margit Mayer, Catharina Thörn and Håkan Thörn, eds, *Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe*, London 2016; Mustafa Dikeç, *Urban Rage: The Revolt of the Excluded*, New Haven 2018.

diligent prosecution and speedy incarceration in the defamed districts of the contemporary metropolis are requested and endorsed by broad swathes of the citizenry (including many residents of these very districts)—a majority that is not silent but vocal in its support for 'law and order' in the city's underbelly. This majority views penalization as the justified means for restoring the authority of the state and for reasserting its governing mission in neighbourhoods it perceives as '*zones de non-droit*' (lawless zones), fearsome redoubts of vice, violence and civic dissension, if not ethnic and religious separatism.[81]

This is illustrated by the moral panic roaring across the French political and journalistic fields in the 2020s about the alleged '*ensauvagement*' of youths and the '*décivilisation*' infecting the defamed *banlieues* against the backdrop of the constant denunciation of rampant *'islamisation'*.[82] Savage, decivilized, Muslim mendacity: the language of colonial supremacy is easily reactivated in a nation that has yet to come to grips with its imperial past. The fact that the urban badlands harbour large proportions of immigrants from France's former overseas possessions gives *prima facie* validity to this alarming vision of the unruly colony coming back to exact revenge by invading the metropole—what Aimé Césaire famously called the 'colonial boomerang'.[83] Like punishment in the tropics a hundred years ago, the penal management of post-industrial poverty strikes ethnic outsiders and their descendants with special force and velocity by striking the neighbourhoods where they tend to cluster through differential policing. *State, race and place coalesce* to tighten the noose of urban marginality spawned by the precarization of labour and the withdrawal of the social state.

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[81] See, on the US case, Wacquant, *The Invention of the 'Underclass'*, and, on the French case, Henri Rey, *La Peur des banlieues*, Paris 1996, and Marwan Mohammed and Julien Talpin, *Communautarisme?*, Paris 2018.

[82] Bérénice Mariau and Gaëlle Rony, 'Polémique autour de l'usage de la formule ensauvagement. Tentatives de qualification d'actes de violence en France', *Mots. Les Langages du politique*, vol. 136, no. 3, 2024; Philippe Robert and Renée Zauberman, 'Violences en France: peut-on parler de "décivilisation"?', *Sciences Humaines*, vol. 362, no. 9, August 2023; Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le 'problème musulman'*, Paris 2022.

[83] This vision is steeped into the 'cultural repository or archive of meaning' constituted by colonialism, one of the four mechanisms whereby the imperial past shapes the present identified by Julian Go in 'Reverberations of Empire' (pp. 12–13). It is now intensified by the fear of the Islamist terrorist whose shadowy figure hovers over the *banlieue*, as shown by Fabien Truong, *Loyautés radicales. L'islam et les 'mauvais garçons' de la nation*, Paris 2017.

Colonial penality deployed by European empires in what is now called the global South was pervasive and radiating, racialized and racializing, differentiated as well as differentiating. The same is true, with a diminished scope and at a much lower intensity, of punishment wielded by the neoliberal state to manage dispossession and dishonour in the neighbourhoods of relegation of the polarized city in the contemporary global North. We must eschew the facile conflation of these two historical formations driven by the 'logic of the trial', which aims to accuse and indict rather than explain and understand.[84] *Analogy is not identity, structural similarity is not genealogical necessity*. The policy of punitive containment of urban marginality in advanced society is not a 'legacy', a 'débris' or a 'reactivation' of empire but the independent rediscovery of techniques of government of troubled territories that addresses the same predicament faced a century ago in the tropical possessions of Europe: how to domesticate reticent and restive categories that do not enjoy the full civic status they yearn for and which therefore regard state authority as illegitimate, bodies out of control that are projected in the public imagination as dark, deviant and dangerous.

In the colonies, rolling out the police, court and prison as well as special punishment regimes to subdue the indigenous population ultimately failed to secure order and consent. The same is happening today in the districts of dereliction of the post-industrial metropolis. We ignore the slow-motion crash of the penalization of racialized poverty at our civic peril and, more urgently, at the cost of warping the lives of the urban outcasts.

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[84] An example of this slippage is Benjamin Weber, *American Purgatory: Prison Imperialism and the Rise of Mass Incarceration*, New York 2023, which claims to establish a direct and organic connection between 'empire and mass incarceration' through the 'unspoken doctrine of prison imperialism'.

I am grateful to colleagues and friends, and especially to the historians of colonialism who welcomed a disciplinary interloper into their province, who read and reacted to several previous versions of this text and helped me clarify, expand and sharpen its arguments. They include Florence Bernault, Emmanuel Blanchard, Jenae Carpenter, Joël Glasman, Julian Go, Ricarda Hammer, Jean-Pierre Le Crom, Isabelle Merle, Chris Muller, Victor Lund Shammas, George Steinmetz, Sylvie Thénault and Romain Tiquet. I thank Harry James Jude for drafting Figure 1.

Hugh Wilford, *The CIA: An Imperial History*
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313 pp, 978 1 541 64591 2

Ed McNally

INSTRUMENTS OF EMPIRE

In the historiographical field of intelligence studies, ideological blinkers abound. The standard account in the American case is that the democratic mandate which brought the Central Intelligence Agency into being through the 1947 National Security Act was roundly abused by successive US presidents, who commanded the Agency's operatives to overthrow foreign governments, assassinate political enemies and extract information through torture, despoiling the foundational tasks of intelligence collection and analysis. This is the story retold in the much-reprinted *The CIA and American Democracy* (1989) and other works by the University of Edinburgh's Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones. The same basic move is reiterated by notionally more critical historians, such as Richard Immerman in *The Hidden Hand* (2014), or in punchier prose by the *New York Times*'s Tim Weiner in *Legacy of Ashes* (2007).

Hugh Wilford's starting point in *The CIA: An Imperial History* marks a welcome departure from all this. He argues that, while much has been written on the history of the Agency, and still more on that of the American empire, there has been little attempt to read them in relation to each other. His aim is to bring the two fields together to advance understanding of both. This is Wilford's fifth study of the Cold War CIA and his broadest to date. Like every historian of the American intelligence service, he has been obliged to circumnavigate the fact that the richest source, the CIA's official archives, remain largely under lock and key. The method that Wilford has

developed to compensate for that has entailed intensive reading of memoirs, private papers and documents from the Pentagon and MI5 to produce granular accounts focused on individual figures at the interface of clandestine political power and cultural practice. British-born, he completed a PhD at Exeter on the milieu of the *Partisan Review* as it pivoted in the postwar period towards anti-communism and engagement with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The resulting monograph appeared in 1995 under the title *The New York Intellectuals: From Vanguard to Institution*; soon after, Wilford relocated to California State University, Long Beach, where he still teaches. His second book, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War* (2003), examined the Atlanticism of leading figures of the Labour right such as Gaitskell and Crosland. *The Mighty Wurlitzer* (2008), Wilford's best-known book, reconstructed the cultural front organizations through which the CIA, as one of its top officials boasted, could play any tune. It was followed by *America's Great Game* (2013), examining the brief heyday of the CIA Arabists in the 1950s before US Middle East policy cleaved to Zionism.

The CIA: An Imperial History dispenses with the myth that the US national-security state was merely a defensive reaction to Pearl Harbor or Soviet expansion. Despite the country's long history of 'empire denial', Wilford writes, the origins of American imperial expansion date back to the settler colonialism of the first European immigrants. A homegrown military-intelligence tradition began with the reports of scouts and spies in 'Indian country', consolidated by the Army topographers, reconnaissance forces and hired local agents who made possible the huge landgrab of the 1846 Mexican War. Centralized analysis of information extracted during the interrogation of captured Confederate soldiers and escaped slaves was crucial for the Union victories at Gettysburg and Appomattox. But for Wilford, the crystallization of a modern US intelligence bureaucracy begins with the New Imperialism of the 1890s, coinciding with heightened labour militancy at home. His book opens with a panorama of European colonial-intelligence practice of the period, from British India and the Transvaal to French Indochina, Madagascar and the Rif. When America entered the stage with its 1898 annexation of the Philippines, it was in some respects replicating its conquest of Indian territory, Wilford argues: forcible relocation, interrogation under torture, indiscriminate slaughter of unarmed populations; but the US also took over the existing Spanish-colonial institutions, police and prison networks. Leading the intelligence effort was a Harvard-educated army officer, Ralph van Deman, politicized in the early 1890s as a violent opponent of the US miners' strike. In Manila, van Deman took over the records of the colonial police to create a vast card-index of the Filipino resistance, constituting America's first overseas field intelligence unit while laying the basis for what Wilford calls a colonial surveillance state.

Back home in the 1900s, van Deman lobbied his army superiors to set up a centralized intelligence system, such as Britain was establishing with its Secret Service Bureau. In 1917, as the Wilson Administration geared up for war in Europe, Deman was appointed head of the newly formed US Military Intelligence Service, setting in place a series of divisions—intelligence gathering, translation and cryptography, direction of military attachés at US embassies, security screening for German, Irish and African-American subversives among military and government personnel—borrowed from French and British models. The imperial experience of this earlier generation of overseas intelligence operatives was crucial for their successors in the 1940s, Wilford argues. First the wartime Office of Strategic Services and then, from 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency, as nerve-centre for American power projection, were staffed by elite Anglophile cohorts, typically educated at Groton and Harvard. Warmly anti-colonial, in the American fashion, and still more fiercely anti-communist, these early CIA men, reared on Kipling's *Kim* and Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, were perfectly at home in the colonnaded villas and ritzy watering holes—Beirut's Hotel St George, Cairo's Gezira Sporting Club, Saigon's Hôtel Continentale—barely vacated by the French and British.

At the same time, Wilford argues that there were structural reasons why the CIA played a spearhead role in what he calls America's 'covert empire'. His central thesis is that, setting out to manage the new states emerging from European colonial rule, Washington was constrained both by fear of provoking a nuclear war with Moscow and by popular American anti-colonialism; the turn to covert action—using the CIA to help prop up pro-US regimes and crush left-sovereigntist forces—was part of the solution. *An Imperial History* makes the case for this through an episodic-cum-institutional analysis of the Agency's many functions, starting with its supply of global intelligence to the US government. Even as the CIA's covert-action division ballooned under Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy, expanding from seven bases in 1949 to 47 in 1962—with thousands of staff and contractors—the apex unit for intelligence analysis, known as the Office of National Estimates (ONE), remained tight-knit: two dozen or so staff members, many recruited from Yale, where ONE's long-serving director Sherman Kent had taught French history before being signed up to the wartime OSS. Their task was to assemble and analyse the regional information produced by field officers, crafting regular briefings for the White House.

The field officers themselves, generally operating under cover of some diplomatic position at the US Embassy, were trained to recruit networks of local agents to supply this material, targeting natives with access to valuable information—a junior government minister or army officer—for assessment by CIA HQ. The challenge was to identify the potential agent's

vulnerability, then work out how to exploit it, while remaining alert to the possibility that the recruit might be an enemy plant; money, blackmail, ideological conviction or psychological entanglement were the main tactics listed in the CIA training manual. Recruitment was 'the most sensitive step'. Once targets had agreed to supply information in exchange for money or other inducement, they would be tested, then trained in spy craft and 'handled', ideally over many years, until the time came for termination. Emotional involvement with agents was an occupational hazard for field officers; according to Wilford, some likened the relationship to sexual conquest; others, to a marriage.

The political role of the CIA station chief was more directly imperial—or perhaps, in Nkrumah's term, 'neocolonial'; that of an informal pro-consul. Congo station chief Larry Devlin breakfasted daily with Mobutu, the venal dictator, while using the country as a staging post for covert operations in Angola, South Africa and elsewhere; the CIA supplied the tip-off that sent Mandela to prison for 27 years. Jordan station chief Jack O'Connell became a close confidant of the young King Hussein. In Mexico City, the CIA's Winston Scott lubricated the special relationship with the PRI with 'cash and camaraderie', buying new cars for ministers' girlfriends. In the Philippines, operative Edward Lansdale channelled CIA dollars into a presidential run for the anti-communist defence chief Ramon Magsaysay, writing his speeches and procuring a catchy radio jingle, 'Mambo Magsaysay'. The result was a landslide, hailed by a CIA-orchestrated campaign in the US media. ('It was a privilege', Lansdale told CIA HQ, 'to give the lie to the current adage that the white man is through in Asia. Hellsfire, we're just starting!') Ten years later, Lansdale was propping up the Ngo Nhu Diem regime in South Vietnam. Wilford provides a memorable picture of the CIA man vacationing at a beach resort near Saigon with his Filipina mistress, the President, Diem's brother Nhu and the notorious Madame Nhu: 'the women splashed about in the waves while the American played Scrabble with Nhu and Diem dozed.' In Cairo, Kermit 'Kim' Roosevelt, grandson of Teddy, drafted an early memo for Nasser and the Free Officers, whom he'd helped to bring to power, titled 'Notes on How to Be the Prime Minister of Egypt'. Lansdale did the same for Diem in Saigon.

Sustaining these pro-US regimes in power required building up their security forces. The CIA helped with funds and training, drawing on the expertise of the Police Administration Department at Michigan State University to turn local guard units into professional death squads capable of terrorizing rural communities and recruiting their own networks of informers. Across Latin America, the Middle East, Central Africa and Southeast Asia, the CIA supplied intelligence on 'communist suspects' to local dictatorships, assisting them with wire-tapping and surveillance technology. Though Wilford

does not explore the links, he notes that Mossad served as a 'regional surrogate' for the Agency's counter-insurgency work, helping to train political police for Haile Selassie and SAVAK torturers for the Shah. The corollary of propping up pro-American regimes was the CIA-orchestrated coup to overthrow governments—Mosaddeq in Iran, Arbenz in Guatemala—that put national-popular projects like oil nationalization or land reform ahead of US interests. *The CIA: An Imperial History* gives a full-dress account of Kim Roosevelt's machinations in Iran in the summer of 1953: paying one mob to play the part of communist rioters so as to mobilize another as an Islamist counter-demonstration, while a loyal American press portrayed the country as 'dangerously unstable'. A similar playbook was deployed in Guatemala.

The debacle of the Agency-backed Bay of Pigs assault on Castro's government caused the first domestic crack in the covert-imperial carapace. The CIA was now openly named and blamed in books like C. Wright Mills's *Listen, Yankee* (1960). The cloak of clandestinity was whipped away as pro-Cuba demonstrators (W. E. B. Du Bois, Maya Angelou) staged vigils outside its new headquarters in Langley, VA. In Vietnam, the CIA's Phoenix Program was 'a bloodbath of torture and assassination'; its counter-insurgency needed ever greater military back-up, morphing into a full-blown war. In 1967, *Ramparts* magazine published a series of CIA exposés. In the early 1970s, 'anti-imperialism entered the mainstream', as Wilford puts it: the *Washington Post* published the Pentagon Papers; the *New York Times* ran Seymour Hersh's report on Agency penetration of the campus anti-war movement—aspects of the 'imperial-boomerang effect' discerned by Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire. Establishment criticism peaked with the Senate's Church Committee which imposed a series of checks on the Agency, including a (short-lived) ban on assassinations. 'We do not need a regiment of cloak-and-dagger men', thundered Senator Church, 'earning their promotions by planning new exploits throughout the world.'

These proscriptions would not stop Operation Condor, the clandestine CIA-backed network responsible for the torture and 'disappearance' of Latin American leftists which saw student leaders and trade unionists thrown from military helicopters over the Southern Cone. Nor would they deter Carter and Brzezinski from dispatching CIA trainers, funds and weaponry to the Hindu Kush. Rather, increased media and congressional oversight of the Agency led to an outsourcing of 'covert-imperial' operations, as with the Reagan Administration's re-routed funding for anti-communist Contra militias to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, overseen by the shady figure of Col. Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council. Reagan appointed a hardline Director of Central Intelligence, Bill Casey, who revamped the CIA's discredited front operations, creating new organs such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Asia Foundation.

Via the Vatican, funds were channelled to trade-union leader Lech Walesa and Church-backed Solidarnosč groups in Poland; not, of course, to trade unionist Lula da Silva and liberation-theology networks in Brazil.

America's Cold War victory led to a recalibration of support for such CIA favourites as Mobutu and Suharto; once pillars of the Free World, now decried as hoary dictators unwilling to move with the times. Plagued by budget cuts and a high turnover of directors—five in seven years—Langley began a cautious and partial declassification of its files, allowing for a preliminary evaluation. On one estimate, that of Lindsey O'Rourke's *Covert Regime Change* (2018), only 39 per cent of covert operations had successful outcomes. The intelligence record was spotty: the CIA had failed to predict the Soviet bomb, the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis, the Iranian Revolution or the disintegration of the USSR; it would miss 9/11, the Arab Spring and October 7. Against the charge-sheet, the spymasters could point to their roles in the successful postwar stabilization of Italy and Japan, under the CIA-funded Christian Democrats and LDP; in the faltering of radical Arab nationalism and strengthening of police regimes that made the Middle East safe for Israel; in the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party and strengthening of conservative rule in Thailand and the Philippines, weighed against the admitted defeats in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; if Cuba was 'lost', Latin America had been 'saved', its dictatorships carefully dismantled; and the Soviet Bloc had fallen to the free market.

The CIA: An Imperial History has less to say about the remaking of US intelligence after 9/11, though an epilogue considers the CIA's changing fortunes during the 'global war on terror'. Analysts were pulled off the Asia and Russia desks and reassigned to the Agency's hitherto downgraded counterterrorism centre; a CIA officer there recalled working 'in a barely bounded rage', consumed by 'a burning need for retribution, rooted in a sense of shameful violation'. That no doubt helped the Agency's reorientation towards rendition and torture operations under Bush, and its expansion into assassination by drone warfare under Obama. The Agency's counter-terrorism chief reportedly assured the former that the terrorists would before long have 'flies walking across their eyeballs'. In formal bureaucratic terms the Agency was demoted by the 9/11 Commission recommendations; its chief no longer the overall Director of Central Intelligence but merely head of the CIA, under a new Director of National Intelligence (DNI) charged with overseeing a clutch of other clandestine bodies. Yet its funding soared to some $500 billion under Bush and an estimated $640 billion under Obama, while with the vast expansion of digital surveillance and satellite data, TECHINT established a clear predominance over HUMINT. An intelligence agency focused on real threats would be concentrating instead on issues like global inequality,

climate change, population movements and pandemics, Wilford writes; but 'as long as America continues to behave like an empire while denying it is one, it will carry on reaching for covert action as an instrument of its foreign relations', with the same baleful domestic and overseas consequences.

An eminently readable synoptic study, *The CIA: An Imperial History* might be taken as the culmination of Wilford's project, which has always aimed to refract political and intelligence-service history through portraits of individual characters and the reconstruction of their cultural worlds. While the macro-structure of his latest book is chronological and thematic, in narrative terms it is also micro-biographical, its cast of CIA men not only embodying an aspect of the Agency's work—Sherman Kent, intelligence analysis; Roosevelt, the military coup; Edward Lansdale, counter-insurgency; James Jesus Angleton, counter-intelligence; Cord Meyer, propaganda—but bringing a specific sensibility to the task. The opening chapter on European precedents sets the scene in similar fashion: Kipling evokes imperial paranoia; T. E. Lawrence, divided loyalties; Lyautey, aspirations to developmental pacification combined with 'brisk' military repression; van Deman, the domestication of imperial methods. In adopting this approach, Wilford aligns himself with the 'emotional turn' in the historiography of US foreign relations, on display in Frank Costigliola's recent biography of Kennan.

In Wilford's telling, the CIA's moving spirits rarely wanted to repeat the imperial past. Lansdale, one of the principal architects of US counter-insurgency in Southeast Asia, declared: 'I was first of all an anti-colonial.' Roosevelt, nemesis of sovereign democracy in Iran, counterposed—in his *Arabs, Oil and History* (1947)—the European powers' 'imperial relationship' to the Middle East to one he believed America alone could develop, 'based on common interests, to be advanced without unfair advantage to either side'. Yet 'for historical reasons, somewhat beyond their control', Wilford argues, repeating the past was 'what they all ended up doing'. *An Imperial History* makes a compelling case for some continuities between European colonialism and American practices: the pro-consular CIA station chiefs, the British models for National Estimate reports, the homosocial bonding with client rulers, the romance of exotic adventures far away from the tedium of domesticity.

Nevertheless, Wilford sometimes vests too much significance in the European past as structuring context for a burgeoning American present. This is due in part to a narratological choice to identify the process by which the 'imperial impulse' came to predominate within early CIA practice as one of colonial rehearsal: 'Agency officers constantly found themselves, regardless of their personal beliefs, using colonial-era scripts to perform the intelligence-gathering and covert-action missions with which they were charged.' But though the CIA men sometimes donned European

clothes—and, as his vivid political-intellectual portraits make clear, often took positive glee in acting out Kipling-esque fantasies—it was not a case of them merely stepping into Anglo-French shoes. They inhabited a distinctly American imperial subjectivity that melded old and new. It was no paradox that the American 'imperial impulse' strengthened as decolonization advanced; that was surely the point.

As far as it went, the anti-colonialism of Wilford's CIA cast was in the end self-consciously imperial, with the negation of European empires understood as a boon for American power. Such was the case for Kim Roosevelt's Arabism, even at its sympathetic height. Before 1955, Nasser was his 'necessary leader', a potential aide to American interests as understood in Washington, and duly lauded in *Time* magazine as a 'dedicated soldier, with the build of a big, handsome, All-American fullback'. Wilford tends to use 'imperial' and 'colonial' interchangeably, and given that he is often writing about European colonial influences on American imperial actors, this terminological slippage may result in conceptual confusion. The Agency, founded as the US rose to global dominance, was imperial precisely because it was American, not due to the corruption of its officers by a European colonial inheritance, however potent this may have been for the early Cold War generation. Putting too much explanatory weight on such cultural continuities risks, *inter alia*, eliding the CIA's early efforts to entrench American power within Europe itself, memorably documented in Wilford's study of Gaitskell and Crosland.

The notion of American imperialism as a 'covert empire', transposed from Priya Satia's study of early twentieth-century British intelligence operations in the Middle East, may be part of the problem here. There was, needless to say, little that was covert about the Pax Americana writ large. This was 'a global hegemonic system of geopolitics and economic dominance' in the words of Anders Stephanson. In the superintendence of this system, the men in the shadows played a notable role, but they counted as one coercive arm of the new American imperium rather than defining its essence. When Wilford writes that the CIA became 'the cutting edge of US power in the postcolonial world', he doesn't weigh its impact against that of the broader forces of American hegemony—military, economic and ideological. The US, after all, announced its arrival on the world-historical stage with the detonation of two atomic bombs. It built its empire on the basis of military conquest and occupation in Japan and Germany, the industrialized wingtips of the Eurasian continent, and famously ringed the planet with military bases, linked by satellite orbits, while its aircraft carriers ploughed the seas. America's postwar strength came, secondly, from rebuilding capitalist economies and installing parliamentary systems—doctored, of course, by the CIA—in former fascist states. By way of modernization theory,

capitalist development was also an important part of American policy for the Third World, financed by borrowing recycled petro-dollars; when that ended in the catastrophe of the 1980s debt crisis, economies were restructured not by the CIA but by the IMF and World Bank. Ideologically, the US undeniably provided a model of affluence and modernity, of cars and Coca-Cola, as well as racial segregation and red-baiting. Wilford's 'covert empire' is not contextualized against this backdrop of overt American power projection.

Failure to pin down the Agency as a *sui generis* product of America's emergent global empire leads to a degree of indulgence towards the more apologetic accounts that are Wilford's ostensible targets. Histories like those of Immerman and Jeffreys-Jones, both popular and scholarly, reprise what might be termed the originalist conceit: as defined by the noble intention of its architects, the original purpose of the CIA was to practise the innocent craft of intelligence gathering and analysis, but this honourable mission was derailed by excess and overreach—or, in Immerman's terms, 'sacrificed to a misguided emphasis on covert and paramilitary projects that its designers did not intend for it to undertake'. As in so many supposed reckonings with the Agency's indefensible practices, the redeemable essence is here an article of faith. More recent periodizations, including those of such supposed deep-state opponents as Tucker Carlson and Elbridge Colby, date the CIA's 'corruption' to 9/11. Before Ground Zero, in Carlson's view, CIA operatives were 'just doing Cold War stuff, nothing particularly evil'. It all went off the rails with the global war on terror.

Such accounts often build upon a notion of the national-security state as springing from the untainted soul of the nation in response to Japan's Pearl Harbor attack. The maximalist version of this was laid out by Douglas Stuart, former NATO Fellow and scholar of international policy at Dickinson College, in *Creating the National Security State* (2012). Examining the debates behind the 1947 National Security Act, Stuart argued that Pearl Harbor swept away older conceptions of the national interest to establish the concept of 'national security' as the 'unchallengeable standard against which all future foreign-policy decisions were to be made'. Vesting responsibility for the coordination of intelligence within a single central agency was supposed to be a defensive move, to foreclose the possibility of further shocks from without.

Although *An Imperial History* does not linger on the ins and outs of the 1947 legislation, the backstory it tells makes for an effective refutation: from continental conquest to annexation of the Philippines, US national intelligence was expansionary from the start. Nor was there any clean distinction between analysis and covert action. In the field of founding visions, much weighed in favour of the covert-actionists, not least the template of the wartime OSS and its vaunted adventurism. The very haziness of the 1947 National

Security Act about the boundaries of the CIA's responsibilities—enabling it to 'perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the President . . . may direct'—wrote such an expansive view into the Agency's founding charter. This was passed into law in the same season that the Truman Doctrine demanded the projection of US Cold War efforts to Greece and Turkey. In May 1948, as Wilford detailed in *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, George Kennan was one of the chief backers of the covert-ops division, OPC, opening a Policy Planning Staff memo with the declaration that political warfare was 'the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in the time of peace'. (Characteristically, he would later rue this as 'probably the worst mistake I ever made in government.') Weeks later there flowed National Security Council Directive 10/2, giving sweeping authorization for the CIA to undertake activities

> conducted or sponsored by this Government against hostile foreign states or groups, or in support of friendly foreign states or groups, but which are so planned and executed that any US Government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the US Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.

In this light, the originalist conceit would appear to be just that.

One deficiency of *An Imperial History* as a guide to grasping the actually existing practice of American covert power is its relative neglect of 'military-intelligence convergence'—the process by which parts of the US military have become more like the CIA, while the CIA has become more like the US military. The legal scholar Robert Chesney has suggested that this nexus began to emerge in the Middle East, in the context of the Iranian Revolution, when US Special Operations Forces complained that no existing organization was capable of providing the 'tactical intelligence and covert logistical support' they needed during the bungled Tehran hostage crisis. In consequence, the US Army Chief of Staff authorized the creation of an Army Intelligence Support Activity unit to institutionalize such capacities within the special forces, thus bringing into the Pentagon functions that had largely been exclusive to the CIA. At the same time, the expansion of counterterrorism operations in response to the 1983 Beirut bombings of US forces saw the Agency furnished with lethal paramilitary options typically reserved for special forces.

Convergence, now more specifically between the Joint Special Operations Command and the Agency, was supercharged by 9/11. Scholars of the national-security state distinguish between rivalrous and cooperative dimensions of the convergence process, but the latter seem to have predominated—notwithstanding politically determined contingencies, such as Rumsfeld's reported contempt for the Agency's competencies leading to an

expansion of the Pentagon's intelligence network. Extra-judicial killings—of Bin Laden in Pakistan, but also of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen—have frequently been instances of 'cooperative' convergence, even if Hollywood has enlisted such heroic deeds to legitimate the CIA's use of torture, as in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*. Such developments cast a cold light on Wilford's concluding hopes for a less lethal intelligence agency concentrating on problems like climate change and inequality. Given the univocally imperial history of the CIA, lucidly recounted in his book, there should be little ground for such confusion. The national-security state and the Agency at its apex incarnate imperial imperatives which derive from a bipartisan commitment to American global primacy. There can be no disentangling the two. And while the CIA functions to entrench such imperatives, and insulate them from the possibility of democratic challenge, it remains their outlet and instrument rather than their source.

Margaret Hillenbrand, *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China*
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Jiwei Xiao

CHINA'S WORKER ARTISTS

A rich literature now addresses the experience of China's labour force, the motor behind the country's extraordinary economic rise. Within it, a distinct strand has tackled questions of class consciousness and agency. Much less has been written about workers' cultural expression—or about Chinese representations of labour within the artistic field. In *On the Edge*, Margaret Hillenbrand, a scholar of modern Chinese literature and visual culture at Oxford, examines both, across high and low forms. Hillenbrand's first book, *Negative Exposure* (2020), explored the question of 'public secrecy' in China, going beyond issues of censorship and amnesia by drawing on the mass of visual material spilled across Beijing's Panjiayuan flea market—old photos, curios, knick-knacks, documents, uniforms, Maoist memorabilia, antiques. For Hillenbrand, these are ghostly evidence of events that are unforgotten yet have in many respects become unspeakable: the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, the Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen. Her study of 'photo-forms'—including artworks such as Xu Yong's *Negatives* (2014), 64 colour negatives of his photographs of the crowds in Tiananmen in May and June 1989—explored the ways in which 'the collective decision not to talk' conspired to keep the past in a state of 'restless quiescence'.

On the Edge also deploys socio-political concepts and cultural texts to parse contemporary contradictions. But rather than focussing on events that are known but 'unacknowledgeable', Hillenbrand's main subject here is ubiquitously visible yet not truly seen: China's vast army of rural-migrant workers. She defines them as a new 'precariat', borrowing a term coined by the English labour sociologist Guy Standing to describe the situation of post-Fordist gig-economy workers in the Global North. *On the Edge* concentrates

above all, however, on how 'precarity as a structure of fearful feeling can permeate the social world'. She points out that the sheer number of precarious workers in the PRC, and its repressive mix of authoritarianism and neoliberalism, mean that China 'should be a core crucible for current thinking about precarity.' Yet this is not a Westerner's defence of vulnerable subalterns. Agency is a crucial theme; Hillenbrand devotes keen attention to cultural forms that involve the active or creative engagement of peasant-workers, ranging from artworks and documentaries to popular fiction and videos posted on social media. This dual focus—precarity, as a pervasive structure of feeling, and agency, as asserted by rural-migrant authors, poets, artists and livestreamers—gives the book its critical edge.

Hillenbrand opens with a consideration of the work of avant-garde artists who incorporate peasant-workers in their performance pieces. As she notes, the relations between the sophisticated artists and the workers vary along a spectrum from collaboration to exploitation. In *Spring Story* (2003), a video work by Yang Zhenzhong, factory employees at their workstations each say a few syllables to camera; edited together, these form the words of Deng Xiaoping's famous Southern Tour speech at Shenzhen, which unleashed China's manufacturing boom. Despite its evident sympathy for the workers, Hillenbrand argues, this 'delegated performance', devoid of reflexivity, ultimately reifies their atomized condition. In the case of the Gao Brothers' *Twenty Hugs for Hire* (2001), exploitative labour relations became an explicit part of the work. The duo, avant-garde artists based in Beijing, went back to their hometown in Shandong to recruit migrant workers at the local labour market for their performance piece. It was staged in an abandoned workers' assembly hall, where the hired hands were instructed to strip naked and embrace each other. The project included a transcript of the haggling over terms and conditions. Hillenbrand is critical of these staged scenes of class strife but ascribes a certain testimonial function to them—allegorizing the way that workers are 'zombified *en masse* for the benefit of their so-called betters', they provide 'vital testaments to a precarious age'.

She goes on to consider the work of China's 'waste artists', who use industrial detritus to create strange new forms of social and ecological critique. One prominent example is Xu Bing's *Phoenix Project* (2008–16), an acclaimed installation of two giant mythical birds welded from corrugated iron, rods, bolts, broken shovels and other building-site debris. People generally scavenge this type of material from construction sites for re-sale or recycling, and Hillenbrand notes that waste artists like Xu Bing themselves enact the role of scavenger. Yet although *Phoenix Project* speaks to 'the intersection of waste, precarity, compromised rights and class friction', she points out, labour is missing: 'there are no actual ragpickers in this installation'.

A similar absence is noted in Wang Qingsong's *Poisonous Spider* (2011), a work made from spirals of barbed wire adorned with everyday trash such as plastic bags, an old shoe, a scratched CD, a wilted lettuce. She also questions the artist's self-identification as a waste picker in Yang Yongliang's *From the New World* (2014), a composite photo-work which subverts the aesthetic of traditional Chinese landscape painting—mist-clad mountains, winding rivers—by collaging digital images of rubble and waste. Ingenious as they are, these artworks show the 'reigning presence' of waste, with human figures missing; if they tell 'oblique stories' about lived experience, it is 'almost despite themselves'.

By contrast, Chinese documentary makers have made the lives of precarious migrant workers a central theme; a sub-genre has focused on the experience of ragpickers and trash sorters. From many notable works, Hillenbrand highlights Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China* (2016), which stands out for its frank yet nuanced exploration of what it means to live and work amidst the rubbish of the globalized world. The film maintains a steadfast focus on the subjectivity of its main character, the 11-year-old Yijie's, who toils with her family, migrant workers from Sichuan, in a small plastics recycling workshop in Shandong, sifting through the mass of trash to find plastic items that can be shredded into vats of grey-brown slurry, and finally transformed into pellets for re-use. *On the Edge* highlights Yi-Jie's sharp commentary and the discriminating interest she takes in the detritus among which the family lives. She is a waste artist herself, as Hillenbrand observes.

Turning to fiction, *On the Edge* examines the representation of China's migrant workers in different literary genres. Hillenbrand analyses a seemingly marginal state-endorsed magazine, the bi-monthly *Migrant Workers' Bosom Friend*—popular among Pearl River Delta workers during its 2000–12 run—which churned out 'problem stories' by remolding the raw material sent in by its readers into formulaic plotlines. One recognizable genre features 'class downfall': from a position of hubristic wealth and power, the protagonist is plunged into an abyss of misery and humiliation, but overcomes the difficulties through sheer grit to resume a position of responsibility and acclaim, now purged of selfishness and pride. According to the magazine, these stories are designed 'to console people who crave spiritual succour in the midst of poverty'. Hillenbrand is sharply critical of the narrative tone adopted by the magazine's staff writers, who use free indirect discourse and fake oral accounts to 'ventriloquize migrant workers and artificially fine-tune their powers of speech'. In her reading, these stories are the Party's way of managing the affective lives of the precariat; similar tropes are now being recycled for the unemployed graduates of the 2020s, the 'lying flat' generation.

These hackneyed tales are contrasted with the extraordinary poems produced by migrant-workers themselves, much celebrated in China. One of these poets, Zheng Xiaoqiong, used her acceptance speech for a literary prize to invoke the tens of thousands of fingers lost in industrial accidents in the Pearl River Delta's factories: 'I often wonder, how far would those severed fingers reach if they were joined in a line?' Hillenbrand explores the 'discordant' character of Zheng's verse, as if it were reverberating to the clang of factory machinery, notably in the poem 'A Thirty-Seven-Year-Old Woman Worker':

> Electric lights illuminate the stars, amid the roar of October
> You can hear the bones in your body and the lines on your face . . .
> Rising, you hear your age shivering on the tip of the wind's tongue
> Autumn's breath in your body trembling
> At the job recruitment notice board, the required age: 18–35
> A 37-year-old woman worker, standing outside the factory gate . . .

Hillenbrand, however, notes some common ground between Zheng's 'poetry of friction' and the stories published in the *Migrant Workers' Bosom Friend*: the presence of middle-class 'ventriloquists' in her poetry also turns representations of precarious experience into 'charged encounters' across the class divide; both make marked use of repetition. The comparison might be queried: the insistent rhythmic repetition in Zheng's work—approximating the drudgery of labour through the very pulse of her lines, unsettling the reader's sensibility—assumes a power of critique very different to the effect of 'pedagogical repetition' in the magazine's stories.

Starker still is the discussion of 'suicide shows', in which migrant workers threaten to jump from the ledge of a skyscraper, a crane or the roof of a department store to protest their plight, after being denied their rightful wages. The videos of these protests, posted on popular platforms such as Bilibili, iQiyi or Tencent, share common features: while the desperate workers rail from above, officials from the emergency services spread inflatable mattresses on the ground beneath and make frantic attempts to phone the labour contractor, who typically arrives just in time with a wad of banknotes, which a fellow worker then delivers to the protester. For Hillenbrand, this scenario allegorizes 'the strategic caprice of the law in China': the money is always there, it's just that it is 'as slippery as gripping hold of a rope on a cliff face in high winds'. The construction workers are contesting their social invisibility yet also demonstrating the rawness of precarity; presenting their bodies as disposable also turns them into weapons. *On the Edge* notes how the official tone changed from compassion to disapproval after the 2010 Foxconn suicides. More recently, protesters have been detained when they come back down.

Finally, Hillenbrand turns to the world of livestream videos, focusing mainly on Kuaishou—literally, 'deft hands'—a popular Chinese app which had 500 million registered users in 2017, predominantly from rural areas and third-tier cities. The livestreamers' performances drew upon the bawdy, *tuwei* [homespun] styles of local peasant culture, especially the slapstick traditions of the northeast. *On the Edge* reads the Kuaishou livestreamers' work as staging a deliberate rejection of the hegemonic value of high *suzhi*, or 'human quality', with its rigid prescriptions for etiquette, food, speech and bodily functions, drummed into Chinese schoolchildren from an early age. Revelling in the disruption of social norms, the app offered a platform for 'emancipation from the very notion of low *suzhi* as shame'. Partly in reaction to its extraordinary popularity, Kuaishou's livestreamers came under increasing class-cultural attack from more *suzhi*-conforming commentators on other sites, who accused them of being 'badly dressed', 'cheesy', 'embarrassing', 'polluted' and 'low-class'. In 2018 Kuaishou's CEO issued a formal apology, assuring the Chinese public that 'the algorithm will be optimized with a healthy and positive value . . . strictly conforming with the national regulations and common ethics and morals.' The bawdy content was replaced by what Hillenbrand describes as short skits of 'can-do hustle', in which simple characters come out on top through hard work and ingenuity, with no disrespect to the ideology of *suzhi*. As Hillenbrand reflects:

> Studying the internet means trying to pin down the most agile of moving targets; snapshot-based analysis is perhaps the only realistic goal in a field so mobile. If this is true of online culture everywhere, it is arguably doubly so of both livestreaming (which has almost sui generis ephemerality) and of virtual China itself, because the cybersphere's natural volatility is intensified there by regulatory flips and interventions that can upend the status quo overnight.

However, she is clear about its value: 'The surge of the *tuwei* style online in the mid-2010s via Kuaishou and other livestreaming sites nevertheless carbon-dates a short but vital moment in the history of the Chinese internet in which underclass voices rang out loud and proud.'

In one sense, this upbeat reading of agency-in-precarity serves as Hillenbrand's answer to the question posed by Wang Hui: 'Why have China's 300 million workers so far failed to generate a national working-class politics, despite innumerable protests and strikes?' At the same time, as she explains in her theoretical introduction, one of her goals is to counterbalance other researchers' work on popular culture that has emphasized 'heartening, cordial, more humane' aspects of workers' experience, which chime with government ideologies of harmony and uplift. Against this, she

has deliberately chosen a 'darker data set', stressing the atomization that economic restructuring has wrought. This informs her choice of analytical categories: China's informal workers are not just a 'precariat' but an 'underclass', consigned to 'zombie citizenship'. Hillenbrand admits that the term 'underclass', with its social-Darwinist overtones, is used for its 'affective tenor' rather than any theoretical or empirical accuracy—it is 'evidentially flawed and emotionally inflammatory', she concedes. Her 'zombie' terminology similarly disavows any 'grotesque identitarian connection' between Chinese workers and the undead.

On the Edge makes a strong case for putting Chinese migrant workers' experience at the core of international discussions of precarity. If questions can be raised about the sociological categories the book engages with and the precise scope of the term 'precariat' as it applies to China, the deployment of precarity as a pervasive 'structure of feeling' in cultural practice—and as a growing 'public affect'—proves fruitful. Hillenbrand's discussion of the bodily experience of precarity is at its most vividly empathetic in the chapter on workers' 'suicide shows'. The eruption of these protesters into visibility, Hillenbrand explains, is more than just physically shocking. The desperate, politically voiceless protester has only one thing left with which to cry out against injustice: 'His body can still "speak".' This lends the master motif of the cliff-edge its shocking immediacy. Hillenbrand's prose identifies closely with the desperate migrant workers filmed atop a high building, or about to jump from a window; evoking their shivers, vertigo and helplessness as 'bare life, in extremis', 'poised improbably over the void'. The fear of tumbling over the edge in the form of 'class slippage', Hillenbrand points out, is a palpable reality for many, and not just in China.

Hillenbrand's critique of the evasion of class issues in Chinese thinking is astute and enlightening, especially for a reader like me who is old enough to remember socialist China and feels reluctant to use 'class' as a central category. Conceptually, 'class' can be too rigid and slow, yet 'precarity' tends to be too fluid and fast. It is a challenge to 'classify' a vast population that for the past two generations has been constantly in flux. In addition, placing too much emphasis on class division might skew the selection of cultural evidence, potentially overlooking examples that might lead to different conclusions. Hillenbrand's critique of avant-garde artists, while justified in individual cases, does not universally apply, not least because there have been many productive relationships between artists/filmmakers and their worker subjects. One also wonders how Hillenbrand would reconcile her criticisms with the repressive censorship, even persecution, to which some of these artists have been subjected by the PRC government. Gao Zhen, one of the Gao Brothers known for creating performance artworks con-

demning Maoism, was arrested in August 2024 and charged under a 2018 law against 'slandering of historical figures deemed national heroes and revolutionary martyrs'.

Hillenbrand's critique of the mainstream discourse, which explains away workers' suffering as necessary sacrifice on the road to national destiny, is well taken. Whether the *tuwei* culture of livestreamers' at Kuaishou's peak in the mid-2010s represented class agency is another matter. If precarity 'atomizes', as she says, so does technology. Do the large number of downright vulgar—not *tuwei*—videos on popular livestreaming platforms truly represent collective self-expression, or do they primarily serve to enrich the owners of the platform and a small group of lucky users? Is there a risk of cultural essentialism and exoticism in flaunting *tuwei* as the definitive quality of the 'underclass'? Social media's embedded addictive mechanisms and exploitative potential are not class-blind. Technology is a double-edged sword that can both empower and disempower, inform and disinform, unite and divide. Hillenbrand rightly draws attention to cultural practices that affirm the right of precarious people to feel angry and afraid, to acknowledge the strain of difficult or impossible circumstances, which cannot and should not always be mastered by obedient dint of will. By shaking off the injunction to live harmoniously, she hopes they may stake a claim to 'a more vibrant civic self'. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go from agency as the expression of raw feeling to agency as goal-directed political action. That said, *On the Edge* is a fierce and urgent book, its chapters hurled at their targets like sharp stones or verbal hand grenades. Hillenbrand sides unreservedly with labour 'under siege', casualized, piecemeal, 'without sureties, benefits or prospects'. Her observations and intricate analyses, vivid and often devastating, demand and reward critical engagement.

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