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Books for review should be sent to:

Mediations
Department of English (MC 162)
601 South Morgan Street
University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago IL 60607-7120 USA

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Editors' Note

This issue is fundamentally concerned with transitions — predominantly those in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Appropriately, we begin with a moment of contextualization through Andy Liu's keynote address to the Marxist Literary Group's 2022 Institute on Culture and Society. Liu's address, entitled "A Commodity-Form Theory of Transition: On Reading *Capital*, Asia, and the Capitalist Epoch in the Rest of the World," argues against an Anglocentric understanding of the origins of capitalism in favor of a more nuanced and global story. Liu writes that there are two transitions: the first being the more typical understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and then a second which is "distinct" and "crucially" not a transition to but rather a transition "*from within* capitalism" itself. Through this lens, Liu examines both Western and global historical phenomena as they relate to the development and crisis of capitalism.

From here, the issue expands to examine further the concept of globalization itself and the historical and economic changes that the idea embodies. Anna Zalokostas traces a history of the term "globalization" from Robert Brenner's early conceptualization of global production in the mid to late 20th century, to the term's widespread acceptance and use around the turn of the 20th century. While the phrase itself has often come to be associated with consumerism, the Americanization of the world, and institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, its ideological origins remain in Brenner's conception of globalized production. Accordingly, Zalokostas speaks to the influence of the economic lexicon on culture in its nascent and maturing understanding of its global position.

With this context in mind, the issue turns toward the historical novel in the era of globalization. Benjamin Crais reads Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* as a novel that takes on the "relationship of form and history as its constitutive problem." As the historical novel itself originates from the transition into modernity, Crais is concerned with the form of the historical novel as we transition into a world after the 2008 financial crisis. Accordingly, Crais looks toward how the historical novel "stages the crisis of an inherited transitional imaginary and revolutionary horizon."

In harmony with the proceeding articles, Josué Chávez turns to the novel's position in an increasingly globalized world. Chávez reads Gloria Guardia's *El último juego* as a novel that orients itself around the "moment of radical transformation of both

American empire and the global financial order.” With this in mind, Chávez is able to read the novel not only as a critique of Panamanian society and class antagonism, but also as an aesthetic form that is made possible by developing neocolonial structures.

The issue concludes with two reviews. The first is Chris Gortmaker and Jake Burchard’s review of *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital*, a collection of essays that aim to transition the concept of totality away from being about class alone, edited by Kevin Floyd, Jen Hedler Phillis, and Sarika Chandra. Gortmaker and Burchard note that the essays within *Totality Inside Out* aim to identify class as a “social identity” insofar as it is “an affiliative relation that, for emancipatory politics, does not have a structural primacy — and therefore a strategic priority — over ascriptive identity categories like race or gender.” The issue concludes with Davis Smith-Brecheisen’s review of Todd Cronan’s *Red Aesthetics: Rodchenko, Brecht, Eisenstein*. Smith-Brecheisen begins his review where Cronan does: by invoking Brecht’s “assertion that the aim of art is to provide a ‘correct representation of the world.’” It is relation to this statement, that the socialist artists whose work Cronan takes up in his book, aim to “represent” without “reproducing social relations under capital.” Smith-Brecheisen’s review encompasses, in turn, each artist as Cronan’s work does — Brecht, Rodchenko, and Eisenstein — to note the aesthetic throughline between representing the world as it is and representing the world as it might be.

Taken together, these articles and reviews constitute a significant exploration into the state of the work of art as the world transitions into a globalized economic mode. Through the engagement of economic change — and the language surrounding our ability to understand it — this issue engages with arguments concerning the formal commitment of the work of art under capital from the late 20th century to today.

Erich von Kloss-Dohna, for the *Mediations* Editorial Board

A Commodity-Form Theory of Transition: On Reading *Capital*, Asia, and the Capitalist Epoch in the Rest of the World

Andrew B. Liu

Thanks very much to Ericka Beckman and the MLG-ICS for the invitation to speak today.¹ My original plan was to frame this as a book talk supplemented with an abbreviated theoretical discussion. But I realized this is a unique opportunity to actually explore those theoretical questions with much more depth. Among historians, I find myself suppressing my interest in Marx and theory, so it is a pleasure to engage with an audience that is interested in Marxist debates. The following is primarily a textual exploration of Marx's *Capital* (1867) and its various drafts. I have elsewhere written about the different historiographical debates and approaches surrounding the question of capitalism.² This talk instead lays out the precise passages in Marx's later works that could provide, hopefully, a theoretical basis for reinterpreting *Capital* for writing global history today.

To give some background: my research broadly concerns China and east and south Asia over the last two centuries. One of the underlying sources of inspiration has been years spent reading and thinking with the Marxist tradition, especially close readings and debates over the drafts of *Capital*. My goal has been to, first, figure out what exactly Marx meant by the phrase "the capitalist mode of production" — a more difficult question than you may assume — and, second, triangulate that story with new research on parts of the world, especially Asia, that have long been considered "outside capitalism's history" but which nevertheless have become major centers of global accumulation today.

I was excited to hear that this year's theme was "transitions," as I have spent many years thinking about the famous twentieth-century "transition debates" and how they shaped our understanding of not just the Atlantic world but also Asia and world history. The reading of *Capital* that I ultimately found most useful is one that, on the one hand, challenges much of the twentieth-century orthodoxy that equated capitalist transition with Marx's chapters on primitive accumulation in England, while on the

other, remaining faithful to the layered logic of Marx's arguments. I hope that this approach is more resilient and useful for scholars today who are trying to understand the last fifty years of global capital. Mine of course is not an entirely original reading, as I relied on valuable new scholarship in recent decades, which I indicate throughout the essay below — though of course all errors are my own.³

Theorizing Multiple Transitions

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars around the world engaged in fierce debates about the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁴ Debates about capitalism's periodization are not just antiquarian hobbies of course. They are always simultaneously arguments about what exactly capitalism is and how exactly it operates in our own lifetimes. The major disputes of the last century were proxies for urgent political questions in different world societies. There were the 1920s debates over the nature of capitalism in Japan and Russia; in 1950s China, major research undertaken to examine the country's "sprouts of capitalism"; and in the 1960s-70s, an outpouring of literature on dependency theory in Latin America and south Asia's semicolonial mode of production.

In the north Atlantic world, the most famous debate was the 1950s exchange centered on the economists Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy. It was later restaged in the 1970s by the historian Robert Brenner and social scientists Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. I believe that for much of the last century, the Dobb-Brenner line of argument — later also adopted by Ellen Meiskins Wood — dominated mainstream usages of the term "capitalism," Marxist or not.⁵ That is, the classic version of "transition" largely drew from a reading of Marx's account of so-called primitive accumulation, or land enclosure, in the final section of the first volume of *Capital*. It entailed an emphasis upon changes in production at the expense of exchange and accumulation; the singling out of propertyless "free labor" as capitalism's key distinguishing trait; and a de facto privileging of western Europe (Dobb) and England (Brenner, Wood) as capitalism's exclusive site of origin.⁶

My view is not that this interpretation is invalid, necessarily, but that it is too narrow. To conflate the Anglocentric primitive accumulation story with capitalism itself is a misreading of the broader logic of Marx's argument. Instead, I believe there are two moments of "transition," or transformation, found throughout the drafts of Marx's *Capital*, and it is important to keep them distinct in our analysis.⁷

First, there was the fundamental, baseline emergence of what Marx called "the capitalist era" or "capitalist epoch" throughout the margins of *Capital*. As he wrote in that famous "primitive accumulation" chapter (chapter 26): "Although we come across the first sporadic traces of capitalist production as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries in certain towns of the Mediterranean, *the capitalist era dates from the sixteenth century.*"⁸ We can quibble with the exact dates, of course, but Marx's version of history was clearly broader than the nineteenth-century English industry that occupied his work's central chapters.

Second, there have been subsequent transitions from absolute to relative surplus-value. In *Capital*, Marx traces the evolution of capitalist production from handicrafts to workshop to factory and large-scale industry. Crucially, these should be seen as not *transitions to* capitalism but *from within* capitalism's broader history. Transitions towards capital-intensive industrialization (relative surplus-value), however, became reified as standalone processes in the twentieth century, dovetailing with a Cold War-era fixation on national development and industry. That is, most twentieth-century accounts of the transition from feudalism to capitalism were really circling around the distinction between absolute and relative surplus-value.

Today, however, I believe it is the former, more capacious, historical conception of the capitalist mode of production as a totality of accumulation that is more fertile for new explorations of Marx's ideas. I have found this especially the case in Asia, but I believe it could also have explanatory value for scholarship on the so-called "rest of the world" beyond the north Atlantic.

The Significance of Doubly Free Labor

For the Anglocentric model, epitomized by Brenner and Wood's work, capitalism was above all distinguished from other systems by the advent of doubly free, propertyless wage labor. The concept of labor "free in the double sense" first appears in chapter 6 of *Capital*, "The sale and purchase of labor-power":

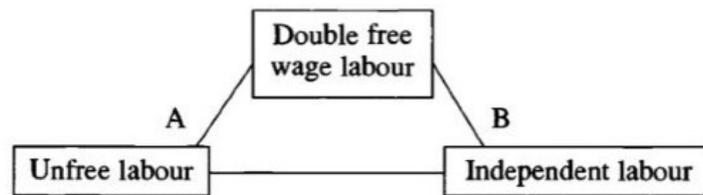
For the transformation of money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must find the free worker available on the commodity-market; and this worker must be *free in the double sense* that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of his labour-power.⁹

It appears again in chapter 26, on "so-called primitive accumulation":

[The transformation into capital] can itself only take place under particular circumstances, which meet together at this point: the confrontation of, and the contact between, two very different kinds of commodity owners; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to valorize the sum of values they have appropriated by buying the labour-power of others; on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labour-power, and therefore the sellers of labour. *Free workers, in the double sense* that they neither form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case with slaves, serfs, etc., nor do they own the means of production, as would

be the case with self-employed peasant proprietors. The free workers are therefore free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own. With the polarization of the commodity-market into these two classes, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are present.¹⁰

From these passages, many came to equate “capitalism” with the appearance of “capitalist labor” in a narrow sense. You could not consider “capitalist” any form of production that did not feature a propertyless proletariat in the mold of the English agricultural worker. This approach excluded two of the most widespread forms of labor found throughout the world: on the one hand, slavery, indenture, and other systems of unfreedom and immobility, for instance in the Americas and across Asia; and on the other, independent peasant households or artisans.



Historians Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden sketched this diagram depicting the ideal-type of “doubly free labor” prevalent in twentieth-century social science. This conception was not exclusively Marxist but accepted widely among Weberians and conservative social theorists as well, achieving a “broad consensus” for much of the last century.¹¹

I do not doubt Marx saw doubly free labor as crucial for the emergence of capitalism. But it is valuable to pay attention to the reasoning *why exactly* free labor was significant for his conceptualization and, conversely, why it could be argued “unfree workers” should be excluded.

Brenner and Wood’s reasoning was clear enough. Their main objection was that because “unfree” workers were tied to property, masters, planters, and peasants could avoid confronting market incentives to raise productivity.¹² It is not that plantations and farms could not produce commodities for the world market but that market pressures lacked the proper leverage to push them to invest in new technology. They instead reacted to falling prices by either withdrawing from the marketplace or simply squeezing workers more, a logic of super-exploitation laid out by A.V. Chayanov. Within this view, “capitalism” became synonymous with the development of productive forces. Put another way: industrialization became the litmus test for whether a society could be considered “capitalist.” It was a definition that turned on the question of technical efficiency, a quantitative measure of relative levels of productivity and the capacity of different techniques: I see this as a “technicist” interpretation of Marx’s *Capital*.¹³

This reading buttressed countless studies in the twentieth century that argued that capitalism *had failed* to emerge in regions without the spectacular processes of enclosure, urbanization, and mechanization, including France, China, south Asia, Latin America, the United States south, the Muslim world, Italy, the Netherlands — virtually anywhere else but England. What was originally posited as a theoretical model of capitalist transition became, in practice, one of non-transition. As Jan de Vries put it: “we have moved from Marxism — which explains how capitalism necessarily emerges from feudalism — to Brennerism — which explains how it can’t.”¹⁴

Contradictions with Global History

The methodological and historical contradictions of this model, however, emerged sharply in my own research on modern Asian history. The heart of Marx’s *Capital* was England’s mills for spinning and weaving cotton, wool, flax, and silk, which took for granted the presence of free workers. But throughout the text, Marx also made marginal references to the global market. The opening chapter on “the commodity” discussed not only coats and linens but also coffee from Brazil,¹⁵ gold from California,¹⁶ and tea from China, perhaps India. If sugar was the major commodity of the eighteenth century, and cotton the nineteenth, then the tea trades of China and India — as well as Japan, Taiwan, Ceylon, and the Dutch East Indies — represented Asia’s contribution to a burgeoning global division of labor.¹⁷

Since the 1700s, Chinese tea had traded for New World and east Asian silver, raw cotton, and Indian opium. Its demand grew in tandem with the production of Caribbean sugar for consumption across the north Atlantic. American merchants grew rich off of the opium and tea trades, especially in Boston, as did notable capitalists such as John Astor in New York City, or here, in Philadelphia, Stephen Girard. By the time of the publication of *Capital* — the 1860s — the Indian colonial government had also begun to promote large tea plantations in the newly-annexed northeast territory Assam, bordering Burma. Tea from Asia was a global commodity bound up with the classic industries animating the story of the rise of capitalism.

The theoretical problem is that the laboring conditions behind Chinese and Indian tea — and for most global commodities at this time — were decisively unfree by the standards of twentieth-century social science. In China, the plant was cultivated and roasted on independently-owned family farms, powered largely by women and children. The semi-processed leaves were purchased by itinerant brokers, commercial agents, and financiers, who refined them in temporary workshops near midsized market towns in the countryside. Workers consisted of seasonal and casual workers — men, women, old, and young — who were not propertyless but market-dependent smallholders supplementing their household income. They were, in short, one leg of the “free/unfree labor” pyramid above, the putatively independent proprietor.

In Assam, India, the colonial government teamed up with metropolitan capital to create large estates known as “tea gardens,” powered by migrant workers brought in through penal contracts. Established in the 1860s, the contracts amounted to an anachronistic regime of indenture, drawing on centuries-old “master and servant laws” that ran contrary to the global trend towards abolition. In theory, migrants from central and eastern India would sign up to work voluntarily. In practice, if they tried to leave the gardens, they were beaten and imprisoned with impunity. They represented the other leg of unfreedom, the immobilized indentured worker.

This picture presents a conceptual impasse. On the one hand, workers in the Asian tea trade did not fit the ideal-type of doubly free labor. On the other, they nevertheless produced commodities as part of a massive web of value spanning the globe. Where could the line between capitalism and non-capitalism be drawn? Could we say that the tea grown in Asia did not count as part of capitalist value, insofar as they were produced by peasants and contract labor? Did tea only count as part of capital when it reached consumers in proletarianized Euro-American societies?¹⁸

To address this question, I have found most useful Jairus Banaji’s close readings of Marx’s text, which he frames as a blend of Hegelian logic and historical thinking. Banaji argued that Marx’s *Capital* operated at multiple “levels of abstraction.” Yes, the Anglocentric story of “primitive accumulation” was plausible for several discrete historical moments, but England was only the “classic” case of a more expansive history.¹⁹ To fixate on expropriated workers as the only possible form of labor under capital was to conflate two levels of analysis in Marx: “forms of exploitation” versus “historical modes of production.”²⁰

“Forms of exploitation” refers to the varied specific practices of extracting surplus from workers, most of which predated capitalism and were logically compatible with other societies. Aside from the market wage, historical examples include slavery, serfdom, corvée, debt bondage, and so on. Yes, for Marx, wage labor was capitalism’s primary form of exploitation. However, Marx also frequently described capitalism not only as a *technical* method of production but also a *temporalizing* and *historical* category. Throughout his drafts, especially in the *Grundrisse*, he used the “mode of production” concept interchangeably with phrases such as “eras,” “epochs,” and “epoch-making”; “forms of society” and “production”; “periods of production”; and “historic modes” and “historic organization of production.”²¹ The unit of analysis adequate for understanding capital, then, was not the individual farm but an entire epoch.

The Epoch-Making Commodity-Form: another story of transition

In my reading, there is one key instance of historicizing language in the first volume that helps guide us through Marx’s fuller views on the role played by doubly free labor. In chapter 6, he wrote:

The historical conditions of [capital's] existence ... arises only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power. And this one historical pre-condition comprises a world's history. Capital, therefore, announces from the outset a new epoch in the process of social production.²²

Marx straightforwardly equated the “new epoch” of capital with free wage labor. However, crucially, the reasoning he gives here was *entirely different* from the technical explanation found in Dobb, Brenner, Wood, and others. Marx continued in the footnote at the bottom of page 274:

4. The capitalist epoch is therefore characterized by the fact that labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property; his labour consequently takes on the form of wage-labour. On the other hand, it is only from this moment that the commodity-form of the products of labour becomes universal.²³

For Marx, the “capitalist era” or “epoch” is not distinguished by technical efficiency but by the universalization of the “commodity-form.” Perhaps the phrase is clear for some of you in the audience: the “commodity-form” after all is one of those specialized terms you encounter all the time in Marxist scholarship. But for myself, I was not sure what the phrase meant from an empirical perspective. How do you write a concrete *history* of the commodity-form and its emergence?

I found it useful to connect Marx's first volume with the earlier drafts of *Capital* that were published only posthumously, in particular, selections from the second draft (1861-1863) and the section from the third draft (1863-1865) known as the “Results of the immediate production process,” or, “the Resultate.”²⁴ In the latter, specifically, he elaborated on what he meant by the universalization of the commodity-form:

The transformation of money ... into capital occurs only when a worker's labour-power has been converted into a commodity for him. This implies that the category of trade has been extended to embrace a sphere from which it had previously been excluded or into which it had made only sporadic inroads. In other words the working population must have ceased either to be part of the *objective* conditions of labour, or to enter the market-place as the producer of commodities; instead of selling the products of its labour it must sell that labour itself, or more accurately, its labour-power. Only then can it be said that production has become the *production of commodities* through its entire length and breadth. Only then

does all produce become commodity and the objective conditions of each and every sphere of production enter into it as commodities themselves. Only on the basis of capitalist production does the commodity actually become the *universal elementary form of wealth*.²⁵

Marx was telling a story here. In earlier societies, households, estates, and plantations produced things for sale, such as crops, tools, and textiles, but those commodities were only the “excess produce” of what they made or grew for themselves. A peasant family, for instance, could cultivate wheat with fifty percent set aside for personal consumption and fifty percent for sale in the marketplace. For Marx, the sporadic production and sale of commodities in earlier commercial societies formed the “*historical premiss* of the capitalist mode of production.”

In the published first volume, Marx briefly referred to such independent and unfree producers as “hybrid forms” (*Zwitterformen*), and in his earlier drafts, “transitional forms” (*Übergangsformen*): that is, forms in which “the capital-relation does not yet exist formally, i.e. under which labour is already exploited by capital before ... labour itself has taken on the form of wage labour.”²⁶ Below, I will say more about how such pre-waged forms fit into Marx’s schema of subordination to capital.²⁷ For now, it is worth pointing out that Marx’s emphasis in the main text was the ephemerality of these forms, that they would lead “inexorably to capitalist production” and how “capitalist production destroys the basis of [traditional] commodity production.”²⁸

According to him, unfree and independent producers would, over time, be gradually pulled into selling increasingly more for the marketplace. This in itself still did not count as capital, strictly speaking, but only a transaction in money. The key distinction was not whether humans sell commodities at all but rather whether commodification reaches into the production process itself, whether trade had “been extended to embrace a sphere from which it had previously been excluded.” This occurred only when land, materials, and labor — *especially* labor — became objects that could only be acquired via exchange as well. The “commodity-form” became the universal form of wealth only when everything that producers made — not just excess produce — became a commodity. And this occurred only after producers themselves became commodified, unable to produce for their own consumption because they now fully depended on the market for survival.

The evidence for this process’s completion was that “as capital develops, *the general laws* governing the commodity evolve in proportion.”²⁹ What are those “general laws”? And if commodities are now the universal form of wealth, what other forms of wealth could they be contrasted against?

The answers to such questions were already given in the first chapter of *Capital*. As historians, we often gloss over chapter 1 as a primer on rudimentary economics. But it was also, implicitly, a historical argument about how capitalism took shape. Past societies had long used money, but the basis of who was wealthy and how much

things cost was shaped by countless *overt* factors, from monopoly and land ownership to seasonal fluctuations to religion to state fiat to moral economy and so on. What distinguished the capitalist mode of production was a system of *covert* valorization organized on the basis of commodity production. Such value was expressed through exchange-value, that is, as quantities of money, which ultimately were derived from the measurement, abstraction, and commensuration of the only ingredient shared in common by all commodities: the expenditure of human labor.³⁰

In concrete historical terms, this was a story of how prices converged and settled upon values that reflected labor productivity. For instance, economic historians generally agree that before the 1800s, merchants engaged in the long-distance trade of silver, sugar, cotton, and opium, but prices were wildly divergent across space. In the 1700s, tea in England could be sold at ten times its Chinese purchase price. For international merchants, the basis of their profit was arbitrage, and there was little incentive to intervene into production. But over time, market forces intensified: more trading volume, faster turnover, fewer tariffs, and new transportation routes, all of which resulted in vanishing price differentials. By the nineteenth century, the price difference for tea had shrunk to 2.5 times, and by the twentieth, 1.5. Only then did producers feel the pressure to raise the efficiency of cultivation, manufacture, and delivery as a competitive strategy. In Marx's notes on merchant capital, this pattern culminated in a sort of transition to industrial capitalism, wherein capital began to intervene into production, a transformation that has been substantiated by recent historical scholarship.³¹

Value under capitalism, then, is a determination of social averages, expressed through prices, which exert impersonal pressures to make things more quickly. Paradoxically, as humans work more productively, they lower the social average of their labor, diminishing the amount of value embodied in each commodity, in turn degrading their own status as producers. In Marx's early example, power-looms in England rendered the finished goods of hand-loom weavers one-half their former value, even if the weavers' physical capabilities remained unchanged.³² The chase for profits by increasing productivity has ultimately amounted to nothing more than running in place, what Moishe Postone memorably called "the treadmill effect" of the capitalist value-form.³³ Marx called it capital's "immanent drive."³⁴

This is what Marx meant by the "general laws governing the commodity" that evolved in proportion with capital. In his notes and drafts, he suggested that the logically tight system presented at the start of *Capital* had come into force *only when* everything had been converted into the form of the commodity. The final frontier, historically, was the commodification of labor itself.

As independent and unfree labor grew dependent on the market for survival, the qualitative use-values of the elements of the production — the sensuous, physical dimensions of raw materials, land, and human labor — were increasingly converted into quantitative exchange-values in the form of money, subjected to abstract

calculations and the pressure of averages. In “the Resultate,” Marx described how even independent peasants could find themselves pulled into the spiral of value:

[T]o the extent to which agriculture produces for the market, i.e. produces *commodities*, articles for sale and not for its own immediate consumption - so too, and to the same degree, it calculates its costs, treats each item as a commodity (regardless of whether it buys it from another or from itself, i.e. from *production*). In other words, then, inasmuch as the commodity is treated as an autonomous exchange-value, it acts as *money*. Thus since wheat, hay, cattle, seed of all kinds, etc. are *sold* as commodities - and since without the sale they cannot be regarded as products - it follows that they enter production as *commodities*, i.e. as money. Like the *products*, and as *their ingredients*, the *conditions of production* are indeed themselves products and they too are thus reduced to *commodities*. And as a consequence of the valorization process they are included in the calculations as *sums of money*, i.e. in the autonomous form of exchange-value.³⁵

Similarly, in chapter 10 of *Capital*, Marx argued that when slavery began to produce for the world market, it too became subjected to the pressures of valorization and calculation:

But as soon as peoples whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, the *corvée*, etc. are drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production, whereby the sale of their products for export develops into their principal interest, the civilized horrors of overwork are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom etc. Hence the Negro labour in the southern states of the American Union preserved a moderately patriarchal character as long as production was chiefly directed to the satisfaction of immediate local requirements. But in proportion as the export of cotton became of vital interest to those states, the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labour, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system.³⁶

There is plenty of new research to corroborate such analysis, even though — or precisely because — it does not come from doctrinaire Marxists. For instance, what made US slavery capitalist was not its relative efficiency. Economist Gavin Wright has argued it was inefficient compared to free labor even at the time, contributing to the underdevelopment of the south. Instead, it was that slavery, per Marx, had entered into a “calculated and calculating system.” Caitlin Rosenthal has thus demonstrated

how nineteenth-century cotton cultivation was gradually captured by trends towards Taylorist rationalization. Similarly for domestic labor, de Vries has shown that market-oriented work performed by women and children increased among early modern European households, in sectors such as agriculture, textiles, metallurgy, leather, wood, and ceramics. They calculated their earnings rationally, not as communal units but as individuals on the marketplace. The family unit long predated capitalism, but by “the seventeenth century wage labor was the single most important source of money in much of northwestern Europe ... [I]n this context individual labor rather than the collective labor of the family was the prevailing pattern.”³⁷

To reiterate: Marx did indeed posit that doubly free, commodified labor was an epoch-making development in the history of capitalism, as argued by generations of scholars such as Dobb, Brenner, and Wood, *but not* because it was technically superior to unfree labor. Such reasoning may be relevant for a secondary discussion about productivity and innovation, of absolute versus relative surplus-value. But the economic superiority of free labor was an argument established long before Marx’s time, widespread in a nineteenth-century abolitionist literature that took its cues from seventeenth-century political economy.³⁸ It was an argument perfectly concordant with mainstream political economy, as opposed to Marx’s intended *critique of political economy*.³⁹

Marx’s contribution instead was to historically ground the naturalized assumptions of economic thought. The comparison between free and unfree labor rested upon the ahistorical presupposition that increased labor productivity was a natural goal of human behavior, owing to Malthusian land and resource shortages (use-value). By contrast, for Marx the pressures towards rising productivity under capitalism were historically distinctive, owing to the socially-generated pressures of a commodity-form that abstracted and commensurated labor into calculable exchange-values. Marx’s theory of the commodity-form, in other words, could historically account for what was only taken for granted in the mainstream story of technical efficiency pursued by Dobb, Brenner, and Wood.⁴⁰

Really, Marx’s theory of transition was an inverted version of that Anglocentric account. It was not that the property relations of individual producers mechanistically triggered a chain of events culminating in industrialization. Instead, Marx emphasized that individual producers were absorbed into something bigger than themselves — namely, the abstract dynamics of commodification and, by extension, its spiral of valorization and calculation. As Diane Elson put it: “Marx’s argument is not that the abstract aspect of labour is the product of capitalist social relations, but that the latter are characterised by the dominance of the abstract aspects over other aspects of labour.”⁴¹ Consequently, I believe Marx was more interested in a story wherein the historical subject was not the producing or working classes, as it was for Dobb, Brenner, and Wood, but capitalist value itself. The transition to capitalism was really the universalization and realization of the commodity-form, and hence of value, as the “dominant subject” (*übergreifendes Subjekt*) of the historical process.⁴²

Universality and Generality

The account of transition found in the margins of *Capital* differs from mainstream Anglocentric accounts, yet it still privileges doubly free labor as a linchpin for capitalism's emergence. However, because the unit of analysis was not the individual producer but an entire epoch, it was more open-ended and accommodating of a variety of social arrangements. Many of the above-quoted passages on slavery and independent proprietorship indicate that Marx did not see the transition as an overnight, all-or-nothing proposition but a gradual, iterated process. Phrases such as “to the extent,” “to the same degree,” “inasmuch as,” “in proportion as,” and “evolve in proportion” — these suggest that even without becoming doubly free, producers were already contributing to the global expansion of value in Marx's time.

The early second draft of *Capital* (1863) provided the most extended commentary on pre-waged “transitional forms” I have come across. He provided the concrete examples of “self-sustaining peasants,” such as the Indian *raiyyat* or the Roman plebeians, and of “domestic industry,” such as English stocking weavers, all of whom were “formally free” to bargain with moneylenders and merchants without being directly subordinated. Yet in spite of their non-commodified status, their surplus produce appropriated in the form of interest or arbitrage still contributed to the “total surplus value” pocketed by circulating capital.⁴³ Along similar lines, Marx elsewhere described American slavery or the Danubian *corvée* as unfree institutions whose aim was not the production of “useful products” but “of surplus-value itself.”⁴⁴

That it was possible for independent, unfree workers to produce capitalist value is perhaps uncontroversial by now. But that is not the same as arguing that slavery and peasantry were inherently capitalist in the same way as Marx viewed the free waged worker. Questions of mediation still persist. How do we include “transitional forms” within a theory of capitalism without collapsing the historical and technical differences with free labor? And what does it mean for the free worker to play a leading, epochal role in capitalism's story, if capitalism can still accommodate counterparts who are decidedly unfree?

To address such questions, I found it most useful to probe the concept of “universality” that appears throughout the passages above. Notably, what was translated into English as “universal” is the German *allgemeine*. The same term was also frequently translated as “general,” and both were used throughout the different drafts, almost interchangeably. For instance, on the same page as the “Resultate” passage above, wherein Marx's words were translated as “*the universal elementary form of wealth*” [*die allgemeine elementarische Form des Reichtums*], he continued:

- (2) The production of commodities leads inexorably to capitalist production, once the worker has ceased to be a part of the conditions of production (as in slavery, serfdom), or once primitive common ownership has ceased to be the basis of society (India). In short, from

the moment when labour-power [itself] *in general* becomes a commodity [die Arbeitskraft selbst allgemein zur Ware wird].⁴⁵

In other words: the emergence of capitalism depended upon not only the universalization/generalization of the commodity-form but also of free labor. How do we understand Marx's deployment of the term *allgemeine* in these lines?

My own take is this: Marx adopted a specific meaning of *allgemeine* that was indebted to Hegel's own conception of the universal and the particular, or, *das Allgemeine* and *das Besondere*. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (1830 edition), Hegel warned that the "universal" should not be viewed as a flat abstraction, in which everything was presumed to share the same traits in common. For Hegel, this vulgar understanding of universality [*das Allgemeine, das Universelle*] was really "commonality" [*das Gemeinschaftliche*]. In this vulgar version, in order to derive a universal conception of a flower, for instance, you would need to abstract it away from, and thereby omit, all particular differences, ignoring the qualities of being purple or yellow or red flowers, short or tall flowers, and so on. A vulgar, abstract universality simply retains the bare minimum of what is shared in common. For Hegel, "such concepts are hollow and empty, ... they are mere schemata and shadows."

Instead,

What is universal about the Concept is indeed not just some thing common against which the particular stands on its own; instead the universal is what particularises (specifies) itself [*selbst Besondernde (Specificirende)*], remaining at home with itself in its other, in unclouded clarity.⁴⁶

A truly universal concept of the flower would not be *opposed* to the particular purple and yellow flower. Instead, it manifests itself *through* purple, yellow, and all different varieties of flowers. True universality encompasses both what is held in common but also what is particular to each specific instantiation.

Now compare these lines from Hegel to what Marx wrote in the famous 1857 introduction, published in the *Grundrisse*:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination [*eine allgemeine Beleuchtung*] which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity [*Besonderheit*]. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.⁴⁷

Marx's notion of "universality" and "generality," in other words, was more complex than "commonality," the vulgar, abstract statement that "all capitalist labor must be

free wage labor or else it is not capitalist.” Rather, Marx saw free wage-labor as a general relation that embodied and crystallized the logic of labor as an alienable commodity. In pre-bourgeois modes of production, wage labor counted as one particular, but not universal, social relation. Within the “capitalist epoch,” wage labor has become the “general/universal illumination” that historically takes on, or “particularises itself” in, myriad concrete forms. If, for Hegel, the universal flower manifests as lavenders and marigolds, then for Marx, the essential relation of purchasing and selling labor for commodity production could subsume not just waged work but a variety of exploitative forms, from slavery and indenture to communal agriculture. He agreed with other political economists that a truly atomized proletarian workforce enjoyed technical advantages over independent and unfree workers — it was more “variable,” “versatile,” “flexible,” and “intense” — but the latter could still assume the same social form beneath concrete differences. In some cases, they were even preferable for capital.⁴⁸

Of course, Marx criticized Hegel’s categories for being idealist, that Hegel believed the universal concept in the mind preceded particularity in the external world. Marx’s universality, by contrast, was not a philosophical premise but the product of history. What had become universal in capitalism — the commodity-form and wage labor — were the results of social and economic forces operating in discrete moments in time. It was only on the basis of material processes that they could “bathe and modify” the non-specifically capitalist, “*available, established labour processes*” that preceded the capitalist era.⁴⁹ What this process entailed, I believe, was capitalist competition expressed through falling prices and increased market dependence for reproduction. In the same passage from the 1857 introduction, he speculatively outlined how industrial capital had subsumed older forms of production, such as agriculture, and subordinated them into a “branch” of its wider circuit.⁵⁰

It should be stressed that although Marx believed slavery and household labor could be integrated into the “universality” of the commodity-form, he was *not* arguing that such antecedent forms could constitute the basis of the capitalist era. Arguments that flirt with these conclusions have circulated for a while, from world-systems theory in the 1970s to more recent scholarship on racial capitalism, social reproduction theory, and, most notably, the new histories of US capitalism.

To define and equate capital with unfree labor, as many new works have suggested, invites broader historical and logical questions, most obviously, what about earlier societies that had slavery but no capitalist accumulation? From the perspective of Marx’s theories, this equation loses touch with the specificity of labor as a commodity and, by extension, with the dynamic of value at the heart of capital’s logic. We should be able to distinguish between two different types of inquiry. The new literature on racial capitalism is primarily focused on the question of American slavery — how it has been understood in the past versus today? could it be classified as modern? — and its authors have looked to the capitalism debates to help settle questions of

national historiography. Such inquiries provide significant interventions into the study of US society, but they often wind up framing capitalism in binary terms — is it or not? — flattening different trajectories of accumulation. The question of slavery, ultimately, is different from asking how to grasp *capitalism itself* as a totality: what are its fundamental dynamics, how can it be historically disaggregated, and where can we locate slavery and domestic labor within a broader circuit wherein wages predominate as the “general illumination”?⁵¹

I believe we can be more precise. At the same time we expand our conceptualization of capitalism, we can also guard against collapsing all differences between forms of exploitation. The key, missing distinction in much of the new literature, I believe, was one that Marx drew between the “*specifically capitalist*” forms of production that were only historically imaginable with wage labor — such as Victorian cotton mills or Michigan car factories — versus the “*inherited, available labour processes*” that capital took over from extant social formations, namely, slavery, serfdom, and peasantry.⁵² Such exploitative forms *were not* specifically capitalist, but their content — their fundamental essence — could be transformed once integrated into global competition, animated by the generalization of wage labor.

This conceptualization of wage labor is, admittedly, more abstract than the straightforward story of primitive accumulation and English enclosures in most economic histories. But abstraction is, after all, the defining quality of labor under capitalism. For scholars studying the rest of the world, in fact, this abstraction and flexibility prove especially useful for triangulating between Marx’s theoretical work and the concrete world histories that were never directly analyzed in his text.

In my own research on Asia, I discovered plenty of examples of managers and merchants in China and colonial India attempting to measure, calculate, and raise the productivity of their casual, seasonal, indentured workforces. World tea prices began to plateau and fall off from the 1860s onwards, and capitalists understood that in order to remain competitive they needed the edge of efficient production. They used seemingly archaic methods but aimed them towards the modern goals of competitive accumulation.

In colonial India, British planters tortured workers, often beating them to death, in order to keep them on task and meet production goals. Several stated that they had raised productivity by 25-30%. One wrote, “tasks for hoeing and plucking have in 10 years increased by one-fifth.” Another claimed the industry was “endeavouring by every possible means to reduce expenditure” by “taxing to the utmost the working power of the coolies.” And in a lecture delivered by a British doctor, later excerpted and circulated in a report to the Qing’s Guangxu Emperor, he proclaimed: the “command of the Tea supply . . . will finally rest with whatever country can produce it at least cost, a law that applies to all commodities.”⁵³ These were the same “general laws” of the commodity identified by Marx as the basis of the capitalist epoch, now shaping putatively traditional work patterns across Asia.

The most memorable example came from stories of tea production in southern Anhui, China. In handbooks and surveys from the region, we find evidence that merchants hired workshop managers who oversaw tea roasting, rolling, and drying by keeping close track of time. They did not have precise mechanical clocks. Instead, they tracked time based on a peculiar instrument: slow-burning incense sticks, typically found used in temples and religious rituals. The principle was similar to an hourglass: rather than abstract numbers, such as ten minutes or two hours, they offered the basic promise that each stick would burn for roughly the same amount of time (about forty minutes), providing a baseline for comparison and averages. Managers created precise instructions by timing each task of production and coordinating them into a division of labor: fire the leaves for the duration of 2.5 to three sticks of incense, stir the leaves for eighty percent of one stick, then rotate and press the leaves for half of a stick of incense, and so on. Eventually, managers created wage and reward system tied to productivity: if workers completed tasks faster than average, they would be paid more; slower than average, they would be paid less.⁵⁴

The incense system is especially illustrative of capitalism's unevenness. It is hard to imagine a kind of industrial technology that appears more physically primitive, traditional, or premodern — and yet it was still bound up with the abstract patterns of value. *Contra* the Brenner theory, managers and workers in a putatively traditional industry felt and responded to social pressures that were very much modern and shared in common across the industrial world.

Conclusion: Transitions *within* the History of Capital

To restate my argument: we should maintain the distinction between two different moments of transition in Marx's *Capital*. The first is the generalization of the commodity-form and of wage labor, which entails many specific, particular variations on the general form of doubly free labor. This was described by Marx as the emergence of "transitional forms" or the "formal subsumption" to capital. The second is the subsequent passage from absolute to relative surplus-value, or from formal to real subsumption, with the latter emerging upon the basis of the former. It entailed revolutions in the production process, such as from handicraft to industry to, these days, factories with minimal human labor inputs. In 2020, for instance, Taiwan-based Apple supplier Foxconn announced it would convert its own facilities into "lighthouse" factories, which would lead the way towards an industrial future driven by automation and artificial intelligence, expelling labor from the production process.⁵⁵

Again, though debates over capitalism's origins over four centuries ago may appear irrelevant to us today, they actually pivot on substantive questions about what capitalism means in our own time. The Anglocentric model assumed that capitalism could be limited to one enterprise or one country and that capitalism really only began with industrialization, or the moment of relative surplus-value. This analysis privileged the site of production as metonymical for accumulation as a whole,

uncritically carved into national units. But that picture becomes more complicated once we relate production back to the overall circuit of value.

First, by prioritizing an analysis of the commodity-form, we can also account for the dynamics underlying that coveted process of industrialization central to twentieth-century development. Marx wrote that real subsumption always proceeded from the basis of an earlier formal subsumption:

[C]apital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an *existing labour process*, developed by different and more archaic modes of production.... If changes occur in these traditional established *labour processes* after their takeover by capital, these are nothing but the gradual consequences of that subsumption.⁵⁶

Whereas past scholarship, such as the Dobb, Brenner, and Wood tradition, fixated on revolutions in the production process, Marx himself believed there was a greater degree of continuity between formal and real subsumption, absolute and relative surplus-value. I do not see this relationship as a teleological stage theory, wherein the former must lead to the latter, but a logical relationship in which the former represents the conditions of possibility for the latter without necessarily getting there. There is a strong tradition in the history of technology and science that similarly suggests it was the gradual transformations in labor intensification (absolute relative-surplus value) that subsequently laid the groundwork for capital-intensive, labor-substituting technology (relative surplus-value).⁵⁷ To cut off the latter from the former is a reification of history, unmooring it from any concrete analysis of changes over time.

Second, by foregrounding the commodity-form, we can see clearly why a research agenda exclusively fixated on relative surplus-value is logically at odds with a broader analysis of capitalist value. In that first chapter, Marx lays out how “value” is determined based upon social averages, one that presupposes a diversity of producers with different levels of efficiency. Relative surplus-value is “relative” to other forms of exploitation, and its coherence depends upon co-existence with absolute surplus-value.

As Marx pointed out, if value were simply a straightforward measure of labor expenditure, as Smith and Ricardo posited, then that system would actually *disincentivize* innovation. Someone who learns how to produce textiles with power-looms using one-half the labor of their peers would wind up impoverished, for they would have to sell their goods at half the price. But in reality the first power loom-made goods were sold at the same price as handwoven ones, and they earned monopoly surplus profits because of lower production costs. This is the significance of Marx’s observation that value operated through averages. Exploitation really takes place in two separate moments: first extracted from labor itself, and then from less to more

productive producers. Relative surplus-value feeds upon absolute surplus-value as the source of its super-profits. Thus, if we were to exclude absolute surplus-value from our mental map of capitalist production — if we were to say that the only producers who count as capitalist are those using the most cutting-edge techniques — then there would be no relative surplus-value to be found, and the value concept becomes incoherent.⁵⁸

In short, past Marxist scholars who fixated on the site of production envisioned a global economy composed of a patchwork of capitalist and non-capitalist producers, of local “transitions” and “non-transitions” to capitalism. In the nineteenth century, hypothetically, the British waged economy may have been capitalist but the suppliers of their sugar, tea, raw cotton, and other consumer goods and materials remained non-capitalist. The logical and historical problems that arise from this conception should be plainly visible. Instead, it is more useful to read Marx as positing one fundamental epochal transformation, which he called at various moments “the capitalist mode of production” or “capitalist era” or “capitalist epoch.” He described this transition conceptually. In terms of real history, he speculated that it began several centuries ago and has since become global in scale. It has also been characterized by unevenness, or the impersonal dynamics of many capitals in contention with one another.

For those of us studying the last two centuries, my guess is that many of the “transitions” we are attempting to theorize are transitions *not to* capitalism but *from within* capitalism’s history — namely, from absolute to relative surplus-value, or, from inherited processes (slavery and family farms) to novel ones overhauled and restructured in capital’s image (industrial plantations and Fordist factories).

Back in the present, we should bear in mind that the second transformation — from workshop to factory — is ongoing and sporadic and never exhaustive of economic life, prone to reversal. For every example of high-tech automation, we hear about archaic forms of subcontracted, unfree gig labor. In fact, during the widespread protests against China’s “zero-Covid” policies in late 2022, workers in Zhengzhou’s Foxconn facilities — the same company touting its smart “lighthouse” factories — had to literally scale physical walls in order to escape their employer and return home, demonstrating a mixture of anachronistic, unfree conditions within the most putatively cutting-edge industries (not to mention recent allegations of child slavery).⁵⁹

In the past few decades, confidence in the teleology of industrialization has been undermined, and among historians the Anglocentric model that fetishized large-scale industry appears increasingly provincial. Patterns of deindustrialization and globalization suggest that capital technologies can sometimes be replaced by strategies that are labor-intensive, geographically dispersed, and responsive to a volatile international market. As David Harvey put it, capital-intensive “rigidity” became a burden while labor-intensive “flexibility” a virtue.⁶⁰

My pet theory is that 1973 marks the turning point in the reimagination of Marx’s

work, both within the academy and outside. On the one hand, the English publication of the *Grundrisse* brought to the surface the historical and Hegelian structure of Marx's logic. On the other, the 1973 oil embargo punctuated the global stagflation crisis, casting doubt upon the power and centrality of north Atlantic industry while refocusing attention on "capitalism" as a historically determinate, crisis-prone phenomenon. New practices have emerged — from financial deregulation to labor offshoring to hyper-consumption — that have made obvious the connected yet uneven character of global capital.

Central to all of this was not only the so-called crisis of western capitalism but also the emergence of newly-industrialized countries, especially in Asia, as the new epicenters of global manufacture. From the 1960s onwards, Asia has witnessed a series of unprecedented national economic "miracles," from Japan to South Korea to China. None of that history makes any sense if we assume that such countries had been immune to capitalist dynamics in previous centuries, as was once assumed. Instead, these stories, from postwar Japan to China's 1980s reform and opening, are more legible as the culmination of a longer integration into the global division of labor.⁶¹

On the one hand, novel transformations in our time are shedding new light on histories in the distant past that we thought were fully understood. On the other, as scholars continue to write new histories of capitalism — ones that highlight unfree and domestic labor, finance and merchant capital — these can also inform the way we understand the present, as the latest moment within the by-now centuries-long epoch of capital.

Notes

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2. See Andrew B. Liu, “Notes Toward a More Global History of Capitalism: Reading Marx’s Capital in India and China” *Spectre* (2020), <https://spectrejournal.com/notes-toward-a-more-global-history-of-capitalism>; Andrew B. Liu, “Production, Circulation, and Accumulation: The Historiographies of Capitalism in China and South Asia” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 78.4 (2019) 767–788; Andrew B. Liu, “From the Great Divergence to New Histories of Capitalism,” *Global Economic History*, eds. Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy, second edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2024): 147–163; Andrew B. Liu, “Levels of Abstraction? Jairus Banaji’s Method and a Reconsideration of Chinese Merchant Capital.” *Storica* 83–84 (2022) 211–26.
3. My thinking is most indebted to the work of Mumbai-based writer Jairus Banaji, especially Banaji, “Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History (1977)” in *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011) 45–102; see also my conversation with Banaji and fellow historian Sheetal Chhabria: “‘Where is the Working Class? It’s All Over the World Today’: Jairus Banaji in Conversation with Sheetal Chhabria and Andrew Liu” *Borderlines*, companion site to *Comparative Studies in South Asia and Middle East* (2020), <https://www.borderlines-cssaame.org/posts/2021/1/18/part-ii-where-is-the-working-class-its-all-over-the-world-today>. Other influential interlocutors include Harry D. Harootunian, Rebecca Karl, Moishe Postone, and Andrew Sartori.
4. The following section is a restatement of arguments from Liu, “Production, Circulation, and Accumulation.”
5. Robert Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism” *New Left Review* 1/104 (1977) 25–92; T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Immanuel Wallerstein, “The West, Capitalism, and the Modern World-System” *Review*, 15.4 (1992) 561–619; Ellen M. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 1999/2002) chap. 5.
6. On the canonization of England as the archetypal capitalism success story, see David Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution 1880–1980” *Past & Present*, 103 (1984) 131–172.
7. Banaji, “Modes of Production: A Synthesis” in Banaji 2011, 356–358.
8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I (1867) Trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 876, emphasis added.
9. Marx, *Capital* 271–272. Emphasis added.
10. Marx, *Capital* 873. Emphasis added.
11. Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden, eds., “Introduction” in “Peripheral” Labour?: *Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1–3.
12. Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development” 36.
13. Liu, *Tea War* 14.

14. De Vries quoted in Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012) 410-411.
15. Steven Topik, "The World Coffee Market in the Eighteenth And Nineteenth Centuries, from Colonial To National Regimes" (presented at the GEHN Conference, Bankside, London, London: London School of Economics, 2004) <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Economic-History/Assets/Documents/Research/GEHN/GEHNWP04ST.pdf>
16. Mae M. Ngai, *The Chinese Question: the Gold Rushes and Global Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2021) "Introduction."
17. On sugar, see Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985); on cotton, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: a Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).
18. Similar questions have also been debated for regions closer to the center of capitalism's historiography, such as the slave plantations of the Atlantic (see Mintz, chap. 2) or the small, independent farms of France and Germany investigated in Karl Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question* (1899).
19. Marx, *Capital* 874.
20. Banaji, "Modes of Production" 52.
21. Banaji, "Modes of Production" 51-52; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Random House, 1973) 98-107.
22. Marx, *Capital* 274.
23. Marx, *Capital* 274, fn 4.
24. The draft scheme comes from Enrique Dussel, "The Four Drafts of *Capital*: Toward a New Interpretation of the Dialectical Thought of Marx," *Rethinking Marxism* 13(1) (2001) 12-20. English versions of the second draft can be found scattered across the *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, and in particular, I found volume 34 most useful. "The Resultate" was planned as a bridge between the first two volumes and was intended to provide a theoretical summary of the argument in the first volume. It was first published in English as part of the 1976 Penguin edition. Comparing the two, one finds clear points of both overlap and divergence in the wording of the drafts, the exact contours of which I am unclear about.
25. Marx, *Capital* 950-951.
26. Marx, *Capital* 645; Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 34 (New York: International Publishers, 1994) 117. In "the Resultate" translation, Marx describes these as "transitional sub-forms." Marx, *Capital* 1023.
27. Such "hybrid" and "transitional forms" should be understood in relation to the more well-known opposition between the "formal subsumption of labour under capital" that was logically prior to a "real subsumption" by capital. Formal subsumption meant formerly independent workers were now employed under waged, capitalist conditions, on the one hand, but without the technological revolutions associated with capitalist development on the other, pointing to earlier phases of capitalism's history prior to large-scale industry (Marx, *Capital* 645). But even formal subsumption presupposed a free waged workforce, excluding slavery or independent smallholding. The "hybrid" and "transitional" forms constituted a kind "pre-formal" subsumption, in which workers were

not even directly subordinated or employed by capital yet their surplus produce could still be appropriated as value-embodying commodities. Notably, one of the most famous explorations of the “formal subsumption” category was Banaji’s early essay on the cotton-growing peasantry of the Deccan Plateau, India, in which he is commonly understood to be arguing that highly indebted peasantry embodied Marx’s category of “formal subsumption.” But really, as I’ve laid out here, Marx would have likely counted them as part of the pre-subsumption categories of “hybrid” or “transitional” forms of independent labor. It is to Banaji’s immense credit that he was clear about this distinction even in the original essay, noting that his materials were really pointing to a case of “a ‘preformal’ subordination of labour to capital.” Banaji, “Capitalist Domination and the Small Peasantry: The Deccan Districts in the Late Nineteenth Century (1977)” in *Theory as History*, 282.

28. Marx, *Capital* 951.
29. Marx, *Capital* 950. Emphasis added.
30. Marx, *Capital* 125-131.
31. Liu, *Tea War*, 39; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. III (1894)* Trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin Books, 1981) 444: “In the context of capitalist production, commercial capital is demoted from its earlier separate existence, to become a particular moment of capital investment in general, and the equalization of profits reduces its profit rate to the general average. It now functions simply as the agent of productive capital.”
32. Marx, *Capital* 129.
33. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 289.
34. Marx, *Capital* 436-437.
35. Marx, *Capital* 952. Further comments on how independent farmers could be subsumed to capitalist calculation can be found in his unpublished second draft (1863): “In feudal society,... relations which are far from belonging to the essence of feudalism also take on a feudal expression ... It is exactly the same with the capitalist mode of production. The independent peasant or handicraftsman is cut into two ... “As owner of the means of production he is a capitalist, as worker he is his own wage labourer. He therefore pays himself his wages as a capitalist and draws his profit from his capital, i.e. he exploits himself as wage labourer and pays himself in surplus value the tribute labour owes to capital.” (Engels and Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 34, 141-142.
36. Marx, *Capital* vol. 1, 345.
37. Gavin Wright, “Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited,” *Economic History Review* 73/2 (2020), 370-372; Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018) chap. 3; Jan De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 82, 102.
38. Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Great Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992) 24, 34; the most famous comparison between enslaved and free labor is found in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1776/2000), Book 1, chap. 8, “Of the wages of labour” 91-93.
39. There is a long tradition of Marxist scholars who confused Marx for a liberal champion of free labor, overlooking his biting, ironic commentary on the concept of free labor. See Banaji, “Fictions

of Free Labour,” in *Theory as History*.

40. For the argument that Marx’s theory of value provides an account of the historically determinate directional dynamic of modern history, see Postone, *Time, Labor*, 287-291. A major lacuna of the Brenner/Wood theory is an explanation for why propertyless workers and capitalist farmers should fight to raise their labor productivity as a result of total market dependence. There are general comments about producing more in order to profit in a competitive marketplace, but they do not indicate why it would not be possible to simply profit at the same level of productivity. There is no account for why prices should fall. Implicitly, they wind up relying upon a market-based theory of supply-and-demand to explain falling prices, as indicated by Brenner’s more recent works on the 20th-century downturn. Conspicuously absent is a theory of value that is animated by averages of labor-time central to Marx’s theory. While supply-and-demand theories are compatible with a theory of value, they are also non-specific to capitalism and are not directly tied to questions of productivity, e.g., they could just as easily apply to mechanization as they could to natural disasters. In Postone’s words, such theories capture the “surface” level of capitalism (circulation) without delving into its “deep structure” (production and labor). See Moishe Postone, “Theorizing the Contemporary World: Robert Brenner, Giovanni Arrighi, David Harvey,” in *Political Economy and Global Capitalism: The 21st Century, Present and Future*, ed. Robert Albritton, Bob Jessop, and Richard Westra (London: Anthem Press, 2010) 7-24.
41. Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labour,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour Under Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 1979/2015) 150. Further, as Banaji pointed out, Marx considered “wage labour ... in the strict economic sense” as any activity that is “capital-positing, capital-producing labour.” Marx, *Grundrisse* 463, quoted in Banaji, “Modes of Production,” 54. Put another way, capitalist labor is any form of labor (L) that has been brought into the circuit of valorization mapped out by Marx, as in this representation from the second volume of *Capital: Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. II (1884)*, Trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin Books, 1978) 124.

$$M-C \begin{matrix} L \\ \swarrow \\ mp \end{matrix} \dots P \dots (C+c)-(M+m).$$

42. Marx 1976, 255. See also Postone, chap. 2. It is worth pointing out, as well, that at times Marx will argue not that wage-labor creates capitalism but that capital “produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-laborer” (Marx, *Capital* 724). Thanks to Ben Parker for the reference.
43. Engels and Marx, *Collected Works* 118-119; the section on “transitional forms” spans 117-121.
44. Marx, *Capital* 345.
45. Marx, *Capital* 951. Translation modified. Emphasis added.
46. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic (1830)*, Trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991) 240, §163 add. 1. Another way to read Hegel’s concept of universality/generality within Marx is Marx’s conception of the “world market” as the conclusion of his unfinished analysis, “in which production is posited as a totality together with all its moments, but within which, at the same time, all contradictions come into play” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 227). Thanks to Jairus Banaji for this reference.
47. Marx, *Grundrisse* 106-107.

48. Marx, *Capital* 1031-1034. Marx was influenced by the works of the Scottish thinker James Steuart, English political economist T.R. Edmonds, and especially the Irish scholar J.E. Cairnes's *The Slave Power* (1862). Cf. Engels and Marx, *Collected Works*, 102-104. It would be fascinating for researchers to delve further into how Marx came to understand American slavery compared to English wage labor in his time.
49. Marx, *Capital* 1021.
50. Marx, *Grundrisse* 107.
51. I have discussed such questions with more depth in Liu, "From the Great Divergence." See also Steven Hahn, "The Arch of Injustice," *Public Books* (2021), <https://www.publicbooks.org/the-arch-of-injustice>
52. Marx, *Capital* 1021.
53. Liu, *Tea War* chaps 4 and 5.
54. Liu, *Tea War* chap 2.
55. "Hon Hai to Add 20 'Lighthouse' Factories," *Taipei Times*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/biz/archives/2021/09/27/2003765055>
56. Marx, *Capital* 1021.
57. See Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974/1998). At the same time, the transition to relative surplus-value is uneven and encounters barriers across many industries. In some cases, material circumstances prevent mechanization, such as the natural traits of crops like rice or tea. In other cases, as in service work, the labor being performed relies upon skills that cannot be quantified or objectified. A total analysis would bring both labor and capital-intensive industries together and study their interactions across labor markets and overall rates of profitability. One recent example is Jason Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).
58. This contradiction — that the logic of competition winds up canceling out labor, and hence the basis of value, from production — was, after all, the foundation for Marx's theory of the falling rate of profit.
59. Eli Friedman, "Escape from the Closed Loop," *Boston Review*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/escape-from-the-closed-loop>. On child slavery in Foxconn, see Yuan Yang, "He Blew the Whistle on Amazon. He's Still Paying the Price," *Financial Times*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/de5fea12-2938-4c20-b394-10ca258a5fa1>
60. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989) chap. 9.
61. One useful take on Chinese history is "Red Dust," *Chuang*, no. 2 (Glasgow: Bell & Bain, 2019), 21-281. <https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/red-dust>

What was Globalization? The Long Downturn at the End of History

Anna Zalokostas

What was globalization? Sweatshops, the cancellation of Third World debt, unequal exchange in world trade, labor organizing at the global level: these were some of the concerns that mobilized the protesters who came together in Seattle against the Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999. As a new era of trade agreements reconstituted networks of production and exchange, the relationships between geographically distant people and places were, too, rearticulated. The anti-globalization movement brought together many skeins, from Ralph Nader's various anti-trade coalitions to campaigns against the World Bank, from student organizers to Mexican farmers and Canadian wheat growers. While the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect in 1994, generated much controversy — and push back — it was the "Battle of Seattle" that squarely put the international economic order on the political agenda: the World Bank and the IMF sought to realign themselves with human rights campaigns, and transnational corporations like Nike were forced to respond to critiques of labor exploitation across the Global South.

If 1999 seemed to mark the emergence of a new social movement, the concerns of the anti-globalization movement nonetheless came as a response to seismic shifts that began decades earlier.¹ Following the oil shocks of 1973 and the dismantling of Bretton Woods, globalization became the defining feature of the capitalist world economy. The signing of NAFTA and the establishment of the WTO may have allowed an incipient regime of free trade to come to fruition, but all the hallmarks of globalization — transformations in the global division of labor, the integration of cross-border networks of production, the growth of finance — were fashioned in the seventies. And yet, even as it refers to processes that began in the seventies, "globalization" as a term remained relatively obscure until the nineties, when it became *the* keyword for talking about the economic interdependence. Globalization may not have named an entirely new world order, but it did name a new way

of seeing — and describing — the world, one that, in the nineties, brought the transformations of the seventies together under a common sign.

By many accounts, the seventies marked a definitive moment of transition. The decade has been named “pivotal,” not only for its economic transformations, but for its social, political, and cultural realignments.² For Robert Brenner, 1973 in particular marked a turning point in the history of the world economy, one in which capitalism encountered a crisis of accumulation that it could not — and still cannot — overcome. Brenner’s study, first published in 1998 in the *New Left Review* as a book-length essay, “Uneven Development and the Long Downturn: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Boom to Stagnation, 1950-1998,” stands as one of the earliest attempts to outline the economics of globalization. As Brenner turned to the seventies to think about globalized production, he did so, significantly, from the standpoint of the nineties, from his position within a broader US print and public culture grappling with the US’s economic ties to the rest of the world and a left whose interest in Marxism was shifting from the cultural to the economic.

Brenner’s conceptualization of the long downturn may have outlived globalization as both an account of totality and an organizing principle of critique, but as an analytic the long downturn remains discursively and conceptually tethered to nineties-era globalization. Foregrounding increasingly interdependent networks of production and exchange, Brenner’s analysis represents a turn to global supply chains as the basis for theorizing exploitation and immiseration. And yet, as much as globalization newly politicized the relationship between production and consumption, it was, more often than not, a synonym for Americanization or commodification. Globalization was, after all, a heuristic that developed in the US. Like Brenner’s account of the long downturn, it emerged after the suppression of nearly all left-wing liberation movements, during a time when interdependence overshadowed solidarity. In restoring this political and discursive context, we can not only see how the strengths and limitations of the long downturn align with the uses and abuses of globalization, but also find in these entwined histories a usable past. Though the anti-globalization movement’s most enduring legacy is ethical consumption, we might see in the debates around nineties-era globalization an attempt to rearticulate the lexicon of the economic — and, in doing so, an attempt to reckon with the terms around which the left might be organized.

Globalization, Keyword of the Late 20th Century

From the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Zapatista rebellion, from Francis Fukuyama’s celebrations of the “end of history” to Naomi Klein’s investigation into the unbranded origins of brand name consumer goods, globalization was defined as much by a series of events as it was by a set of commentators. Signifying the integration of markets in its narrowest sense and the expansion of social and economic processes to the planetary scale in its broadest sense, the economic processes indexed by

globalization as a process may have begun in the seventies, but it was in the nineties that globalization as a keyword “skyrocketed to terminological stardom.”³ By 2000, the Library of Congress recorded 284 publications with the term or one of its derivatives in the title, none of which were published before 1987.⁴ Theodor Levitt is sometimes credited with coining the term — though he did not do so, he did help popularize it, bringing it into the mainstream in a 1983 *Harvard Business Review* article. If the term itself has no necessary theory attached to it — denoting nothing more nor less than the process of becoming worldwide—the subject of Levitt’s article is suggestive: Levitt writes about the emergence of standardized, low-priced consumer products, discussing changes that allowed companies like Coca-Cola and McDonald’s to sell the same products worldwide. Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” might stand as the moment in which nineties-era globalization began intellectually. Published in 1989 in *The National Interest*, Fukuyama’s triumphant celebration of post-Cold War Western liberal democratic capitalism concluded that over time, nations that hadn’t yet become liberal capitalist democracies would inevitably do so.

In both popular journalism and academic scholarship, globalization stirred much controversy and debate. Was globalization leading to the demise of the nation-state? Would it lead to greater cultural homogeneity or cultural heterogeneity? Arjun Appadurai, whose *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) stands as a major text of globalization theory, proposed difference and disjuncture as the defining features of globalization. At the same time, mainstream economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman and political commentators like Thomas Friedman tried to come to grips with the new regime of international trade. Major anthologies like *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System* edited by Anthony King (1991), *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* edited by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (1997), and *Cultures of Globalization* edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (1998) tried to grapple with globalization from the vantage of culture. Brenner might not be among the thinkers we most readily associate with globalization, but the publication of “Uneven Development and the Long Downturn” was one of the most ambitious attempts to outline the economics of globalization at a time when globalization as a system, a process, a condition, and an age captured national attention.

Globalization may not have named wholly new processes — or, as Brenner’s survey suggests, any entirely new order — but it did mark a new way of looking at and describing the world. After the formal end of the Cold War, as the geographical divides between the First, Second, and Third Worlds began to lose traction, globalization sought to produce a new map of the world. As the Thomas Friedmans of the world underwrote globalization as the dominant descriptor of our increasing and irreversible interconnectedness, the anti-globalization movement took the dividing line between the Global North and Global South — between consumption and production — as its organizing principle. Though much of what once went under the name of globalization now travels under different names, it was the lexicon of globalization that, in the

nineties, sought to come to terms with the transformations of the seventies.⁵ Free trade zones and offshoring, global supply chains and the international division of labor, the transfer of commodities and resources: these were the great themes of globalization and its antinomies.

Though neoliberalism is often considered a more precise term for what once went under the name of globalization, the two terms have different emphases and different orientations.⁶ First, globalization is fundamentally about relationality. If the reference of neoliberalism is the individual — or, in Melinda Cooper's analysis, the family — globalization involves the relativization of individual and national reference points to global networks of relationship. Organizing attention around interconnections, it emphasizes the systematic interrelationship of individual ties—no relationship is either isolated or entirely bound. In this sense, we might trace its intellectual genealogy through theories of dependency and of world-systems, which sought to theorize increasing interdependence between national systems. As a point of view, globalization sees linkages at multiple scales, from the individual and the nation to the international system and the planetary. Likewise organizing its analysis around networks of production and exchange, Brenner's essay is part of this way of seeing. At its best, globalization theory offered a way to avoid false dichotomies between the global and the local, between global capitalism and cultural and economic nationalism.

Second, globalization is intellectually and discursively organized around the relationship between the Global North and the Global South. This is not to occlude the deep history of the Global South as a laboratory for neoliberalism, but to suggest that the map of the world drawn by globalization — and contested by the anti-globalization movement — is one that is oriented around, and seeks to reckon with, the division between Global North and South as its key organizing principle. It is this division that organizes globalization's account of totality and lexicon of critique, and it is this division that produces globalization's cast of characters. In part, this is because globalization is closely connected with modernization theory, which was both its predecessor and contemporary. Roland Roberston, one of the earliest theorists of globalization, began his academic career interested in modernization and stumbled into the term globalization as a way to explain "the modernization of the whole world."⁷ We might understand critiques of globalization, then, as sharing much in common with critiques of modernization — both appear to justify the spread of Western culture and society. As Paul James and Manfred B. Steger note in their genealogy of the concept of globalization, it is telling that the use of "modernization" began its decline just as the term "globalization" began to take hold.⁸ Globalization theory sought to define — and critique — the relationship between Global North and Global South. In this sense, we might see globalization as a theory that is particularly tethered to the Global South — not only because many of its most prominent cultural theorists were also scholars of the postcolonial, but also because globalization's close

relationship with modernization and focus on interdependence uniquely positioned it as a theory that attempted to come to grips with the rise of what Mike Davis named a “planet of slums.”⁹

On the left, globalization was a way of seeing and describing how the wealth of the few depends on the misery of the many. For some, the energies that culminated in the anti-globalization movement seemed to mark a distinct break from the campus politics of the culture wars, or, further back, the politics of 1968 — the shift, in this account, being from identity politics to class politics, and the whole set of dichotomies through which that division is perpetually recoded.¹⁰ The Battle of Seattle in particular seemed to mark the resurgence of a left long understood to have been defeated, either by state repression or internal conflict. And yet, the concerns animating the anti-globalization movement did not just appear suddenly, without any precedent; as Michael Denning suggests, we might see the Battle of Seattle in line with the tradition of IMF riots protesting austerity measures.¹¹ In doing so, we can see how the movement’s critique of consumption is part of a long history of anti-capitalist critique that takes place beyond the factory gate. Seen within this tradition, the Battle of Seattle represents not the reappearance of a previously disappearing economic critique, but a rearticulation of the very terms of the economic. Particularly in the wake of Francis Fukuyama’s celebrations of the “end of history” — the inevitable spread of “liberal democracy in the political sphere combined with easy access to VCRs and stereos in the economic” — critiques of consumption came to stand in for broader critiques of capitalism.¹² In politicizing consumption, the anti-globalization movement provided us with a vocabulary for thinking about the economic beyond the point of production.

It is from this position that Brenner sets out to document and theorize the world economy after World War II, from a print and public culture that is widely concerned with the US’s economic ties to the rest of the world as a new round of agreements and institutions sought to secure the conditions of free trade. By looking back to the seventies from the standpoint of the nineties, Brenner’s account of the long downturn is part of a shared vocabulary for talking about historical change. This is the vocabulary of globalization: the vocabulary of Coca-Colonization, of offshoring, of cheap factory labor, of maquilas and free trade zones, of networks of production and capital flows. On the one hand, these keywords point to real historical processes. And yet, bringing these processes together under a common sign, to turn to offshoring and production networks to stage a critique of capitalism, represents an attempt to think globally about issues of exploitation and immiseration. This was the decade’s response to the seventies.

The Long Downturn: Paratext and Context

Amidst an ascendent regime of globalization, what stood out to the editors who first published Brenner’s essay in a special issue of the *New Left Review* was, first,

Brenner's theorization of intra-capitalist competition, and second, his explication of the patterns of uneven development that began in the fifties. Though we often take the long downturn to be portable, for Brenner there is no way to understand the seventies without the fifties — the long downturn may be the manifestation of the crisis, but the origins of the crisis, its causes, date back to the postwar order. The problems Brenner identifies arise, in the first instance, from globalization; in this sense, the seventies are less a shift to globalization than a re-emphasis of globalization as the defining feature of the American economy.

To make this argument, Brenner makes the case that the postwar era is best understood as two distinct eras: a period of prosperity from the late 1940s to 1973, characterized by rapid growth, and the long downturn, a period of increasing economic turbulence from 1973 onwards, characterized by slowed growth, investment, productivity, and employment. While historians and social scientists have developed theories of stagnation that accord with Brenner's periodization, where Brenner's model departs is in the fundamental cause of what he calls the long downturn: the falling rate of profit throughout advanced capitalist economies, itself the result of a persistent tendency toward overcapacity in the global manufacturing industries. Looking at the postwar era, Brenner identifies a pattern: one after another, a new economic power has been able to make use of advanced technology in combination with low wages to manufacture goods that were already being produced on the world market, but to do so at a lower price. The result has been a profound intensification of competition, growing overcapacity, and a downward squeeze on profits in manufacturing.

Basing his study on the US, Germany, and Japan, Brenner identifies 1973 as the year when the global manufacturing industry reaches its saturation point and plunges the global economy into extended decline. As German and Japanese manufacturing caught up with the US, American firms found that their investments in fixed capital prevented them from abandoning increasingly unprofitable lines or scaling back production. Existing corporations not only refused to cede ground to their newer rivals, but also did their best to counterattack, cutting back on equipment and workers and leading to slower growth of investment and employment. With the help of governments around the world, corporations released a relentless assault on the working class; the increasing austerity since the 1970s has been an attempt to recover profitability. In the US, corporations adopted further distinct strategies. First, they stepped up production overseas; in what is often called "offshoring," they combined advanced capitalist techniques with lower wage labor. Second, they turned to financial services.

This argument about the long downturn was first published as "Uneven Development and the Long Downturn" in a special issue of *New Left Review* 229, May-June 1998. Verso published it as a book under the title *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn 1945-*

2005 in 2006, with a new preface and afterword. Following the Great Recession of 2008, Brenner revised his argument again, publishing yet another sequel, a paper titled “What’s Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America.” Though the 2006 reissue of *The Economics of Global Turbulence* contains just one direct mention of “globalization” (listed alongside cost reduction and neoliberalism as a response to the crisis of the 1970s), Brenner’s argument is, fundamentally, an argument about what came to be known as globalization. In all these iterations, the starting point of the long downturn remains the same — 1973. What changes is the end date — from 1998 to 2005 to 2008, the long downturn continues to extend into the present.

The editorial preface to the special issue of the *New Left Review* in which Brenner’s essay first appeared helps illustrate how the long downturn is both discursively and conceptually tethered to nineties-era debates about globalization. Making the case for the significance — and timeliness — of Brenner’s subject, the editors begin by invoking the formal end of the Cold War: “Since the end of the 1960s, the course of the global economy has constituted the hidden force field of all politics. With the victory of the West in the Cold War, removing the Soviet bloc from the scene, the distance between the world market and international affairs has closed dramatically.”¹³ As the editorial goes on to reference Alan Greenspan’s speculating whether the US economy has “moved beyond history,” its authors position Brenner’s text in relation to a set of then-urgent questions:

In the United States, has the spread of new technologies outdated all traditional cycles, as New Age economists contend; or is Wall Street blowing into just another balloon at bursting-point? In East Asia, is the IMF imposing necessary disciplines on corrupt and jerry-built dirigiste systems, or is it recklessly driving even sound economies into the abyss — as such unlikely critics as Jeffrey Sachs now charge? Finally, and most pregnantly, what is likely to be the outcome of the divergence between Asian and American sectors of the world economy as they interact at the threshold of the new century?¹⁴

Francis Fukuyama, Alan Greenspan, Jeffrey Sachs; the end of the Cold War, the East Asian financial crisis, the New Economy: together, this set of referents is one that orients us toward globalization as a discursive field and context. In actively drawing connections between Brenner’s essay, a set of political commentators, and a series of historical events, the *Review* editors situate Brenner as part of this conjuncture. In his preface to the 2006 reissue of *The Economics of Global Turbulence* published by Verso, Brenner likewise locates his analysis within these histories. Taken in their context, Brenner’s essay offers a corrective, insisting that “beneath the glossy surface of the ‘Fabulous Decade,’ the foundations on which the global system was developing remained rickety.”¹⁵

In addition to understanding Brenner's essay in relation to globalization's events and commentators, the opening editorial of the *Review* also understands it as part of an approach to history that moves beyond the scale of the nation. The opening statement of the editorial explains its decision to publish Brenner's work in its entirety by stating, "NLR has published special numbers before, consisting of a single text on major political questions of the day — European integration or Britain's last imperial war. Robert Brenner's survey is on another scale."¹⁶ Pointing to the rarity of special issues here, the *Review* suggests that the kind of topic that might call for a special issue is one that is something along the lines of the dissolution of the British empire or the integration of Europe — both of which constitute not only "major political questions of the day," but are also, significantly, on a scale that exceeds that of the nation-state. The suggestion that Brenner's analysis is "on another scale" — presumably one ever larger than that of the European Union or the British Empire — offers an understanding of the kind of historical narrative that Brenner's long downturn claims to make. Though Brenner's methodology is certainly not a new historical framework — world-systems theory rose to prominence in the 1970s, with the publication of the first of Immanuel Wallerstein's multi-volume work — we might, in light of these opening remarks, understand it as one that emerged under the same conditions that produced the "transnational turn." In the same way that the transnational turn often reinforced the very provincialism it attempted to displace, and globalization all too often became a code word for Americanization, Brenner's framework is inescapably and perhaps unavoidably, like globalization, US-centric. The 1973 Recession was, after all, primarily (though not exclusively) a crisis in the US and UK.

Even as the *Review's* editors suggest that Brenner's study is on another scale than that of the disintegration of the British empire or the consolidation of Europe, by naming these special issues as precedents, they nonetheless position the long downturn in relation to these historical forebearers. These points of reference do nothing to temper the Anglo-American framework of Brenner's analysis. The long downturn is comparable to the disintegration of the British empire and the consolidation of Europe because it is about the decline of US empire, what Giovanni Arrighi, with the contemporaneous publication of *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Time* (1994), would identify as the terminal crisis of US hegemony. Significantly, Arrighi and Brenner disagree about the role of labor militancy in bringing about the long downturn: Brenner explicitly rejects the wage-squeeze thesis, while Arrighi's account of 1973 as a turning point emphasizes the wave of labor actions between 1968-73 and the subsequent pay explosion that followed. For Arrighi, the crisis is specifically a crisis in US hegemony, one that follows longer historical patterns of expansion and decline he locates in previous Genoese, Dutch, and British regimes of accumulation: like the 1975 Fall of Saigon, the 1973 oil shocks and dismantling of Bretton Woods point to the unraveling of

the American century. Though Brenner does not, as Arrighi does, identify longer historical precedents to the prolonged period of decline that begins in the 1970s, the editors' invocation of previous events that deserved special issues sets up a comparison between American and British empires.¹⁷

In pointing to what is particularly and distinctly unique about Brenner's argument, the *Review* singles out two key theoretical interventions. Looking closely at these helps draw attention to how Brenner's analysis is tethered to globalization conceptually, and how the *Review* both understood and emphasized that connection. First, the editors point to Brenner's conclusion that "it is not the vertical relationship between capital and labour that in the last resort decides the fate of modern economies, but the horizontal relationship between capital and capital. It is the logic of competition, not class struggle, that rules the deeper rhythms of growth or recession."¹⁸ Here it is, I think, especially helpful to acknowledge that the long downturn emerged in the wake of the historical suppression of nearly all left-wing liberation movements both in the United States and globally, the breakdown of organized labor, and the dissolution of actually existing alternatives to capitalist development. To remember the long downturn's connection to nineties-era globalization is also to recognize its blind spots, and to see its emphasis on multinational firms as shaped by its own historical moment.

The *Review* puts forth Brenner's "second theme" as the "specific pattern of uneven development between specific blocs of capital," a pattern that precedes the 1973 crisis.¹⁹ For Brenner, the seeds of the 1970s are to be found in the 1950s. From 1945, the US commanded a position of dominance, resulting from an unprecedented combination of economic and military power. As the US's continued dominance came at the expense of its partners and rivals, it threatened to be too destructive; had it continued, it would have forced the US's partners to back out of the postwar order. In pursuing its own interests, the US thus had to take into account the economic interests of its partners and rivals, and in the 1950s, it opened the way for export-oriented growth for its leading competitors. Moving forward, the US ruled by hegemony instead of dominance. Along with the European and Japanese turn to exports, the US turned to foreign direct investment, scouring the world for cheap factories to combine with advanced technology. This two-pronged settlement — export-oriented growth for the US's partners and rivals, foreign direct investment for the US — made for rapid growth, but it also sowed the seeds of the long downturn: the same trends that allowed for rapid economic growth also undermined that growth. The problems in the economy, in the first instance, arise from globalization — export-oriented growth and foreign direct investment that becomes the fundamental feature of the postwar liberal order in the 1950s as a means of supporting continued growth.

Though Brenner identifies contradictions inherent in the postwar order as early as the 1950s, it is not until the 1970s when these contradictions become acute. While, for David Harvey, the 1970s represents a turn to neoliberalism, for Brenner, this is

not so much a shift as it is a fundamental reemphasis on globalization as the defining feature of the American political economy. And yet, for Brenner, 1973 inaugurates a distinct period. It marks the moment when the contradictions of globalization — contradictions that had thus far remained latent — rise to the surface and become manifest. Following the 1973 oil shock and the collapse of Bretton Woods, the 1973 recession marked *the* decisive moment when an already faltering economy lurched into full-scale restructuring. Rather than a retreat from globalization, this marks a full embrace of globalization; while the Great Depression of the 1930s brought capitalism's tendencies toward globalization to an abrupt halt, the 1970s accelerated those tendencies. By turning to the 1970s to understand the origins of the present, Brenner's account of the long downturn represents a way of understanding immiseration and exploitation through the increasing intensification of global production.

Insofar as Brenner makes an epochal claim about the 1970s, we might situate the long downturn within the great globalization debates of the 1990s. For all its multiple meanings, globalization — a geographical term, denoting a process of spatial change over time, the process of becoming world-wide — turned on a common referent: the rising volume of transnational flows and relations in the contemporary international system. To be sure, even at the time, scholars argued globalization was not a new phenomenon, pointing to longer histories of global connection from the empires and conquests of the ancient world to the travel and trade of medieval and early modern times. Only beginning with European colonial expansion in the sixteenth century did global contacts involve Western European and North American dominance. Yet globalization has come most prevalently to refer to a specific set of transformations that occurred late in the twentieth century following World War II. Describing economic, social, and political interdependence across cultures, societies, nations, and regions in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century, globalization claimed these interdependencies were precipitated by an unprecedented expansion of capitalism on the world scale.²⁰ Like arguments that sought to claim globalization as a periodizing concept, for Brenner the intensification of networks of production and exchange produced an epochal transformation. In this way, too, we might see how the long downturn as an analytic is tethered to its particular historical moment.

While the idea of “globalization” no longer captures the spirit of the age, the long downturn has outlasted the “age of globalization.” To be sure, much of what once went under the name of globalization today travels under the history of neoliberalism; David Harvey, another theorist with ties to nineties-era globalization, has since turned his focus to the history and critique of neoliberalism. Brenner's account, too, has largely been understood as an account of neoliberalism. And yet, it was globalization, not neoliberalism, that was *the* keyword of the nineties. Insofar as Brenner seeks to understand exploitation and immiseration by recourse not only to the economic crisis of 1973 but to the global networks of production and exchange that entrenched themselves in its wake and intensified with the passage of

NAFTA, we might more clearly position Brenner within the discourses of nineties-era globalization. By more closely examining the uses and abuses of globalization, we can both see its limitations and begin to account for some of the exhaustion of political energy associated with the term.

Idioms for a Critique of Everything Existing

In addition to seeing Brenner's text as part of a broader shift in both academic scholarship and popular journalism that sought to make sense of the US's economic ties to the rest of the world, we can see Brenner's analysis of the long downturn as part of a broader shift in Marxist theory. In this sense, it is helpful to consider the publication of "Uneven Development and the Long Downturn" within the history of the *New Left Review*. Brenner's book-length essay appeared during Robin Blackburn's long tenure as official editor-in-chief, when Perry Anderson stepped away from the magazine (only to return in 2000 for three more years). Beginning when Anderson and Blackburn took over the journal in 1962, the *Review* dedicated itself to producing an account of English history that placed the emphasis on the transformative function of culture rather than economics or politics. Largely coterminous with the project of the New Left, the *Review* put aside praxis to supply what they saw as a missing of theory of revolution. They looked abroad to do so, making the writing of Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, as well as more recent writings by Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse and French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, available to English readers.²¹

If the New Left as an intellectual project can at least be partially demarcated by Anderson and Blackburn's reign from 1962 to 2000, Brenner's long essay appears toward its very end. Whereas in the sixties, the revival of Marxism brought with it a focus on its cultural aspects — and a particular emphasis on ideology critique — the culmination of the New Left project under Anderson and Blackburn coincides with the return to the economic aspects of Marxism. This shift was, in part, the product of real historical crises in both politics and economics. In naming those crises, and in developing a historical and theoretical account of protracted economic crisis, Brenner's model of the long downturn provided a heuristic for economic rather than cultural critiques of capitalism amidst a broader transition in critiques on the left, and the idioms in which those critiques were staged. At the same time, in situating Brenner within a broader set of commentators, we can see how this shift from culture to economy coincides with the widespread attempt to grapple with transformations in the global division of labor and the development of competitive networks of production, as they were felt in the US.

As a generalizing concept of social relations, globalization offered a way of theorizing the social whole at a moment when many were turning away from theories of totality. In the break between postcolonialism and Marxism signaled by Aijaz Ahmad's response to Fredric Jameson in "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the

‘National Allegory’” (1987), globalization, especially as it was articulated by Appadurai, offered an alternative vocabulary for thinking about the relationship between the Global North and Global South. Against claims that the extension of American capital led to Americanization — or commodification — Appadurai named disjuncture and difference as the defining features of the global economy. Significantly, Appadurai’s globalization theory was an effort to wrest culture from economy. Even as Appadurai’s theory of globalization was decidedly cultural, his definition of globalization became part of the rush to “see it whole” that named and theorized connections between the Global North and Global South as the organizing principles of totality.

In the wake of political and historical defeats that all but vanquished real opportunities for solidarity, globalization offered an opportunity to newly politicize the international division of labor. Particularly as globalization brought renewed attention to the world economy of physical goods, the commodity became an object of critique in a way that departed significantly from the anti-consumerist critiques of the sixties. Whereas earlier critiques of the commodity emphasized cultural degradation wrought by runaway consumption, those under globalization emphasized the entire web of social relations brought together by the commodity form. In particular, globalization drew a direct connection between consumption in the Global North and labor exploitation in the Global South. Anti-sweatshop activists brought significant attention to “labor warehouses” in special economic zones, patronized by brands like Kathie Lee Gifford’s clothing line. In 1996, the year that Gap was attacked for its labor practices in El Salvador, *Life* magazine published a photo essay of a Pakistani boy stitching Nike soccer balls for six cents an hour. In 1999, ABC’s *20/20* aired footage of young women locked inside sweatshops sewing clothes for Gap, Tommy Hilfiger, and Ralph Lauren. Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*, closely associated with the 1999 Seattle anti-globalization protests, exemplified this new investigative interest in the unbranded origins of brand name goods.

It was not new for consumer goods to be produced under oppressive conditions — Nike had been producing sneakers in Asian sweatshops since at least the early seventies and many companies had been exploiting cheap overseas labor for much longer. And yet, in the wake of Fukuyama’s fantasy that the “end of history” meant the spread of US-style capitalism, critiques of consumption stood in for critiques of capitalism. TVs and VCRs didn’t just make the world boring; they made it more unequal. Especially as the anti-globalization movement coincided with anti-sweatshop campaigns, critiques from the left focused on the exploitation required by current levels of consumption, on the sweatshop labor behind Wal-Mart’s low prices. To be sure, such critiques have their limits, particularly as they come to emphasize individual choice over collective politics. Nevertheless, in naming and politicizing the links between production and consumption — between Global North and Global South — leftist critiques of capitalist globalization sought to articulate the relationship between capitalism and imperialism.

Much of this theorization turned on the cultural rather than economic dimensions of empire — particularly as emblemized by the blockbuster publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), which, as scholars from Timothy Brennan to Walter Benn Michaels have made clear, celebrated the intrinsic and somehow spontaneous power of the dispossessed to, above all, resist, at the precise moment in which the infrastructure of US neocolonialism only proliferated the terms under which repression might occur. And yet, for how blind *Empire* was to actually existing, and enduring, imperialism, even Hardt and Negri's "multitude" — like Zygmunt Bauman's "wasted lives," and, a decade later, Michael Denning's "wageless life" — reoriented leftist critiques of capitalism around surplus populations, around those forcibly expelled from the industrial paradigm of the wage. If Hardt and Negri's theorization of surplus populations was stubbornly — and myopically — cultural, we might find in their vision of the multitude as the subject of history an important precedent to contemporary theorizations of the structural necessity of the wretched of the earth to the accumulation of capital.

By turning to global supply chains — to the networks of production and exchange that bring populations together and tear them apart — as the basis for an understanding of exploitation and immiseration, nineties-era theorizations of globalization on the left put extraction, expropriation, and dispossession at the center of our analyses of global capital. The significance of this should not be overlooked. In a present increasingly defined by debt and dispossession, by informal and precarious labor, any understanding of global capitalism needs to account for how the traditional terms of economic exploitation have expanded beyond — even as they continue to rely upon — industrial wage labor, how capital accumulation systematically depends not only on economic exploitation, as it has been traditionally understood through the wage relation, but through a whole range of interrelated forms of oppression and exploitation. If the seventies have broadly been understood as a decade in which an organized left was alternately dismantled by the state or tore itself asunder, we might see in leftist theorizations of globalization an attempt to reckon with and redefine the very terms around which the left might be organized. The anti-globalization movement's attention to the global supply chains undergirding US patterns of consumption, especially as fueled by neocolonial processes of extraction, signaled such an attempt. Foregrounding the systems of commodity consumption and circulation that connect the US to global frontiers of resource extraction, the anti-globalization movement sought to understand how the lexicon of the economic — how its vocabulary and its cast of characters — might take shape beyond the factory floor.

Notes

1. For anti-globalization as a new social movement, see Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *5 Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond* (New York: Verso, 2000); Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004); and Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage, 1999).
2. See in particular, Judith Stein, *The Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2012); and Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). While for Jefferson Cowie the seventies mark the tragic fall of the working class, undone by internal conflict, for Judith Stein it is the moment when the US “traded factories for finance.” For some, as Daniel Sargent, it marks the moment in which the US ceded control of managing the world economy — not to another nation-state, but to integrating markets. For others, such as Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, the 1970s mark the moment when the US, in collaboration with less powerful nation-states, orchestrated market expansion, turning markets themselves into an export.
3. Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 1.
4. Malcolm Waters, *Globalization*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 2.
5. For more on the keywords that grew out of globalization in relation to Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* specifically, see Hadji Bakara, “On the Unfinished Business of Theory from the South: Arjun Appadurai’s Globalization Theory” in “1990 at 30,” ed. J. Daniel Elam and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, cluster, *Post45: Contemporaries*. <https://post45.org/2020/05/on-the-unfinished-business-of-theory-from-the-south-arjun-appadurais-globalization-theory/>
6. For more on the keywords that grew out of globalization in relation to Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* specifically, see Hadji Bakara, “On the Unfinished Business of Theory from the South: Arjun Appadurai’s Globalization Theory” in “1990 at 30,” ed. J. Daniel Elam and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, cluster, *Post45: Contemporaries*. <https://post45.org/2020/05/on-the-unfinished-business-of-theory-from-the-south-arjun-appadurais-globalization-theory/>
7. Roland Robertson, “Interview: Roland Robertson,” *Globalizations* 11.4 (2014) 447.
8. Paul James and Manfred B. Steger, “A Genealogy of ‘Globalization’: The Career of a Concept,” *Globalizations* 11.4 (2014) 430.
9. See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (Verso, 2006).
10. For Klein, anti-globalization marked a distinct break with the campus politics—the culture wars—of the first half of the nineties, though, St. Clair, and others have challenged this account. For Denning, the Battle of Seattle marks a break from the politics of 1968.
11. Denning, 11.
12. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3-18.
13. “Themes,” *New Left Review* 229 (1998) i.
14. “Themes,” ii.

15. Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (New York: Verso, 2006) xxiii.
16. "Themes," *i*.
17. See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1994).
18. "Themes," *v*.
19. "Themes," *vi*.
20. See Lisa Lowe, "Globalization," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2020) 126-129.
21. See Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect? A History of the New Left Review* (UK: Merlin Press, 2006).

With the Future Behind Us: The Historical Novel at the End of Development

Benjamin Crais

Because the historical novel reflects and portrays the development of historical reality the measure for its content and form is to be found in this reality itself.

– György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*

These two crumbling columns — history and modernity — are, in the end, part of a single pillar: *das kapital*.

– Marcello Tari, *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution*

We are the world's dark past, we are giving shape to the present.

– Carla Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel"¹

Published in the wake of the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the emergence of a new cycle of struggles, Rachel Kushner's historical novel of the 1970s concludes with three moments of temporal suspension. A post-minimalist artist traverses New York City during its 1977 blackout; in this "night of suspended time,"² she encounters proletarians smashing store windows and taking whatever they desire. The heir to an Italian industrial empire has boarded a plane to return home to fulfill his filial role, but the blackout prevents his takeoff: "The airport had lost power. They would wait until it came back on" (374). The artist stands at the foot of the French Alps, waiting for a member of the Red Brigades to appear; the novel's final pages are a meditation on waiting, a wait that does not resolve in the militant's appearance. Suspension, dead time, waiting — each of these moments resonates with a common description of our contemporary experience of temporality, one that speaks of a crisis of futurity and a "perpetual" or elongated present.³ Read allegorically, they signify the end of a long epoch of capitalist development: a surplus population

in the streets of a deindustrialized city, industrial capital unable to move, the disappearance of the Leninist militant.

In this article, I read *The Flamethrowers* as a historical novel of deindustrialization, taking this relationship of form and history as its constitutive problem. Predominantly set in two of the defining locations of the world economic crisis of the 1970s, Kushner's novel has often been read as a historical novel about the emergence of neoliberalism.⁴ Its main narrator is Reno, a fledgling post-minimalist artist who travels to New York in the wake of its fiscal crisis (and several years after "the factories were closing" and "the worker was leaving the city") (195) and immerses herself in the art scene burgeoning in its abandoned warehouses and factories. There she falls in love with "Sandro Valera, of Valera and Moto Valera motorcycles" (23) — the heir to one of the major industrial firms at the heart of Italy's postwar miracle and a minimalist artist older and more established than herself. Throughout the New York chapters the crisis of the Italian economy hums in the background — "Italy applying for an IMF loan. Inflation, unemployment. Valera getting hit especially hard by the oil crisis. Suffering work stoppages. Sabotage. Wildcat strikes" (109) — before coming to the fore when Reno travels to the country with Sandro.⁵ There, she discovers his infidelity at one of his family's factories and flees only to be swept up in the revolutionary Movement of 1977 (ultimately inadvertently aiding the Red Brigades' assassination of Sandro's brother, the head of Moto Valera).

Existing scholarship on the novel has thoroughly analyzed how *The Flamethrowers* cognitively maps the political-economic restructuring of the 1970s.⁶ Yet if the genre of the historical novel has often been evoked, the historicity of this form is less often dwelled upon.⁷ In a commentary on György Lukács's study of the historical novel, Jameson writes that Lukács's account of the genre was animated by an "attention to the ways in which the content of a given historical moment enables or limits its representational form, or better still, its narrative possibilities."⁸ For Lukács, the historical novel emerged as a narrative form out of the transition to modernity, premised on a new conception of history as "the bearer and realizer of human progress."⁹ Underwriting this conception of history was the rise of the bourgeoisie and the experience of capitalist modernization which broke from the stasis of the feudal economy.¹⁰ Indeed, *The Flamethrowers* directly evokes this historical passage in what Kushner refers to as the novel's "spine": a loose *Bildungsroman* of Sandro's father, the industrial magnate T.P. Valera, that traces his life from his childhood in nineteenth-century Alexandria to his establishment of the industrial empire that powers Italy's postwar economic miracle.¹¹ Set at the opposite end of this arc of accumulation, the bulk of *The Flamethrowers* concerns a markedly different transition: the onset of protracted economic stagnation and the passage to postmodernity (in which "modernity, in the sense of modernization and progress, or *telos*" is "definitively over").¹²

Revisiting this “pivotal decade,” *The Flamethrowers* is a potent example of what Sean O’Brien identifies as a renewed sense of historicity in the capitalist core since the 2008 financial crisis, one which looks to “trace the emergence of the historical present and its various impasses.”¹³ Yet, this content poses definitive narratological problems for the genre. What Jameson identifies as the “waning” of historicity in the postmodern denotes not simply presentism, but rather a fundamental transformation of time: “a volatilization of temporality, a dissolution of past and present alike, a kind of contemporary imprisonment in the present.”¹⁴ As he notes with regard to the popularity of the genre today, the contemporary historical novel might be considered a symptom rather than a solution to our waning of historicity, “doomed to make arbitrary selections from the past” and offering “at best a host of names and an endless warehouse of images” rather than an authentic narration of the historical process. At the end of development what kind of history can be made to appear?¹⁵

In what follows, I argue that *The Flamethrowers* dialectically fulfills the project of the historical novel insofar as it registers the historical forces that “have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it” as stressing the genre’s formal system.¹⁶ It does so by identifying a developmental historical temporality with the expansion of industrial capital, situating the waning of historicity within the trajectory of capitalist development whereby industrial expansion engenders its opposite in deindustrialization.¹⁷ Ultimately, I find the novel’s value to reside less in its mapping or critique of the political-economic transformations of the 1970s than in how it stages the crisis of an inherited transitional imaginary and revolutionary horizon.

Existing commentaries on Kushner’s novel have curiously tended to render the insurrections at the novel’s climax — an adaptation of Nanni Balestrini’s 1980 poem *Blackout* that proleptically conjoins the Movement of 1977 with the New York blackout of the same year (experienced by Reno upon her return to the US) — devoid of specific political or historical content beyond a nebulous resistance to capital. However, the novel portrays a very specific moment in Italy’s revolutionary 1970s, one that Balestrini and Primo Moroni describe as the “crisis of the concept of development.”¹⁸ The critique of capitalist development was a defining feature of the entire revolutionary cycle which broke from the Italian Communist Party’s faith in the development of the productive forces. “One could say,” commented the operaist Raniero Panzieri in an editorial meeting of *Quaderni Rossi*, “that the two terms capitalism and development are the same thing,” and indeed I argue that Kushner founds her reinterpretation of the historical novel on this same insight.¹⁹ Yet Balestrini and Moroni refer specifically to a late moment in this sequence: the displacement of the hegemonic figure of the male industrial worker and the factory as the locus of class struggle, occurring in the context of the disaggregation of the factory system, the rising weight of the service sector, and an increase in unemployed and precarious proletarians.²⁰

Commenting on the “strategic value of generic concepts” for Marxist literary criticism, Jameson proposes that such concepts allow “the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life.”²¹ As theorized by Jameson and Lukács, the historical novel does not simply denote the narrative representation of historical events, but is rather premised on a set of essentially modern categories which mediate aesthetic and social form (namely, a concept of historical development and the political representation of the masses). It is these very categories that the Movement of 1977 — and the epochal break of the 1970s more broadly — put into crisis. In *The Historical Novel* and elsewhere, Lukács conceives of the transition to socialism through an analogy with the bourgeois revolution: developing its early progressivist philosophy of history, the workers’ movement “[extends] the last great phase of bourgeois ideology by means of criticism and struggle and by overcoming its limitations.”²² As Endnotes writes, Lukács and other theorists of the workers’ movement “all took heart from the idea that their revolution inherited the baton from a previous one, the so-called ‘bourgeois revolution,’ which they saw as the inevitable result of the development of the forces of production and the rising power of the bourgeoisie.”²³ At the moment in which Kushner’s novel is set, the bourgeoisie are extinguished “as a class possessed of self-consciousness and morale,” yet the industrial proletariat can no longer appear as the representative of a dawning socialism.²⁴ If the proletarian revolution can no longer be identified with the tendencies of capitalist development or the transitional imaginary inherited from the bourgeois epoch, what form can it take? Setting the end of development against the form of the historical novel, *The Flamethrowers* makes this question appear at its limits.

The Crisis of Development

In the opening pages of the novel Reno has two visions of humans dwarfed by immense machinery. Thinking of her boyfriend Sandro Valera, she recalls his favorite scene in Jacques Demy’s *Model Shop* (1969): a boy and a girl in a bungalow “overshadowed by industry.” Falling asleep, she then dreams of a “gigantic machine, an airplane so large it filled the sky with metal and the raking sound of slowing engines,” slowly decelerating without being able to land (16-17). In discussions of *The Flamethrowers* as a historical novel, critics and scholars have predominantly framed the historical transition it narrates in terms of the rise of neoliberalism: the shift from factories to finance, the emergence of a “post-Fordist” subject, and the recomposition of the US-led global order.²⁵ To adequately understand the relationship between form and historical content in *The Flamethrowers*, I contend that we must place a different (if not unrelated) aspect of this epochal transition at its center: the development of a high technical and organic composition of capital which in the 1970s engendered a structural crisis of accumulation and the ongoing displacement of labor from the sphere of industrial production. It is the transformation of historical time effected by this rising ratio of

constant to variable capital — the slowing of engines dreamed by Reno — that stands at the heart of *The Flamethrowers's* formal system as a historical novel.

The novel articulates the waning of a developmental historical temporality as the growing disproportion between two spheres, one corresponding to industrial capital and the other to those excluded from it. The novel primarily (though not exclusively) articulates the distinction between spheres through the gender distinction.²⁶ Upon arriving in a deindustrialized New York, Reno finds work at a film processing lab. It is a typical service job — “helping customers, answering the phone, restocking” (85) — with one notable exception: Reno also serves as a “China Girl,” a woman whose image briefly appears on film leader as a reference point for lab technicians (but is unseen by the audience). Musing on this role, her boss Marvin asks a rhetorical question: “The girl cut into the leader, wouldn’t you say she’s as much a part of the film as its narrative?” (92). Underpinning yet obscured by the narrative, the strobing image of the China Girl presents a series of serialized presents: “Me then gone, me then gone” (86). This figure’s two sides evoke a set of conceptual oppositions through which our “waning of historicity” tends to be theorized: time and space, temporal development and a perpetual present. Yet the figure suggests not (only) a logic of succession—i.e. from the “temporal dominant” of modernity to the “spatial dominant” of postmodernity—but their interconnection as gendered spheres of a single structure. As Mathias Nilges argues, the novel undercuts any straightforward narrative of the rise and fall of a “linear conception of temporality and futurity” by demonstrating that this conception was “from its beginnings...connected to the temporal exclusion of women.”²⁷ Yet this claim must be more firmly grounded in the novel’s figuration of political economy. For what this masculinized experience of development denotes in the novel is nothing other than the dynamic of industrial capital.

The figure of the China Girl presents a gendered hidden abode underpinning and obscured by the more conspicuous narrative.²⁸ Appearing intermittently between the 1970s chapters of the novel, the “spine” narrative of T.P. Valera articulates the development of its male protagonist as predicated on the utilization and delimitation of a minor, feminized character. In these chapters, Kushner invokes two narrative forms that emerge from and narratively represent the passage to capitalist modernity: the *Bildungsroman* and the historical novel.²⁹ As an adolescent in late nineteenth-century Egypt, the young Valera reads Flaubert and dreams of “his own sentimental education” as an “endless succession of breasts and velvety cunts” (33). Modeled on the *Bildungsroman*—in which, Bakhtin writes, “man’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence”—the novel’s narration of Valera’s individual development is premised on an experience of historical development mediated in turn by typified, objectified images of women.³⁰

The narrative form of the *Bildungsroman* has been theorized as negotiating the contradictions of an emerging world in which the “new and destabilizing forces of capitalism impose a hitherto unknown *mobility*” and orientation towards the future.³¹

In the “spine,” these temporal and spatial coordinates of the modern are condensed through the figure of the motorcycle, the eventual product of Valera’s factories. Jameson has argued that the modern experience of historical time was predicated on the “mixed, uneven nature” of modernity “in which the old coexisted with what was then coming into being” and it is this sense of spatial unevenness — temporalized as the opposition old/new — that inspires Valera’s fascination.³² Appearing as a metonym for industrial production (“a motor like an industrial machine,” a wheel “like a factory flywheel”) (35-36), the “frisson” between the “gleaming motor parts” and “cracked limestone wall” (39) in Egypt delights Valera. Over the course of the “spine,” the motorcycle serves as the medium of his development as he learns to ride it and befriends a group of machine-worshipping, motorcycle-riding futurists, all of whom share his masculinized, developmental experience of time: “smashing and crushing every outmoded and traditional idea...every past thing...the only thing worth loving was what was to come” (74).

This experience of development is also constitutively gendered. For Alex Woloch, the “free, full development of the central protagonist [of the *Bildungsroman*] is contingent on the utilization, and delimitation, of minor characters,” and it is the typified image of a woman that supports Valera’s *Bildung*.³³ The novel’s central symbol for the dynamism of modernity is first encountered as the possession of his childhood crush, Marie.³⁴ The erotic image of Marie “getting on strange cycles and spreading her legs” (38) inspires Valera’s initial fascination with motorcycles and recurs as a reference point to measure his development. Resonant with Marvin’s description of the China Girl as a conversion of the specific to the generic “woman,” Valera reflects that he has reduced his crush to a “vivid image” (75). Envisioning her as confined to reproductive labor (“squeezing out children”) and thus, like all women, “trapped in time,” he defines his form of temporality by contrast: “I am changed for the better” (79).³⁵

A loose analogue for FIAT founder Gianni Agnelli, Valera stands as *The Flamethrowers*’ primary representative of what Lukács analyzes as an integral element of the historical novel: the world-historical individual, the characterological representative of historical progress. Quoting Hegel, Lukács writes that the world-historical individual embodies the historical movement by which the “new opposes itself hostilely to the old, and the change ‘goes hand in hand with a depreciation, demolition and destruction of the preceding mode of reality.’”³⁶ The propulsive, masculinized time of Valera and his futurist gang is predicated on this sense of historical progress, of the supersession of the old and passage into the new. “To progress,” a futurist exclaims, “which is always right!” (77). However, while the futurists only *experience* modernity’s temporal dynamism through the medium of the motorcycle, Valera *produces* it. “Time,” Valera reflects, “had worn a mask,” and he and the futurists would tear it off to know it as “cataclysmic change” (128) — a knowledge that leads him to the factory.

An embodiment of industrial capital and world-historical figure — who must, as Lukács writes, grant “consciousness and clear direction” to the movement of historical progress — Valera becomes the conscious bearer of historical development by becoming an industrial capitalist.³⁷ While the futurists can only conceive of their experience abstractly, writing poems about speed and metal and throwing themselves into the inferno of modern warfare, Valera—the “only one with the training to conceptualize speed” and “interested in *generating* actual speed” (78-79) — plans to open Moto Valera, beginning the industrial empire that powers Italy’s postwar economic miracle.³⁸ Elliptically narrating the transition from an early situation of “incomplete” modernization to a world of integrated industrial production and consumption—“the postwar miracle, everyone in his own little auto, put-putting around, well enough paid from their jobs at Valera to buy a Valera, and tires for it, and gas” (266) — the “spine” identifies its developmental form with the expansion of value *qua* industrial capital. It grounds this identification on the basis of the temporal logic embodied by the ratcheting speed of the motorcycle, allegorically rendering capital’s compulsion to raise productivity through mechanization.³⁹

If the novel moves back and forth in time — principally, between the “spine” and the 1970s chapters — it also invites us to read this movement as a lateral one between either side of the China Girl figure. For many critics, one of the most striking features of *The Flamethrowers* is the apparent passivity and weak protagonicity of its primary narrator. Like her flickering appearance at the head of the film leader, Reno is consistently located in a subordinated, feminized position — one defined by a non-developmental form of time. Unlike her boyfriend Sandro Valera (or his father), for whom “the future..was a place, and one that he was capable of guiding himself to” (125), Reno “expect[s] change to come from outside” (88) and is frequently rendered as a support for the development of others (especially Sandro, introduced as “[holding] all the power” in the relationship) (5). While some critics have read Reno’s passivity as a kind of “narrative technology” that enables the novel’s cognitive mapping of the political-economic landscape of the 1970s, others have argued that her passivity grounds an overarching critique of the “illusion of direct, unmediated experience.”⁴⁰ Departing from these readings, I want to propose that the novel invites us to read Reno’s weak protagonicity vis-à-vis the historical dynamic of industrial capital.

Marvin’s question to Reno, posed as a non-sequitur in the conversation in which she learns of Sandro’s romantic interest — “wouldn’t you say she’s as much a part of the film as its narrative?” — invites a reading of the China Girl figure in terms of a major theoretical and practical intervention of 1970s Italian feminism: the reorientation of attention and struggle from the factory (and figure of the male industrial worker) to the domestic sphere and the unwaged activity of the housewife.⁴¹ When a housewife appears in the novel, it is to figure a particular relationship to time — appearing, appropriately enough, on the cover of *Time* magazine. “The job of the housewife is a little vague,” muses Reno, “and it’s easy to just not cross anything off the long list of

semi-urgent chores. The woman senses that time is more purely hers if she squanders it and keeps it empty, holds it, feels it pass by” (150). If commodity production is governed by the direct temporal compulsion of value — i.e. to continually raise the productivity of labor through mechanization — this feminized sphere is only indirectly mediated by value, characterized instead by a serialized or durational logic of time expenditure.⁴² Reno, of course, is not a housewife, and neither are any of the novel’s other characters. Yet it is this non-directional form of time differentiated from the temporal dynamic of industrial capital that the novel narrates as coming to the fore in the context of deindustrialization.

When the novel first introduces Reno, she is astride a ’77 Valera motorcycle and travelling to the Nevada salt flats where she intends to use the motorcycle to enact an artwork: racing across the desert and then photographing the traces left in the sand (what she, describing an inspiration for the piece, calls “drawing in time”) (9). Hearing Sandro describe another woman’s art performance — walking in a straight line for a mile into the Mojave Desert and marking it with chalk — as “submitting passively to the time it took,” Reno adopts this idea of registering the “*time it took*” for her performance-cum-photography project — a relationship to time that Sandro characterizes as feminine (and which the novel juxtaposes to Valera’s nineteenth-century experience of the motorcycle in the subsequent chapter). Speeding across the desert at 125 miles per hour, Reno comes to a heightened awareness of time — one less like Valera’s experience of convulsive change and more resembling her strobing appearance as a China Girl: “I felt alert to every granule of time. Each granule was time, the single pertinent image, the other moment-images, before and after, lost, unconsidered” (29). Time congeals into a series of images, each producing, as Jameson writes of the spatialized time of the postmodern, “no future out of itself, only another and a different present.”⁴³ As she remarks at the climax of the race, moments before wiping out on the sands, “I was in an acute case of the present tense” (30).⁴⁴ A spatialized experience of time and speed, registered as movement across a flat plane, the novel’s first representation of post-minimalist art figures time as sheer presence — in the sand, as images — stripped of qualities of change or development. At the height of her race, Reno recalls Sandro telling her that a “young woman is a conduit” — she does not need to use time, but merely pass through it (30).

As many readers have noted, the novel invites an allegorical reading of post-minimalist art such as Reno’s in terms of the expansion of service work. As Nadja Millner-Larsen writes, Kushner’s novel concerns the rise of a new kind of art that “mirrors the rise of another kind of work, that central to the growing service economy, in which the performance of immaterial labor has overtaken the manufacturing of material goods.”⁴⁵ Those seeking to theorize service work have often turned to performance as a metaphor through which to apprehend a production process in which “the product is not separable from the act of producing” and it is this aspect of post-minimalism that Kushner stresses in her depiction of the New York art world, most

directly in an account of a conceptual art piece in which a woman “performs” as a waitress: applying for and performing the job for over a year under an assumed name.⁴⁶

However, the figuration of time in the novel’s depiction of post-minimalism has been less remarked upon. In his account of the waning of historicity, Jameson writes that the “postmodern ‘perpetual present’ [could be characterized] as a ‘reduction to the body’ inasmuch as the body is all that remains in any tendential reduction of experience to the present.”⁴⁷ If such a non-developmental form of time is merely attributed to a minor character and denigrated by T.P. Valera in the “spine,” it takes on a new weight in the 1970s chapters. Throughout, post-minimalism is associated with a serial, non-narrative form of time registered in the span of a performance or the singularity of an event and unbound from any developmental schema. For instance, one artist’s performance involves punching “a time clock on the hour every hour twenty-four hours a day for a year” (199), and Reno’s first encounter with the city’s galleries brings her before a “a ten-minute-long film of a clock as it moved from ten o’clock to ten minutes after ten” (47). It is most prominent in the weak protagonicity of Reno. Drawing on Woloch’s work on minor characters, Jasper Bernes and Nancy Armstrong have each argued that the conditions of post-industrial labor are not amenable to the novelistic development of character (as emblemized by the *Bildungsroman*).⁴⁸ “In a post-industrial world,” Bernes writes, “[classical protagonicity] no longer exists. We have, instead, majorly minor characters” — characters such as Reno.⁴⁹ Unlike both T.P. Valera and Sandro, Reno, as Sasha Frere-Jones observes, moves through the novel “like a passive observer, or like a camera.”⁵⁰ Sometimes the narrative is directly mediated by Reno’s use of a camera in such a way that evokes Lukács’s argument regarding the “contemporizing” and imagistic qualities of description.⁵¹ In a key passage in which she equates her weak protagonicity with the role of a service worker, Reno films limousine chauffeurs across the street waiting by their cars. As her “camera [grazes] their faces,” Reno reflects that she “expect[s] change to come from outside” (88) — an outside predominantly represented by Sandro, one of the few minimalist artists in the novel and whose work signifies factory production.

Commenting upon the career of Stanley Castle, the only minimalist in the novel besides himself, Sandro observes that the rising technical composition of his artistic process has rendered him superfluous: Stanley’s “algorithm,” Sandro comments, has subtracted him “from the production of his own art” in a manner analogous to “the way in which the postindustrial age was now robbing the worker of his place” (159). This displacement — what I’ve described as a growing disproportion between two spheres — is the very narrative structure of *The Flamethrowers*.⁵² As a *Künstlerroman* (loosely tracing the rise of post-minimalism), a love story culminating in separation, and a historical novel, *The Flamethrowers* narrates the weakening of the developmental temporality of the Valera men and the coming to the fore of those in the position of the China Girl. If the “spine” associates a directional historical temporality with industrialization, the reduction to the present/the body is identified

with its remainder — a non-absorption that comes to predominate in the context of economic stagnation and deindustrialization. In this sense, the novel's structure could be understood as a narrativization of William Baumol's theory of economic stagnation.⁵³ For Baumol, advanced economies stagnate because the very dynamism of the technologically "progressive" sector of the economy — i.e. its ability to raise labor productivity through mechanization — also causes it to shed labor, creating a massive shift of employment to a stagnant sector and, asymptotically, a stationary economy. In this account, the "service sector" denotes a remainder: those activities resistant to industrialization which, in the context of deindustrialization, absorbed a sizeable proportion of the surplus population produced by slowing growth — a process that has also been theorized as the "feminization of labor" insofar as it has involved both the entry of large quantities of women into the workforce and capital's mobilization of competencies traditionally unwaged and gendered as female.⁵⁴

If in her introductory chapter Reno dreams of the slowing engines of an airplane, by the novel's end they have stilled. Its final chapters represent the New York blackout of 1977 twice, once from each side of the now-separated Reno/Sandro couple — that is, from each side of the China Girl figure. The last chapter to feature Sandro finds him waiting at the TWA airport terminal to return home to Italy to fulfill his filial role after the death of his brother, the head of Moto Valera. Once, the futurists had dreamed of a "future in which the city would be built to the size and scale of machines and not men" (78). By the 1970s, this dream has been realized; the terminal makes Sandro think of man dwarfed by his creations, of infrastructures not built "to any human scale" born of "a proscriptive lie about progress and utopia" promoted by men like his father (366). Right before the moment of takeoff, just as the plane is ready to take Sandro forward to his future, the blackout begins — the novel leaves him on the stilled plane. Meanwhile, Reno rides her motorcycle through the stilled city in what she describes as a "night of suspended time" (353) and encounters a surplus proletariat in the streets, smashing store windows and looting goods.⁵⁵ She interprets their actions as declaring that "the system is in 'off' mode" — a deactivation that refers to the loss of power, but also what this vast, stalled infrastructure signifies: the end of industrial expansion. This final presentation of the China Girl figure — now brought up to date, with Sandro directly occupying the counterpoint to Reno instead of his father — articulates the crash of futurity as the very consequence of what the "spine" narrates: industrial capital's temporal dynamic and the rising organic composition of capital.

Decomposition and Revolution

Shortly before Reno leaves for Italy, Reno's boss Marvin makes a second oblique reference to a key text of Italian feminism. If his rhetorical question about the China Girl evokes Italian feminists' analysis of the hidden abode of reproduction, this second non-sequitur evokes Carla Lonzi's seminal essay "Let's Spit on Hegel." Referring to a subtitle error in a print of Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), Marvin comments that

“Hegel” came out wrong as “Helga.” Seemingly ignoring Reno’s comment that she’s leaving the country, he muses that the subtitles occasionally run onto the film leader, just “a few frames from the girl cut into the negative as a calibration tool. You, or some other, there with a bit of accidental subtitle. Helga” (208). A critique of patriarchy and Marxism, Lonzi’s essay presents women as the non-dialectical underside of the Hegelian dialectic: “confined to one particular stage” and thus excluded from traditional Marxism’s model of class struggle and historical development. Proposing the crisis of men’s “historical role as protagonists,” Lonzi concludes her essay with the declaration that women are the “Unexpected Subject,” the “world’s dark past... giving shape to the present.”⁵⁶

For Lukács, the Hegelian conception of history was deeply resonant with the classical historical novel’s narration of historical development as “a process full of contradictions, the driving force and material basis of which is the living contradiction between conflicting historical forces, the antagonisms of classes and nations.”⁵⁷ With Reno’s journey to Rome, such antagonism comes to the fore of the novel in its dual climax — the Movement of 1977 and the New York blackout of the same year. Yet if the classical historical novel narrates historical transition in terms of the rise and fall of contending classes, *The Flamethrowers* depicts less the emergence of a new class than class decomposition.⁵⁸ In the prior section, I argued that the novel articulates the restructuring of the 1970s in terms of the rising organic composition of capital, identifying the crisis of historicity with the generalization of a form of non-developmental time previously obscured or subordinated by the temporal dynamic of industrial capital. Now, turning to the insurrections at the conclusion of the novel, I argue that it represents this transition — deindustrialization — as the fraying of the very narrative schema of transition underpinning the classical historical novel.

“The historical novel as a genre,” Jameson writes, cannot exist without the appearance of collectivity “which marks the drama of the incorporation of individual characters into a greater totality, and can alone certify the presence of History as such.”⁵⁹ When the collectivity appears in *The Flamethrowers*, it is through the act of leaving the factory. In Italy at the invitation of the Valera company, Reno visits one of their plants with the aspiration of filming the factory grounds. Instead, she discovers Sandro’s infidelity. Fleeing the factory with Gianni, an employee of the Valera’s (and member of the Red Brigades), Reno travels to Rome where she encounters a revolutionary collectivity assembled in the city’s streets.⁶⁰ Separated from the artists’ parties of New York and the Valera family villa, Reno encounters this collectivity as “so many bodies massed together that they formed a vast shifting texture, a sea of heads filling the square” (274-275). With camera in hand, she is struck by the heterogeneity of the crowd, the masses are a “stream of faces, a pointillism of them. Face after face after face” (278).

What appears before Reno’s camera is the finale of Italy’s “creeping May.”⁶¹ In the years following World War II, Italy experienced its “economic miracle,” premised on

the rapid growth of large-scale industry (and identified, in Kushner's novel, with T.P. Valera). While the Italian Communist Party remained broadly committed to the development of the productive forces and ideology of progress, workers began to collectively resist the despotism of the factory in a series of wildcat strikes and factory actions. For the theorists of *operaismo*, this "mass worker" appeared as the primary subject of class struggle and vanguard fraction of the proletariat: situated at the heart of Italy's economic development (the large-scale factory), homogenized by the Fordist factory system, and militant, the mass worker appeared as "the primary force of change."⁶² This hegemony of the industrial worker would come into question over the course of the 1970s and, by 1977, was wholly untenable. In Nanni Balestrini's novel of Italy's "Hot Autumn" of 1969, a militant proclaims that a demonstration "has the job of explaining the struggle in the factory to the city."⁶³ By 1977, the struggle was in the streets — "To speak still in the old terms, after the experience of 1977," Antonio Negri wrote two years later, "is to be dead."⁶⁴ This shift in the locus of struggle was conditioned not only by the further politicization of other constituencies, but the restructuring of the Italian economy. Beginning in early 1970s, the workers' insurgency and the economic crisis of 1973 "set in motion various processes that reduced the role of industrial labor and commodity manufacturing" including automation, offshoring, the disaggregation of the large-scale factory, and the expansion of the service sector.⁶⁵ One of the major consequences of the restructuring was a growing mass of un- and underemployed proletarians, infamously theorized by Asor Rosa as Italy's "two societies": an organized industrial proletariat and a growing mass of the "marginalized and unemployed, whose behavior was symptomatic of the disintegration of the old order."⁶⁶ The Movement of '77, the final revolutionary phase of this sequence, symptomized and affirmed this disintegration, making a definitive break from the traditions of the Third International and a politics predicated on the affirmation of labor.

Standing amidst the demonstrators in the Piazza del Popolo, Reno toggles between two categories for the deindustrial collectivity surging around her. Noting that "*Popolo* means crowd or multitude," she raises an alternative: "*Popalaccio*: rabble or mob" (283). If the former evokes Hardt and Negri's term for a new, heterogeneous subject of post-Fordist production, the latter presents a different tense: not the emergence of a new class composition, but a decomposition into the rabble — a term referring to the disparate mass of the poor conceptually and historically prior to an industrial working class.⁶⁷ Just as it articulates the rise of the service sector in terms of industrialization's remainder, *The Flamethrowers* elects for this latter meaning in its rendering of collectivity.⁶⁸ What globally connects the masses as they appear in Italy and the New York blackout is a shared condition of superfluity — a passage from the factory to the streets. In Rome, Reno's attention is most drawn to young proletarians "dressed in the most ragged clothes imaginable," identified by a companion as living in "remote slums on the outskirts of Rome." "There's nothing to do out there," she

explains, “they’re young and it’s like they’re left for dead.” Observing these youths without a future, Reno links them to a specific tactic of class struggle, price-setting (“I thought of what Sandro had told me about people setting their own rent, their own bus fare”) (276) and later witnesses them expropriate goods through smashed store windows just as the surplus population of New York does during its “night of suspended time” (276).⁶⁹

Joshua Clover has theorized this tactic of price-setting as a form of “spatialized struggle” that comes to the fore in the context of economic stagnation and a rising surplus population: displaced from the factory — and its temporal logic of ratcheting productivity growth — proletarians in the age of deindustrialization struggle in the streets not in their capacity as workers, but as those united only by their dispossession. For Clover, it is the rising organic composition of capital that is the very “process of spatialization itself, and thus the transformation of temporal to spatial struggles” — what I have argued to be the very form of *The Flamethrowers*, brought to a crescendo in Reno’s departure from the factory and the suspended time of the blackout.⁷⁰ This transition from time to space, from development to its crisis, is both the narrative result of capital’s dynamic — the rising technical and organic composition of capital and the extrusion of proletarians (and capital) from manufacturing — and the collapse of the form of historical time produced by this dynamic and the progressivist vision of historical development it underpinned. Earlier, I discussed how T.P. Valera — as a “conscious [bearer] of historical progress” — identified a modern sense of historical development with the expansion of industrial capital.⁷¹ In the same passage in which he decides to open his factory, he contrasts his experience of development with that of other groups, derided as stagnant and unable to access his historical time. Besides women — “trapped in time” — he and the futurists contrast themselves to a second group: “Rome’s slum inhabitants,” “zombie lumpen who seemed...as if they were living in the Middle Ages” (77-79). At the end of the long arc of capitalist development the lumpen reappear at the forefront of class struggle, the “world’s dark past...giving shape to the present.”⁷²

In Lukács’s and Jameson’s accounts of the historical novel, the character of the “world-historical individual” is necessary for the incorporation of collective history into narrative. Never the protagonist of the historical novel, the world-historical individual emerges out of the mass experience of history to embody a “historical movement...[granting] consciousness and clear direction to a [progressive] movement already present in society,” which he concentrates in a “historical deed.”⁷³ This narrative function is inseparable from a question of representation. As Jameson writes, the role of the world-historical individual raises the question of “the representation of a collectivity by individual characters” — a question that is “fully as much a narratological problem as a political one.”⁷⁴ In Lukács’s account this representative function of the world-historical individual (as “embodiment” of a historical movement), is analogous to the party-form (“viewed socially, a *party*, a

representative of *one* of the many contending classes”) and a Leninist conception of leadership, one of the many points of resonance posed between the passage to modernity given form by the classical historical novel and his conception of the transition to communism.⁷⁵

The climax of *The Flamethrowers* stages the closure of this revolutionary orientation. For participants in '77, what was decisive about the movement was its rupture with this very form of representation. It was, Balestrini and Moroni write, “the historical moment in which the subjectivity of a new social composition definitively ruptured all the theories and praxes of the ‘party form.’”⁷⁶ As Sergio Bologna commented at the time, the heterogeneity of the movement inhibited the possibility of “a majoritarian social reference point for the class” and the “kind of relationship (as with the large-scale factory) of mass vanguards capable of pulling behind them the whole of the movement.”⁷⁷ Faced with the multiplicity of the crowd, Reno points to the emergence of this problem of composition: “How do we find each other? It repeated in my head as more and more people packed into the enormous square. The ‘we’ of it: people lost in the vast thickets of the world” (277).⁷⁸ Commentaries on *The Flamethrowers* that make Reno’s naivete central to their reading have stressed her incomprehension of the political events unfolding around her. For Tucker-Abramson, Reno’s use of photography and her attempt to “import her distinctly New York conceptual frameworks” to the Movement of '77 is exemplary of this ignorance.⁷⁹ Yet I want to propose that Reno nonetheless grasps something important by positing an identity between the differential composition of the amassed demonstrators and the post-minimalist art practices of New York. Among that “massive crowd of strangers, this stream of faces, a pointillism of them,” she thinks of an acquaintance’s fantasy of photographing every living person. Panning her own camera across the piazza, Reno reflects that “this would be a place to start” on that project (278). For Rosalind Krauss, what unified post-minimalism — a “post-Movement” art that did not “flow through a single channel for which a synthetic term...might be found” — was the logic of photograph, the indexical registration of singular presence (“[isolated] from within the succession of temporality”).⁸⁰ If Kushner’s account of the demonstration makes continual reference to Reno’s use of her camera (“I kept my camera going”), we should read this not as highlighting a political unseriousness, but an identity between this logic of the photograph and a deindustrial proletariat. Written in a clipped, serialized manner, Kushner’s account of the demonstration suggests a procession of photographs like the one embedded at the chapter’s beginning (or the strobing image of the China Girl) — a serial, spatialized mode of representation adequate to a decomposed proletariat united only by a common dispossession.

However, *The Flamethrowers* does evoke a possible candidate for the role of the world-historical individual: Gianni, the member of the Red Brigades who brings Reno to the demonstration and, in aiding the kidnapping and murder of Roberto Valera, is responsible for the novel’s climactic deed. If T.P. Valera fulfilled the role of the

Hegelian “world-historical individual” for the rising bourgeoisie, one might expect Gianni to do so for the proletariat, granting “consciousness and clear direction” to the historical transition rendered by the novel.⁸¹ Just as the world-historical individual is analogized by Lukács with the Leninist party, the Brigades positioned themselves within the tradition of the “historic parties of the Third International,” presenting the organization as a hegemonic pole for the broader revolutionary movement.⁸²

The last pages of *The Flamethrowers* describe Reno waiting for Gianni to appear. Having driven him to the Alps — which he plans to ski across to avoid arrest at the border — she stands on the other side to collect him.⁸³ As dusk settles and Gianni fails to appear against the white snow of the mountains, Reno meditates on the experience of waiting. “No longer pointing toward an anticipated future,” Theodore Martin writes, the wait might redirect “our attention to the complexity of a present in crisis.”⁸⁴ As the world-historical figure fails to arrive, Reno experiences the end of an expectation: “You can think and think of a question, the purpose of waiting, the question of whether there is any purpose, any *person* meant to appear, but if the person doesn’t come, there is no one and nothing to answer you.” Finally, one must “Leave, with no answer” (383). Having dissociated from the factory and party, the novel then ends.

In his account of the historical novel, Jameson raises an interesting question about the relationship between the genre and revolution. Noting an ambiguity in the latter term — “what we call revolution in the passage from the old order or feudalism to capitalism is not at all the same structurally or substantively” as other forms of seismic historical transition — he doubts “whether the historical novel — as a narrative form historically generated by the passage from the old order to a bourgeois society as well as the representation of that historical passage — can function as a useful generic category for novels which issue from and represent wholly different kinds of historical convulsion.”⁸⁵ Concerned with a different historical convulsion — the end of capitalist modernization — *The Flamethrowers* sets the form of the historical novel in tension with the epochal transition of the 1970s. In doing so, it fulfills the project of the historical novel — to grasp history as process, as the “concrete precondition of the present” — by rendering the historicity of that form. “In order to arrive at its own content,” Marx wrote, “the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.” In the destitution of the historical novel, the problem of revolution in our time appears at the genre’s limits.

Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1989) 333. Marcello Tarí, *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021) 27. Carla Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel" in *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, eds. Paola Bono & Sandra Kemp (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 59.
2. Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers* (New York: Scribner, 2013) 348. Hereafter cited in text.
3. To take a few examples: Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29.4 (2003): 695-718. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Shall We Continue to Write Histories of Literature?" *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 519-532. Jane Elliott, *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
4. See, for instance, Rachel Greenwald Smith, "The Contemporary Novel and Postdemocratic Form," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 51.2 (2018): 292-307 and Eli Jelly-Schapiro, "Literature, Theory, and the Temporalities of Neoliberalism," *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2019) 22-41.
5. In histories of neoliberalism, the response to New York's fiscal crisis (as it neared default on short-term debt) marks a pivotal moment in the neoliberal assault on entrenched Keynesian orthodoxy. As economic historian Kim Moody writes, "The crisis regime shaped in 1975 [in New York] would in many ways be an example of how government could be used to reassert class power and shift priorities toward both the traditional goals of business and the newer ideas that would be known as neoliberalism." Similarly, the Italian 1970s are a central referent for narratives of the transition from an industrial to a deindustrial (or "post-Fordist") capitalism. As Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni write, "Many in the Western world . . . think that the Italian case was one of the most revealing social and productive laboratories for deciphering the epoch-defining passage from one phase of capitalism to another." Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2007) 18. Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *The Golden Horde: Revolutionary Italy, 1960-1977* (London: Seagull Books, 2021) 34.
6. In addition to the texts previously cited, see Andrew Strombeck, "The Post-Fordist Motorcycle: Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* and the 1970s Crisis in Fordist Capitalism," *Contemporary Literature* 56.3 (2015): 450-475. Myka Tucker-Abramson, "The Flamethrowers and the Making of Modern Art," *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2019): 73-91. Eli Jelly-Schapiro, "Literature, Theory, and the Temporalities of Neoliberalism," *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2019) 22-41. Treasa De Loughry, *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis: Contemporary Literary Narratives* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Davis Smith-Brecheisen, "The Pivotal Decade Revisited, or the Contemporary Novel of the Seventies," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 50.4 (2023) 25-49.
7. In Andrew Strombeck and Myka Tucker-Abramson's respective essays on *The Flamethrowers*, each consider its relation to the genre of the historical novel. For Strombeck, "Kushner allows her historical novel to fail" by refusing to make what he identifies as the novel's three parts—the "spine" narrative, the New York chapters, and the Italy chapters—cohere. For Tucker-Abramson,

The Flamethrowers is “a properly historical novel,” albeit one that “doesn’t quite function as it did for Lukács” insofar as the mass experience of history appears in the background of the novel (while the main characters, in her reading, are “fantasies of capitalist regeneration under US hegemony”). While I find each reading compelling, the one developed here departs substantively from both Strombeck and Tucker-Abramson’s accounts. “The Post-Fordist Motorcycle” 453. “*The Flamethrowers* and the Making of Modern Art” 88-89.

8. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso Books, 2013) 264.
9. *The Historical Novel* 27.
10. For the long-term patterns of stagnation and non-development characteristic of the feudal economy and the subsequent emergence of modern economic growth, see: Robert Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong” in *Marxist History-Writing in the Twenty-First Century* ed. Chris Wickham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 49-111.
11. Drew Arnold, “The Rumpus Interview with Rachel Kushner,” *The Rumpus*, 2013. <https://therumpus.net/2013/08/07/the-rumpus-interview-with-rachel-kushner/> [accessed 4 March 2022]
12. Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” *New Left Review* 92 (March/April 2015), 104.
13. Sean O’Brien, “Detecting the Present: Contemporary Neo-Noir and the Case of American Decline,” *Polygraph* 29 (2024) 48. On *The Flamethrowers* as an example of a recent turn to the 1970s in contemporary fiction, see Smith- Brecheisen, “The Pivotal Decade Revisited.”
14. Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity” 120.
15. Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* 260-263. On the contemporary historical novel, see Alexander Manshel, *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).
16. *The Historical Novel* 53.
17. In other words, the novel articulates “historical time” in a manner similar to Moishe Postone: as “an ongoing directional movement of time, a ‘flow of history’” produced by the intrinsic dynamic of the value form. *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 293.
18. Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *The Golden Horde* 34.
19. Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 36.
20. Paolo Virno, “Do You Remember Counterrevolution?” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* ed. Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 244-245. Sergio Bologna, “The Tribe of Moles” in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* ed. Sylvère Lotringer & Christian Marazzi (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007) 36-61.
21. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) 105.
22. *Historical Novel* 173.
23. Endnotes, “A History of Separation: The rise and fall of the workers’ movement, 1883-1982” in *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation* (2015) 86.
24. Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso Books, 1998) 85. See also G.M. Tamas, “Telling the Truth About Class,” *Socialist Register* 42 (2006) 254-55.

25. "The Pivotal Decade Revisited" 41.
26. The now-canonical account of the gender distinction as predicated on a spatial separation between value-productive and non-value productive activities posited by the value-relation is Endnotes, "The Logic of Gender: On the separation of spheres and the process of abjection" in *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class and other Misfortunes* (Endnotes, 2013) 56-90. For an important critique of this theory see Beverley Best, "Wages for Housework Redux: Social Reproduction and the Utopian Dialectic of the Value-form," *Theory & Event* 24.4 (2021) 896-921.
27. Mathias Nilges, *How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021) 117.
28. As Genevive Yue writes, the example of the China Girl demonstrates how what is seen in a film rests "on a foundation of what is unseen." *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021) 7.
29. Nilges argues that if the Bildungsroman was the symbolic form of modernity, the Zeitroman (i.e. time novel) is the symbolic form of the contemporary in which the "flow of the world that gave rise to the bildungsroman appears to have stopped." He characterizes *The Flamethrowers* as an example of the latter. *How to Read a Moment* 19-20.
30. M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 23. On the Bildungsroman as the symbolic form of modernity, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).
31. Moretti, *The Way of the World* 4.
32. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 311.
33. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 29.
34. *Way of the World* 4.
35. Valera's objectification of Marie is only a slight distance from that of Lonzi's, his futurist companion, who suggests that "in the future women would be reduced to their most essential part, a thing a man could carry in his pocket... Women will be pocket cunts, Lonzi said. Ideal for battle, for a light infantryman. Transportable, backpackable, and silent. You take a break from machine-gunning, slip them over your member, love them totally, and they don't say a word" (75-76). By contrast Valera's use of Marie as a literal vehicle for his personal development "reduces her to her own foot, to a thing he could carry in his mind, like a rabbit's foot" (76).
36. *Historical Novel* 39.
37. *Historical Novel* 39.
38. Perry Anderson, writing of the modernist fascination with technology (e.g. as evidenced by the futurists), notes that in the early twentieth century this did not necessarily mean a celebration of capitalism. The condition of this interest, he writes, "was the abstraction of techniques and artefacts from the social relations of production that were generating them. In no case was capitalism as such ever exalted by any brand of 'modernism.' But such extrapolation was precisely rendered possible by the sheer incipience of the still unforeseeable socio-economic pattern that was later to consolidate around them." In other words, in the condition of uneven development (or incomplete

modernization) in the early twentieth century, the “still incipient, hence essentially novel, emergence within these societies of the key technologies or inventions of the second industrial revolution” such as the automobile generated a fascination with speed and machinery seemingly abstracted from the still-developing mode of production that generated them. However, Valera identifies the experience of speed, of historical progress, with capitalism and its preeminent institution, the factory. For the futurists, machinery is something abstractly fascinating, set against an otherwise traditional world. For Valera, a true apprehension of machinery—and speed—leads to the capitalist factory. Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 144 (1984) 104-105.

39. Tucker-Abramson and Strombeck have each developed analyses of the motorcycle’s role in the novel as a symbol of industrial manufacturing (and, in the 1970s chapters, its displacement).
40. Rachel Greenwald-Smith, “Six Theses on Compromise Aesthetics,” *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*, eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Wordon (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2016) 192. “*The Flamethrowers* and the Making of Modern Art” 86. “The Pivotal Decade Revisited” 36.
41. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019); *Women and the Subversion of Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, ed. Camille Barbagallo (Oakland: PM Press, 2019). The China Girl figure evokes an optical metaphor employed by Leopoldina Fortunati to articulate the “at once dialectical and coconstitutive relationship of visible value and its invisible support mapped along the axis of gender.” Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 197. Maya Gonzalez, “The Gendered Circuit: Reading the Arcane of Reproduction,” *Viewpoint Magazine* (2013).
42. Roswitha Scholz, “Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender Without the Body” in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, eds. Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2004) 128. See also “The Logic of Gender” 63-66.
43. “Aesthetics of Singularity” 122.
44. Her crash inspires a new thought about temporality: “What happens slowly carries in each part the possibility of returning to what came before. In an accident everything is simultaneous, sudden, irreversible. It means this: no going back” (31). Tucker-Abramson reads the crash as allegorical of the crisis of 1973 that brought an end of postwar growth. “*The Flamethrowers* and the Making of Modern Art” 77.
45. Nadja Millner-Larsen, *Up Against the Real: Black Mask from Art to Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023) 210. Millner-Larsen’s book is a history of *Black Mask/Up Against the Wall Motherfucker*, a group whose fictionalized history appears in a standalone chapter of *The Flamethrowers*. Written an elliptical, chronicle-like form that sets it apart from the rest of the novel, the chapter documents a series of political actions and stunts by the group in solidarity and cooperation with “the children of the Lower East Side, under-fed, runny-nosed, of black and brown complexions, robbed of a lice-free, misery-free existence, robbed of most aspects of childhood” (186). What is most striking about the chapter is its utter incoherence. It is an account of spatialized lumpen struggle and insurrectionary anarchism, yet these actions are theorized according to a stagist and even workerist philosophy of history (195). I would suggest we read this chapter as the novel’s figuration of May ’68 — the last

- high point of the historical workers' movement and the opening of a new era of struggles.
46. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1982) 1048. See Sianne Ngai's account of "post-Fordist performance" in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) 174-231. On performance in Marxist theory see Michael Shane Boyle, "In Service to Capital: Theater and Marxist Cultural Theory" in *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) 209-224.
 47. *Antinomies of Realism* 28.
 48. Nancy Armstrong, "Why the Bildungsroman no longer works," *Textual Practice* 34.12 (2020) 2091-2111.
 49. Jasper Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor: The Office Novel after Deindustrialization," *Post45* 1 (2019).
 50. Sasha Frere-Jones, "I Am a Camera: An Interview with Rachel Kushner," *The New Yorker*, 11 June 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/i-am-a-camera-an-interview-with-rachel-kushner> [Accessed 11 November 2023]. Many recent novels that might be categorized, after Mathias Nilges, as instances of the contemporary Zeitroman turn to photography and film. See, for instance Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Paris: Metronome Press, 2005) and Ling Ma, *Severance* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2018). See Bernes' essay on the office novel for a discussion of photography in *Remainder*.
 51. Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*. (London: Merlin Press, 1970) 138.
 52. In an article on postmodern literature and poetics, Joshua Clover observes the effacement of "the broadly modern association of the novel with narrative" since the early 1970s. Indexed by the diminishment or disintegration of "the conventions of the bildungsroman, of the development of a character through consequent time," Clover argues that this waning of protagonicity is the "expression of a homologous change in the sphere of production...defined by an 'organic composition of capital' — that is, a decreasing ratio of workers to machines." "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41.1 (2011) 41-42.
 53. My account of Baumol's theory is drawn from Jason E. Smith, *Smart Machines and Service Work: Automation in an Age of Stagnation* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020) 72-74. See also Bernes' discussion of Baumol and novels of service work in "Character, Genre, Labor."
 54. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* 214-215. Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017) 26.
 55. In 1965, the city had also experienced a blackout — an experience in which, Rick Perlstein writes, "the wary anonymity of the city transformed itself into a contagion of joy," inspiring the 1968 comedy *Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?*. "In 1977," he writes, "different sorts of liberties were taken: 1965 inverted, as formerly alienated, atomized Gothamites once more united in carnivalesque communion, this time to strip the city bare." Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020) 129.
 56. Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel" 58-59.
 57. *Historical Novel* 53.
 58. For the concept of "class decomposition" see Endnotes, "Onward Barbarians" (2020) <https://endnotes.org/posts/endnotes-onward-barbarians> [accessed 15 January 2023].
 59. *Antinomies of Realism* 267.

60. Specifically, she encounters the Rome demonstration of 12 March 1977. See Red Notes, *Italy 1977-8: 'Living with an Earthquake'* (1978) 59-69.
61. Michael Hardt offers a useful account of this revolutionary sequence as “a drama in three acts.” *The Subversive Seventies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023) 109-124.
62. Sergio Bologna. “Workerism: An Inside View: From the Mass-Worker to Self-Employed Labour,” *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 127. “The growing homogenization of labour by age and gender within many of Italy’s large and medium-sized industrial concerns during the late 1960s acted to reinforce that compactness encouraged by the spread of mass production techniques.” Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven* 108.
63. Nanni Balestrini, *We Want Everything* (London: Verso Books, 2022) 162.
64. *Storming Heaven* 197.
65. Hardt, *Subversive Seventies* 110. See also Paolo Virno, “Do You Remember Counterrevolution?” 244-245 and Sergio Bologna, “The Tribe of Moles.”
66. *Storming Heaven* 200. By the mid-1970s, Robert Lumley writes, “the distinction between the ‘adult’ world of regular waged work and youth’s transitional situation hardened; the absence of work (or work to match qualifications), and the prolonging of the educational process extended the period of being young of necessity rather than from choice.” *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso Books, 1990) 298.
67. Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). On the rabble see Peter Stallybrass, “Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat.” *Representations* 31 (1990) 69-95.
68. Tiqqun’s text on the Movement of 1977 is vehemently critical of the concept of the “multitude” and similarly adopts the designation of “rabble.” Tiqqun, *This is Not a Program* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).
69. Reno paraphrases the politics of ’77 as: “We’ll take what we can and pay what we want. We’ll pay for nothing that’s already ours” (286). On “proletarian shopping” or “auto-reduction” in 1970s Italy, see Bruno Ramirez, “The Working Class Struggle Against the Crisis: Self-Reduction of Prices in Italy.” *Zerowork: Political Materials #1* (1975) 143-150.
70. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (New York: Verso, 2016) 140.
71. *Historical Novel* 39.
72. “Let’s Spit on Hegel” 58-59.
73. *Historical Novel* 39.
74. *Antinomies of Realism* 281-282.
75. *Historical Novel* 47. “One of the things the ‘world-historical individual’ in the sense of the classical historical novel exemplifies, if he is really a leader or representative of genuine popular movements, is Lenin’s ‘from without.’” *Historical Novel* 214.
76. *The Golden Horde* 658.
77. “The Tribe of Moles” 51.
78. On the “composition problem” see Endnotes, “The Holding Pattern: The ongoing crisis and the class struggles of 2011-2013” in *Endnotes 3: Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes* (2013) 44-52.

79. "The Flamethrowers and the Making of Modern Art" 86.
80. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (1977) 68-81.
81. *Historical Novel* 39
82. *The Golden Horde* 666. Accordingly, if Gianni serves as the primary characterological representative of '77 in the novel, he also stands apart from it: "Whether Gianni was in the Movement was unclear" Reno observes, registering this in terms of his appearance as an industrial worker ("He did not look like the rest of them, working-class handsome in his mechanic's jacket") (271). Although Gianni denies having worked on the assembly line, a newspaper describes the Red Brigades as "Italian militants who got their start in the Valera factories on the industrial outskirts of Milan" (120-121).
83. This is based on an event in the life of Nanni Balestrini.
84. Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019) 105.
85. *Antinomies of Realism* 271.

Mournful Hedonism: An Abject Comportment of National Developmentalism and Neocolonial Financialization in Gloria Guardia's *El último juego* (1977)

Josué Chávez

El último juego (1977) is a pastiche of modernism by Panamanian writer Gloria Guardia. The plot, set *in media res* over the course of a single day, follows Tito Garrido, banker by profession and son of a prominent family of the Panamanian elite. In the diegetic present, the protagonist is preparing to meet with the military president to ratify a treaty that agrees to the continued presence of American military bases around the Canal Zone, despite popular calls for their abolition in the name of national sovereignty. The concession had spurred a student guerrilla group to break into Tito's house over the weekend, while he was hosting a party for the treaty negotiating team. They were kept under hostage for three days, making the diegetic present, a Tuesday, Tito's first day of "freedom" since Friday. Notably, he spends it mostly inside his car or at one of his two offices in Panama City, forced to torturously wait while the military head delays the meeting, a convenient technique for narrative progression. As readers, we learn about what happened through flashbacks rendered in a stream of consciousness that is reminiscent of the style of Virginia Woolf, where exterior events lose narrative hegemony in favor of the inner thoughts of the protagonist. The prose is also inflected with montage and crosscuttings techniques that pay a nod to Boom writers.¹

The overall result, on one hand, is a blank parody pastiche where anything goes, but on the other, the plot gradually reveals an orientation and direction to Panamanian society at a moment of radical transformation of both American empire and the global financial order. In fact, the plot about the hostage and its aftermath is expanded through the technique of the prose, in the accumulation of connections forged between the protagonist's reaction to the loss of his lover, the toggle between narrative and descriptive modes, and the external social issues internalized by the composition. In other words, the literary form parodies a structure of disavowal that drives the

narrative forward by way of Tito's mental acrobatics, making visible a social process in motion through the "small, imperceptible capillary movements of individual life."²

Dominant interpretations read the novel as a national allegory in terms of race and gender.³ However, missing from these analyses is a more thorough interpretation of the novelistic attempt to unravel a *specific* class dimension to the nation. My analysis will focus on how the literary form evokes a major economic transition in patterns of capital accumulation in Panama, theorizing the role of national elites within it. The novel theorizes this transition by "discovering" a kind of pattern to the affects, habits, and dispositions that secured the neocolonial financialization of the country, what I call an *object* comportment of mournful hedonism. This analysis does not come at the expense of gender and race, but rather allows us to return to these terms with deeper scrutiny.

The representation of the protagonist's deceased lover Mariana tends to be the focal point of most criticism on the novel. Literary scholar Ileana Rodriguez sees the character as an "unfolding of metonymy" that constitutes the nation into a "feminized fiction," where the only subject position available is impotence.⁴ At stake with this interpretation are the historical trajectories of Central American, anti-imperialist revolutions throughout the second half of the twentieth century, which compelled the need to advocate for a close relation between literature and politics. Therefore, this commentary on the novel is also a critique of social polarization as revolutionary aspirations became foreclosed. Although the conclusions on impotence are generative, the methodological orientation treats the novel as an interpellating apparatus, thereby losing sight of the specificity of the literary form.⁵ In short, the tendency to focus on Mariana as representation has constrained more thorough interpretations of the novel as a whole.⁶

Consider her introduction in the opening lines, where seemingly banal descriptions gain meaningful symbolism retrospectively, when we pay close attention to the alternation of the temporal levels: the memory of Mariana talking with the guests happens right before the hostage takeover, while the "last time" Tito references at the beginning is the paramedics taking the corpse out of his house, which is also the final scene of the novel. One way or another, he spends his first day of freedom fixated on the hostage:

Yesterday I saw you, Mariana, for the last time, I should have stared at you deeply and attentively, you had a visage to be stared at, I mean, to be stared at without qualms, without shame and with quite some malice in the recording pupil: full lips, tall forehead, brown cheekbones, I came close to you, Good evening, Mariana, with a quick gesture...and you walked across the living room in the direction of a group of guests talking...⁷

The spiral structure suggests itself as a peculiar origin story where her loss is not only

implied from the beginning, but thematized as an absent corpse in the sexualized description of body parts, which in turn suggests itself as a refracted memory of death turned into fixation on an idealized past. For the French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, the corpse is the symbol of abjection par excellence, a process she further depicts as the subjective experience of the dissolution of temporal boundaries, an “archaic memory” that impels carnivalesque parody and repulsive horror.⁸ I’m interested in how Kristeva’s idea of abjection foregrounds a temporal dissolution that results in the alternation of polarities; etymologically, abject also means something that is both present and cast off.⁹ Both meanings seem apt for approaching the qualities of the character of Mariana as part of a larger literary form, which repeatedly sets in motion a play of presence and absence that looks like an alternation of Tito’s reactions to the diegetic present, paradoxically revealing in the process the contours of a social reality in transformation. Notice how even as Tito sexualizes the corpse, a new and ornamental *quality* of abstract labor comes across, “you were doing your thing, telling guests how boring you found that job of yours...the whole day in front of an electric machine, serve the café...the five latino economists at your service, pisco sours with the board at five, write down the memo...”¹⁰ In mourning Mariana while stressing modern feelings associated with the workforce, the form expands what at first glance seem like menial details, enlisting the digressive prose for a narrative progression of some kind of allegory.

What exactly is the allegorical content of this literary construction? Except for Tito and his family, every other character, including Mariana, expresses nationalist sentiments that exacerbate his sense of isolation. As this social pressure and his recalcitrant refusal are gradually fleshed out, a structural dimension emerges, contextualizing Tito’s mental acrobatics while performing a kind of toggle that suddenly turns the narration of loss into something else. Take, for example, the moment Tito is out for lunch at one of the most exclusive clubs in Panama City. After ordering a lobster bisque, he runs into Paco Alvarez, a government colleague who participated in the 1959 anti-American riots. Paco is curious to know what happened during the hostage takeover, but Tito finds the question irritating and dismisses him by attacking his nationalist convictions, a “heroism of the I-would-die-for-my-nation type.”¹¹ Paco responds: “man, things have been changing, and you know it...we want to be a free nation, we want the Canal to be ours, fuck, let’s stop playing along with the world powers.”¹² The conflict between the two is neutralized from the very beginning, since the stream of consciousness mediates the plot from Tito’s point of view. In this scene, the outrage at what he considers Paco’s “ingenuity” deflates his mournful obsession over Mariana as the other side of a hedonistic class project. From this double affective stance, Paco’s nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments appear out of place while surrounded by martinis and lobster bisques. Tito reacts to an unpleasant past that refuses to die by turning its symbols into objects of grotesque obsession (Mariana) or absurd repulsion (Paco). The mental acrobatics conveyed

by the digressive prose gradually reveal the contours of a social world, in principle excluded by the technique of the prose. In short, the bursting asunder of the present is intimately linked to a past moment of nationalism and its lingering pretensions or attractions. The pastiche emphasizes the perverse pleasure Tito finds in mourning the national past viz-a-viz his obsession with Mariana *and* his hedonistic repulsion of others, damaging the legitimacy of nationalism in the process, but without fully dismissing its validity.¹³ To put it bluntly, by grafting a dead Mariana onto an ideal past that is more comforting than the present, the impossibility of the lingering attractions of the developmentalist project are brought to the fore.

It is also worth noting that the composition of the pastiche is also rendered through the repetition of bank advertisements, a feature rarely remarked upon by critics.¹⁴ Consider this radio broadcast a few lines after the opening scene:

this is WCA transmitting from Panama City, historical town where the two Oceans meet, welcomes you any time of the year...Ladies and Gentlemen...leave your money in Panama, a paradise where your money is safe, the Switzerland of the Americas. Panama offers you security and good service, deposit your money today and bury your concerns at the high mountains of Chagres Club, the biggest and most modern private social club in Central America ...¹⁵

The pastiche unfolds the country's transformation into an offshore enclave as a cartoonish object of desire, comparing it to one of the most successful tax havens in Europe. The indulgent pitch appeals to and makes fun of its intended audience — a transnational and financial elite: “courtesy of the Bank of Transylvania, a bank with over one hundred years of experience...when you think of your children, think of the Children's Bank”¹⁶ Even as it parodies peddling global prestige, the novel remains committed to a national legacy. In fact, a *longue durée* of violence is alluded in the reference to Chagres, a trade town from the colonial era that was flooded in 1904 to expand the Canal.¹⁷ The image that emerges suggests a city teeming with banks as a lucrative reminder of failure, a humiliating but attractive transgression of sovereignty that sustains Tito's world of luxury. The pastiche of the bank advertisement contributes to the narrative insofar as the social world that impelled Tito's convictions is revealed. These scenes exemplify how the combinatory play of the form activates registers of mourning and hedonism in function of a specific class dimension to the nation, more specifically a project that seeks to render the nation *abject*, both present and cast off in new *financial* forms. In short, the accumulation of alternations may give insights into a practical comportment that turns weaknesses into strengths and strengths into weaknesses — a repeated motion conditioned by the compulsory turn to an offshore financial enclave.

To anticipate my larger argument, on the levels of content and form *El último*

juego reveals how the class recomposition of the contemporary, Panamanian elite conditioned the fetishistic strategies of self-delusion most adequate for this ruling class from a merchant colonial background to transform itself into bankers. By further grafting the loss of Mariana over a newly constituted moment of financialization, the novel obliquely visualizes an economic transition by theorizing in the literary composition a plausible comportment for the successful reordering of Panamanian dependency according to its new role as an offshore enclave, a turn that took place after the developmentalist pretensions of the elite fractured along conflicting class interests.

A Volatile Class

The traces of the social world outlined so far suggest a distinct orientation of the literary form, which may be better characterized by briefly considering the historical composition of the Panamanian ruling class.¹⁸ Panama's incorporation into a capitalist world market has historically been conditioned by its advantageous geographical position, which significantly increases productivity by lowering circulation costs worldwide. This "natural resource" has been under the monopoly of a merchant bourgeoisie since the colonial era, which benefitted from it through the generic form of enclave concessions. Tito belongs to this specific faction of the ruling class, with ties to liberal ideologues of the state who founded the Republic of Panama in 1903 as an imperial venture.¹⁹ Restricted insertion in the sphere of circulation strengthens one of the main contradictions of the social formation: the inequality between the urban transit zone of Colon and Panama City (in the center of the country) and what the sociological literature calls the "rural interior," which refers to the eastern and western ends of the country. Each version of the capitalist world-market has had a main concession through which the merchant faction made its profits. Starting with the California Gold rush of 1848, the nexus of dependency was the railroad. The Panama Canal took over the role between 1904 and 1914, until the offshore enclave replaced it, beginning in 1969.²⁰

The generic structure of the concessionary enclave is symptomatic of the systematic weakness of the Panamanian ruling class. By profiting essentially from the lowering of circulation costs worldwide, there was never a strong foundation to foment sovereign authority. Furthermore, the ability to profit from concessions failed to incentivize robust internal markets, which in turn preserved languishing circuits of subsistence in the interior by intermittently expelling surplus labor to circuits of transnational accumulation in mono-export industries.²¹ The material basis in the sphere of circulation left the merchant faction very vulnerable to the volatility of the world market, so to guarantee its reproduction as a *political leader*, it was forced early on to strategically "absorb" other classes through compromises in the control of the state apparatus and "prestigious" marriages, resulting in one oligarchic alliance between urban and rural landowners, agrarian industrialists, and a nationalist petite

bourgeoisie.²² The alliance between the merchant faction and the military government of Omar Torrijos, the former's response to oligarchic in-fighting, was forged in 1969, precisely with the reorientation of the national economy to new financial markets.

This is the historical composition of the oligarchic ruling class in Panama, today around 20 families. If we locate the standpoint for the literary form with this hegemonic faction, we are forced to revisit the canonical readings of the novel. Ileana Rodríguez ultimately interprets *El último juego* as an anti-imperialist romance, along the lines of Doris Sommer's canonical reading of nineteenth-century Latin American novels, where the plotting of heterosexual love is used to negotiate national histories. However, Sommer's argument presumes the project of romance to be democratic and conciliatory, which Rodríguez leaves intact by mobilizing her interpretation solely as a negative critique: the anti-imperialist romance in Guardia's novel, its failure of reconciliation, posits both nation and gender as discursive play of legitimizations and transgressions of sovereignty. At first, the interpretation may seem plausible, insofar as the main antagonism consists of anti-imperialist revolutionary politics and an "administrative non-bourgeoisie." The problem is that this characterization does not convincingly account for the literary form as we have seen it so far. Interpreting the novel as an anti-imperialist romance fails to consider how the representation of nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments has an ornamental disposition that reinforces the main antagonism *within* an oligarchic class that shares a modern and *liberal* self-image, between a faction in favor of transnational financialization and another one fixated on national developmentalism as a sign of modernity.

In other words, the novel crystalizes habits and dispositions that come together as a disavowing comportment, a defense mechanism that makes an economic transition alternately visible and invisible. It is as if the literary form stylistically ventriloquizes the comportment needed to realize the history it illustrates, namely the transition from shipping enclave with developmentalist pretensions to neocolonial offshore enclave. I call this gesture mournful hedonism, an abject comportment that is not empirically verifiable but remains plausible insofar as the interpretation of the novel succeeds as a compelling reading. Consider for example the sequence soon after the opening scenes, when Tito arrives to his office at the bank. He quickly becomes uncomfortable the moment he is left alone, with abrupt shifts in the narrative that convey a sense of spiraling horror: from memories of family gatherings with Mariana to scenes of lovemaking (unclear at times whether with his lover or his wife) to brief flashes of the guerrilla group shoving the guests against the walls. The spiral reaches a climax when the focalization returns to Mariana: "you seemed oblivious to everything, as if time had stopped around you and this was the only thing you aspired to, and even the hostage was necessary, the motor force to situate you...on a summit or a stadium from where to change your skin...for a more sensitive one, capable of perceiving beyond your own reality."²³ By grafting the Romantic sublime onto a fantasy of sexual possession, it is as if the entire section was suddenly reconfigured in a new

key. The protagonist gazes out the window, asserting the privilege of experiencing the foreclosure of contradictory possibilities as a kind of beauty, precisely because the horizon remains the Panamanian social formation. An allegorical movement from sexualized object to social landscape suddenly emerges in the confrontation with an unbearable new reality. Mournful hedonism, as figure for a literary form and a social process, attunes us to how the composition internalizes the external to make visible a historical structure: an abstract but real coercion in the middle of social transformation.²⁴ In other words, the novel theorizes in its form a point of affinity between literature and reality, a real but abstract nexus of contemporary social relations.

Agency in Restriction

This concept of mournful hedonism, not just as an abject comportment that is the expression of the compulsory turn to the offshore enclave, but also as the rule for the literary composition, allows us to appreciate how the novel plays with the residual genres of realism in unique ways. The use of *Bildungsroman* is particularly noteworthy; it mediates how the merchant faction preserved itself in a new financial form, thanks to a traditional strategy of elite survival, family prestige.²⁵ Mariana was Tito's lover since young adulthood, even after he married Maria Enriqueta, or Queta, at age 30. Her family is of a similar pedigree as the Garridos, but she's "tackier." Among other things, he dislikes her taste for American magazines, which he sees as a gaudy manifestation of provincial origins. In contrast, Tito admires how Mariana reads Federico Garcia Lorca. She is portrayed as the rebel, modern woman par excellence. On the other hand, the decision to marry Queta was imposed by his father, Ricardo A. Garrido II, or RAG, who also pushed Tito to become treaty negotiator, to ensure low trade tariffs as part of the canal treaty, which benefit the import-export business he established with Queta's family wealth. Tito's love triangle therefore performs a clash between modern ideals and class interests that double as family duties. Their weight distorts the norms of family life without damaging their validity, registering the inability of the class to participate in the world market outside the concessionary enclave. In this way, a negative relation to the family form motivates the continued adherence to an unachievable norm: "Queta is a Garrido now, very much a Garrido... no one dares even doubt it...my old man gets mad...he appreciates what she's worth... with her money he organized that enterprise, yes, the International Importing and Exporting Business...he even kisses and hugs her tenderly, something he has never done with me."²⁶ Not only is Mariana out of reach, so is his own status as a Garrido. It is Queta who received the paternal approval, precisely because she acted as an investor. Tito's sense of belonging is denied at the same time it is distorted in practice, evoking a coerced transformation that diminished without annihilating their former source of wealth in shipping. The accommodation of transgressed family norms attests not just to who this class was before turning financial, but also to the comportments it

developed over time to support its transformation.

The novel therefore achieves a very concrete standpoint from where everything else is constructed: the national “defect” of the Panamanian elite, which is consciousness of their fundamental role as an imperial lackey. This neocolonial *raison d’être* is an inevitably humiliating position, even more so after the foreclosure of national developmentalism. As imperial lackey, achieving hegemony is conditioned by the faction’s ability to successfully adapt to imperial interests. This need to adapt to the rules of the “game” is thematized in the parody of the *Bildungsroman*, where the process of maturation implies a betrayal of any principle that goes against larger class interests. On this plane, the betrayal is transformed into an *unfulfilled* desire for paternal approval. Furthermore, in this parody of growing up, the ruling class resents the new, making it valorize the old. Take the following moment, one of the few times Tito walks outside:

the colonial style mansions that the gringos, the French, the Swiss and the Germans have been buying and turning into banks, restaurants or commercial stores, I want to return, rewind, go back in time...8-year-old me...visiting that couple of older Nicaraguans, old exiles...they had just built for themselves this, or was it that?, house of two floors that now harbors one of the seventy something banks we have...²⁷

Tito mourns the years after 1938 as the bygone time of his youth, a period which coincided with a boom in internal accumulation tumultuously sustained by oligarchic cleavages until the 1960s. Throughout this period, urban landowners, agrarian industrialists and the petit-bourgeois factions of the oligarchic ruling class used economic and political crises to realign against the merchant faction, which benefits the most from transnational circuits of accumulation. By recurring to canal treaties under the auspices of sovereignty, the merchant faction sought to manage the oligarchic cleavages.²⁸ At the same time, the “death” of internal accumulation under the hegemony of finance capital, gestured at in the description of foreign banks destroying the childhood neighborhood, is in part a result of the foreclosure of global, developmentalist possibilities of the immediate post-war period. As Bret Benjamin argues, the developmentalist aspirations of global decolonization were foreclosed by the early 1970s as a crisis in the valorization of capital asserted itself. Briefly put, this crisis in the value-form results from the imperative to compete by increasing productivity, which leads to a decline in profitability by displacing living labor from production.²⁹ The tendential displacement of living labor across the totality undermines the global ability for capital accumulation by removing the basis for new value creation through consumption, resulting in a relative surplus population.³⁰

In addition, increasing productivity in Panama, as in the rest of Central America, meant modernizing with restricted technological means a somewhat autonomous

agrarian structure by continuing the practice of enclave concessions. With the mid-1950s discovery of the Euromarkets, a regulatory vacuum that resulted from the decolonization of the British empire and further incentivized the proliferation of the first offshore financial markets, modernization became intertwined with the promotion of various forms of offshore activities, putting it at odds with its prior conception as investment in productive activities.³¹ The parody of *Bildungsroman* evokes this perverse present that is as traumatic as the foreclosed past, a catch-22 that results in an alienating modernity that is not disqualified in its allure. What we have is Tito yearning for a moment when he could be rich without becoming a banker, which in Panama would have been when the ruling class could carry out its infighting as a reformist developmentalist struggle. In short, the novel parodies a time the ruling class could pass for a progressive force before its fundamentally counterrevolutionary tendency asserted itself.

In this way, the abject comportment of an older elite class reacting to unpleasant change is formalized. In the coordination of content and form, mournful hedonism mobilizes dispositions and habits compelled by the history illustrated. Unable to hide the truth of their defective trait as imperial lackey, but still entitled to empire's prerogatives, mournful hedonism is a kind of agency in restriction. Symbols associated with modern life are always employed to alienating ends; take, for example, Tito's reaction to Panama City, "a Third World city, or developing or underdeveloped to say it without poetry."³² As a reaction from the privileged old to the new form of offshore enclave financialization, mournful hedonism turns banks, the city, and electronic devices into targets of petty resentment. As a concept, it allows us to appreciate *not simply* that the Panamanian elites are an imperial lackey, but what's most interesting, the peculiar comportments developed to *reproduce* their humiliating position.

Near the end of the novel, we find out how Tito got the job of treaty negotiator: by rewriting national mining laws to encourage transnational extractivism, which impressed the military president, who also wanted to use his prestigious last name to give legitimacy to the negotiations. In 1970, the same year Tito secured his new job, the Torrijos government in real life passed a new set of banking laws that coincided with the amendment by the US Congress to the Bank Holding Act, allowing American banks to expand abroad and operate in Panama. The amendment was an attempt by US banks to take advantage of the lucrative Euromarkets. In Panama, the move was part of the transition away from the period of internal accumulation driven by oligarchic cleavages. The new set of banking laws realized the successful alliance between a hegemonic merchant faction suddenly embracing financialization, the military faction clustered around the figure of Omar Torrijos and the US, at the expense of the factions in favor of national developmentalism.³³ In short, the neocolonial relation between the US and Panama eased the latter's financialization *and* the transfer of the Canal, which was unprofitable for Americans since the end of WWII.³⁴ Tito's character evokes, as part of the literary whole, how through its subjugation in a structure of

dependency, Panama was assigned a new role in a transformed global financial order that overlapped with the hegemony of American empire, while conditioned by a crisis in the value form of capital.

Imperial Lackey Patriarch

The phenomenon of finance as conditioned by crisis gets dramatized in the parody of gendering codes. Mournful hedonism allows us to appreciate how the novel constantly subjects Tito to juxtapositions that bring into focus a hollowed-out masculinity. The form functions as a kind of meta dissecting mechanism, achieved in part through the influence of 1970s feminist thought. By using modern objects to interrupt Tito's memories and bring the prose back to the present, the montage is constantly dissecting his defense mechanisms, developing the narrative on a different plane as an exposition of patriarchal impotence.³⁵ For example, we first find out about the hostage in an implicit manner, during the opening scene of his car ride to the office: "the day changed course and I had to pronounce that goodbye which remained fixed, printed and sealed...National Guard Communications, Panamanian terrorists arrived to Libya...they kept under hostage some thirty something personalities inside a luxurious residence for over seventy hours...I turn down the volume..."³⁶ The prose surrounding the military memo doubles as Freudian slip: the final goodbye to Mariana is figured as a signed treaty; lowering down the news hints at discomfort. The associative modality of the metaleptic prose transforms disparate memories and sudden reactions into one virtual reenactment of his disavowal of responsibility and its rationale. Mournful hedonism, as rule of the composition, ventriloquizes Tito by showing how his hollowed-out masculinity resembles, on the one hand, the reproduction of a hollowed-out sovereignty in a structure of neocolonial dependency, and on the other, the economic impossibility of sustained accumulation, a state of affairs that "does not show itself by the 'cessation' of capitalism...but by actions that force upon the capitalist class the awareness that [it is] on its way."³⁷

The entire composition aims at exaggerating patriarchal impotence, revealing through its humiliating qualities an antagonistic impasse.³⁸ When Tito remembers the first time he slept with Mariana, at a party she organized with their childhood friends Teresa and Antonia, he digresses to comment on Antonia's husband Juan Almillategui, a cousin of Mariana: "and the photographer...focusing on Wilson...and Juan Almillategui, so short, chubby and plump...Don Juan, please, look this way, toward the camera...and a grimace came out, so out of tune with the splendid gestures...with which Teresa and you, Mariana, had decorated."³⁹ With the pretense of mourning, he indulges in a violent inscription of inferiority, simultaneously insinuating the act as a thrilling privilege in the references to mass photography. Although at this moment RAG's character has not been introduced, the description of Juan anticipates Tito's relation to his father, "an appendage of his father, that chubby Spaniard with black suspenders."⁴⁰ His contempt is a clear recoil to their resemblance, a reminder

he is similarly a daddy's boy. Importantly, the Almillategui family's economic basis in domestic production is used to justify both malice and resignation:

[the father] was starting a business selling foodstuff, and their house, I blush thinking about it, a lifeless house, without light or hope, I mean a mausoleum bought by my own efforts and decorated with a pale woman, of opaque eyes, blue-eyed and purple lips, where we used to have lunch, some immense tortillas, every Sunday.⁴¹

The anamorphic imagery stages the prerogative of a subject that perceives internal accumulation as both prey and emblem of belonging. The boastful description of the house as a feminized mausoleum turns the Almillateguis into a metonymy for an ideal relation to the nation: a compulsion to profit off transnational circuits of accumulation that stagnate national productivity, while inflating consumption in the country's transit zone at the expense of the laboring population's consumption capacities.⁴² As scholars have pointed out, Panama's twentieth-century agrarian reforms were minimal at best and deeply intertwined with the ambitions of different factions of the ruling class.⁴³ The oligarchic alliance is sustained by the prerogative to be an imperial lackey, too weak to overcome dependency, but strong enough to secure its reproduction in the sphere of circulation. Unlike elsewhere in Central America, like in Guatemala or El Salvador, Panamanian landowners and agrarian industrialists never achieved hegemony over the state. The dizzying oscillation of gendered luxury and impoverished consumption reinforces Tito's impotent masculinity as the compromised hegemony of a neocolonial bourgeoisie unable to address the systematic but uneven rendering of the national laboring population as doubly redundant to the valorization process of finance-driven accumulation, in other words, relatively superfluous to national production and consumption. This memory of Almillategui, in other words, captures in its parody the impersonal coercion to produce "monetary subjects without cash."⁴⁴

By giving insights into a comportment constituted by the history the novel illustrates, the literary form repeatedly performs the concrete strategies that negotiate humiliation with self-preservation. Halfway through the book, we learn Tito once proposed to Mariana, but she rejected him: "You Mariana, talking to me about that simple man, your ideal...someone who will see me for what I am, you were saying, for what I am: a lowercase woman."⁴⁵ Parodying his romantic obsession to the point of narcissism, Mariana's reason for her rejection deflates his mournful fantasy into an idealized compensation. The revelation of dismissal relativizes Tito's nostalgia, suggesting it is in fact for an era when the oligarchy could be rich and claim to embody the nation through developmentalist pretensions. A new reality, more unbearable and humiliating, reveals the perversity of both past and present without disqualifying either.

Surreal Conflicts

The perversity of both past and present reinforces mournful hedonism as an abject comportment of the Panamanian bourgeoisie, the most adequate form of practice and consciousness to embrace financial circuits mediated by the national, defective trait of being an imperial lackey of the United States. The moment of striking the bargain produces the strategy of class delusion as a practical necessity that justifies the preservation of neocolonial prerogatives by lamenting the betrayal to nationalist developmentalist aspirations. However, this does not mean it can dismiss humiliation or fix the decomposition of class relations. Instead, new weaknesses must be confronted and appropriated, but the strategy of class delusion can only go so far. Registering a wider decomposition as immanent to financialization, the form parodies at times the action-packed qualities of the thriller, using racial codes to compose a kind of surrealist suspense.

Take for example another moment when Tito looks out a window and sees the statue of President Jose Antonio “Chichi” Remon, murdered in 1955 and located right next to the presidential palace in real life. In the novel’s sequel, *Lobos al Anochecer* (2006), Chichi’s murder takes center stage, where he is portrayed as a peculiar national hero: a petit bourgeois turned drug dealer and military leader, but still committed to agrarian reform and investment in productive activities. These associations are negatively present in Tito’s digressive remembrance of the murder:

there he was... shots fired, rat-tat-tat-tat, a burst, another one, then another, the murderers jumping from all sides, smiling, dancing, singing...fighting for the prerogative to take part in slaughter, to revel in the blood gushing out...leaving the poor man, thrown aside, impotent... no one, really, no one remembers that anymore, now what matters is my children, awake and playing with a pair of cholitas that take care of them...let the rest sink down the Earth...for the status-quo, I even let the Earth swallow me.⁴⁶

The assailants are figured as bloodlust revelers, suggesting an anamorphic fantasy of a guilt-ridden conscience, where racialization and social reproduction (“mis hijos...jugando con el par de cholitas que los cuidan”) come across as emblems for new social priorities that have replaced what Chichi stood for, namely, national developmentalism, no matter how limited or at what expense. Openly admitting his predilection for the status quo, Tito turns his children into an alibi for the enjoyment of violence, relying on racial codes to amplify the urban spectacle of the offshore enclave while securing a defense from his consciousness as imperial lackey.

At the same time, the position of *financialized* imperial lackey also suggests a transformation in the hegemony of American empire, conditioned by the impossibility of continued accumulation at the level of the totality. The inevitable abjection of the

neocolonial offshore in a situation where the impossibility of continued accumulation looms over is expressed in the elastic codes of racial resentment. For example, the moment when Tito runs into the Japanese banker Tanaka, a power struggle where the status of subordinate to a new kind of financial empire led by the US is rehearsed. Like everyone else, Tanaka wants to know about the concession to military bases, “he asks with petulance, with airs of I-am-superior-you-runaway-Indian.”⁴⁷ Throughout the novel, racial identifications are inconsistent at the level of Tito’s character, but they always exacerbate humiliation. Brief interruptions of the guerrilla leader Cero calling him “*rabiblanco*” (“white-ass”) recur, along with his mother’s warnings of looking too “Indian.” His projection of racial resentment in fact speaks to a shared but coerced association. Both Panama and Japan were strategically important allies to the postwar project of a global capitalism under the auspices of US hegemony, which was predicated on *reviving* capitalist economies around the world and their national bourgeoisies. Between the immediate postwar years until the 1990s, Japanese banking was the second most prevalent in Panama after American banks. The racially charged interaction of competitive inferiority intentionally mobilizes this history, which is further thematized when Tanaka shares that he is moving to the new Bank of Tokyo skyscraper: “I notice how purple his lips are, quivering, probably, in anger, pure anger, and he opens his mouth to tell me with pride.”⁴⁸ Tito’s speculation comes across as a compensatory projection, palpable in the tentative language in which it is delivered. The prerogative to inscribe social differentiation, seen earlier with the Almillategui family, is repeated here to evoke a regime of financial expansion that is fundamentally about conceding to a transformation of American empire, now in charge of upholding a new global financial order that hinges on the dollar.

The specific ways since the 1970s in which the contemporary infrastructure of finance capital keeps sustaining a totality in tendential crisis are opaque.⁴⁹ At the very minimum, we can say the structure of dependency of the concessionary enclave makes the national turn to financial markets an expression of the needs of the global hegemon and its potential “autumn.” As pointed out above, the 1970s represent a fundamental transformation of the international financial order and the role of the US within it. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin have shown how the American decision in 1971 to effectively dismantle the Bretton Woods system “decreased one set of perceived restrictions on the US” while at the same time it “expanded not only international status but the responsibilities of the Federal Reserve and US Treasury.”⁵⁰ The literary form internalizes a national transition that presupposes a larger transition in the global financial order, where the US is no longer responsible solely for its own social formation but also for securing and validating confidence in the dollar. Confidence in the dollar as a new necessity for competition in the world market makes the transformed playing field a humiliating one for neocolonial capitalist classes after a period where national developmentalist sovereignty seemed possible. The racial resentment of the scene alternates between mourning for the transgressed national

sovereignty represented by finance and enjoying its privileges as a hedonistic inscription of interlocked racial and gendered stigma.⁵¹

Therefore, the comportment, even as it preserves neocolonial prerogatives, also denounces exclusion from privileges that have disappeared. Right after the encounter with Tanaka, Tito steps outside one last time. He often complains about the heat. Even the sun's reflection in the rearview mirror of his car bothers him:

outside the heat is asphyxiating, the sun, Mariana, it blinds me, to protect myself I hurry to put on my sunglasses and...I feel safe to walk through these streets...the ones our generation has witnessed changing... thousands of people, of traders...who come and go from skyscrapers like this one...the First National City Bank, the Chase Manhattan Bank, the Banco do Brazil, the Bank of Boston and London's...Little or nothing do they know that when you and I were children...we used to play in those same spots... used to be empty lots or giant, fancy houses ...from one day to the next, they were sold, demolished or renovated, like that of Banco Comercial Antioqueño.⁵²

By incorporating references to changes in the urban landscape as part of the literary construction of a dependent elite's perspective, the novel proleptically gestures at a technique that Honduran-Salvadorean writer Horacio Castellanos Moya developed further a few decades later.⁵³ The denunciatory quality of testimonio suddenly appears as a parody of ruling class delusions. The new is resented through a valorization of the old, by way of a projection of exclusion viz-a-viz changes in the built environment. The parody of speaking from a position of exclusion while enjoying hermetic privileges emphasizes Tito's mental acrobatics as futile, as if they resembled the impossibility of continued accumulation within a totality in tendential crisis, registering a repressed consciousness of its reality.

But the generality of catastrophe implied in the looming over of impossible accumulation is at its most palpable as the novel comes to an end, when the use of montage to generate suspense takes over the narrative mode. Its accelerated repetition insinuates Tito's arrival to the perimeter of the Presidential Palace to ratify the treaty, where several slums are located, evoking it as a virtual form of social disintegration. As the novel comes to an end, it exacerbates action-packed, surrealist suspense.⁵⁴ After he tells his driver Elias to take him to the palace, he remembers the guerrilla leader Cero commanding him into a bus to go to the airport, fragmenting the memory of their preparations, "packing up weapons...putting away the large quantities of ammunition, hand grenades, dynamite candles," with a list of the luxury brand names he sees along the ride in the diegetic present, "LUCES, Christian Dior/ Pierre Cardin/ Givenchi/ John Kloss/ Ives St. Laurent."⁵⁵ Mournful hedonism is operating at full speed, rapidly collapsing memories of the ride to the airport to escape to Libya with

snippets of rescue negotiations. The scene becomes a parody of a car chase, turning the city into a virtual encounter with death, “Cero screaming, either stop or I kill you, Mariana, the racket of the motor...Elias, take the Justo Arosemena avenue...the guerrilla approaches the driver, if you stop the car I blow you up...aiming the gun at his thick and sweaty neck.”⁵⁶ The foreground is lit with action; the vivid settings of brutality intermingle with erotic memories of Mariana until, “lowering his head... he is certain it is not worth remembering...but he is stuck in a morbid game and he knows it.”⁵⁷ The sequence reaches a peak with this moment of ambivalent empathy, amplifying the stigma of decomposition while simultaneously asserting it as part of the social whole.⁵⁸ As Tito readies himself to assert his class prerogatives, the novel relativizes an appearance of absoluteness with the distance of an unequivocal judgment. The stream of consciousness turns on its protagonist, showing how he cries his way to the bank, by way of a canal treaty that ensures the smooth reordering of a shifting structure of dependency, “a morbid game.” The composition of this “morbid game” is the concrete means by which the literary form labors to make visible an abstract historical structure: mournful hedonism attunes us to the formalization of overlapping transitions in a complex ensemble of social totalities that generate new forms of real but abstract coercions.⁵⁹

Thrilling Decompositions

As literary form, mournful hedonism can only go so far. The suspenseful unraveling of the *Bildungsroman* is a sign of its breakdown. After the parody of the car chase, a switch to the perspective of Elias reinforces the relativization of absolute reflexes, one of the few times the prose focalizes a perspective other than Tito’s: “Elias, for his part, is bored. This patron is extremely laconic, a tomb, nothing like the Jiménez, who left to the United States; he wipes the sweat off his forehead, he doubts he’ll last much longer with this weird family.”⁶⁰ Tito’s centrality is diminished in his portrayal as interchangeable patron. The driver can dismiss the damaged validity of abstract values like nation and family, knowing full well that the only binding force is the restricted means of earning a wage. Both oligarchic nostalgia and nationalist aspirations are turned into empty ideals. The sudden importance and audacity of the secondary character relativizes the normative reflexes of Tito’s milieu, exalting the comedy of the situation and reaching a peak when the narrative switches back to Tito’s claim of liking Elias for being a stereotypically submissive worker. The racialized description was undermined before it was even delivered, turning the judgement of “submission” into a clownish projection of domination: “like a good Indian, always quiet...tamed, lets someone else do, say, decide, and he only knows how to follow, to abide, to begrudgingly please...that is how he gets to feel just how he likes to, I mean, how he feels in his puddle: upset, tired, oppressed, irritated.”⁶¹ The relativization of Tito’s inner world collapses his defense mechanisms, parodying his projection as a conviction for *his own* neocolonial subjugation.

This scene also pays a nod to Panamanian writer Rogelio Sinan's short story "Todo un conflicto de sangre" (1946), where a Nazi German trader is convinced her driver from the interior is gradually turning her into a Black woman, until she seduces him at the end instead. The intertextual relation suggests the diminished stature of the oligarchic ruling class in the world-system. Whereas postwar fantasies sustained by internal accumulation could criticize the ruling class by amplifying the absurdity of the racial and gendered hierarchies they created (Sinan), the fantasy performed by Guardia's novel, building on previous achievements in the literary sphere, can only work through the national past by acknowledging the humiliating reality of being an imperial lackey, a reality that cannot be easily racialized or sexualized away.⁶²

A culminating trajectory of surrealist suspense further evokes stagnant national productivity, most perceptible when we contrast the depictions of the slum neighborhoods of El Marañón, Calidonia, and El Chorrillo at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Tito first describes their sight as "ants" coming down the "hills," a familiar gesture of the hedonistic prerogative to treat others with disdain. Although treated indifferently, super-exploitation is one of the possible ways the Panamanian structure of dependency reproduces an economic periphery.⁶³ It "comes back" as a kind of exaggerated immiseration, a reminder of the compromised hegemony of the neocolonial ruling class, where the relative surplus population stands for an impasse between the private wealth of the elite and the social wealth of the nation. After he orders his driver to take the quickest road to the palace, "strewn with puddles and mud, reeking of fish,"⁶⁴ physical discomfort foreshadows the recognition of Mariana's death, amplified by the cross-cutting of "I swear! It was an accident" with memories of love making, "you and I in Las Cumbres, breathlessly climbing up and down the path with the exotic plants, our bodies recorded in the pupils of the shadows."⁶⁵ The dissonant sequence emphasizes generalized catastrophe as Tito covers his nose to no avail, while informal markets erupt into the scene: "lotto vendors sitting in the middle of the street, try your luck!, a scream, another, a traffic jam, cars running into wheelbarrows, trucks, bikes, drunken motorcyclists..."⁶⁶ Chaos and chance give way to a miniature model of the country's social polarization. The distinct trajectory of entropy evokes the unnerving consequences of adhering, then betraying, the ideals of national developmentalism. The market is taken over by descriptions of surrounding luxury hotels and private yachts, montaged with anti-imperialist slogans, "NO BASES! GRINGOS GO!...WE ARE NO LONGER MEAT FOR IMPERIALISM," followed by memories of Tito in his living room while held hostage, catching the announcement of Mariana's death over the radio, since men and women were separated 24 hours into the hostage takeover. The patterns give the montage a naturalist-surrealist quality.⁶⁷ His memory of physical deterioration as Elias is about to pull up to the palace, "a diffuse pain, with the urge to puke,"⁶⁸ reinforces his journey across the city as a spiraling progression of social deterioration. The result is a crystallization of doubt about the hegemony of a diminished peripheral bourgeoisie, figured as a "desperate

fear of slipping down the slope of class domination” and experiencing the misery they condemn onto others.⁶⁹

As he remembers seeing from the living room window the paramedics taking her corpse out of his house, the “shuddering symptoms of the unconscious and deep impersonal volcanic forces” characteristic of the classed perspective of naturalism become evident in his reaction:⁷⁰ He clings desperately to her, “they were saying your name, repeating it over the radio...what right do they have, Mariana,” confirming his own decadence in a final moment of stunned comprehension, “you extending over the hard stretcher? Your smooth body? Your long and warm thighs? I close my eyes...a grey wind blows across the bay.”⁷¹ Tito behaves according to the new needs of his class, as if it were a binding, subconscious force. In doing so, the obstinate preservation of his class interests also registers a diminution of their position in the capitalist world-system, a self-interested critique that keeps the elite on its toe. At the same time, the form shows *obliquely* how the reordering of dependency into an offshore enclave doubles as national productive stagnation and class disintegration across the totality under the auspices of a new financial empire.

In conclusion, *El último juego* relies on temporal concentration and montage in a pastiche of modernism to unfold a history of *class compulsions*. As literary form and social process, mournful hedonism formalizes the strategies of an intra-competitive, financialized ruling class to make sense of its alienating self-preservation. The new critical knowledge may illuminate, but it is not guaranteed, the historical reluctance of Central American elites to deal with the disproportionate weight the concessionary structure of dependency exerts in the social organization of the territory. The critical mapping of the form figures social disintegration as part of a shared, contemporary plane of historical transformations, determined in the Panamanian social formation by the reordering to the offshore enclave of a historical structure of dependency, the concessionary enclave. The concept attunes us to how the literary composition evokes in the alternation of narrative and descriptive modes larger social relations, where the mobilization of gendering and racializing codes doubles as a parody of defense mechanisms. The arrangement makes visible stagnant national productivity and a qualitative transformation of American empire, but in the transgression of generic conventions. The abject comportment of mournful hedonism is, in this way, a point of affinity between part and whole that reveals connections between literary and social features that were previously unavailable for scrutiny, or in other words, a “social ontology” that unfolds in itself by compelling interpretation.

Notes

1. Particularly *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962) by Carlos Fuentes, a comparison scholar Ileana Rodriguez briefly pursues in *Women, Guerrillas and Love* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 27. Guardia also credits Mario Vargas Llosa as an important influence. See Roy C. Boland-Osegueda, "Entrevista a Gloria Guardia: una escritora de profesion y vocacion," *Antípodas* 23 (2012) 11-28.
2. György Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1989) 144.
3. See, Arturo Arias, *Taking their Word* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 62; Rodriguez, *Women, Guerrillas and Love* 20-23.
4. Rodriguez, *Women, Guerrillas and Love* 20-23.
5. The argument rehearses the isomorphism of culture and literary text, collapsing their specificities. In contrast, my essay attempts to straddle two diametric positions: taking seriously material conditions, but also elaborating how aesthetic form achieves a modicum of autonomy. The aim is to balance an almost total separation between the spheres of literature and reality. See Roberto Schwarz, "Objective Form," *Two Girls* (London: Verso, 2012) 10-32.
6. For examples of representational analyses of Mariana, see Maida Watson, "Casa, mujer y nación en la trilogía Maramargo," *Antípodas* 23 (2012): 73-84; Elena Grau-Lleveria, "Relaciones de poder como juegos estratégicos," *Confluencia* 21.1 (Fall 2005): 158-167; Barbara Dröscher, "Huerfanas y otras sin madres," *Revista de Critica Literaria Latinoamericana* (2004) 267-296.
7. Gloria Guardia, *El Último Juego* (San Jose: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1986 [1977]) 9, all translations of the novel are my own. This quote is a translation adapted from Rodriguez, *Women, Guerrillas and Love*.
8. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 11-13.
9. My use of "abject" is loosely inspired by Endnotes Collective's "The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection" (2014).
10. Guardia 9.
11. Guardia 104
12. Guardia 105
13. Even her name reinforces a close affinity between the character and the failure of Panamanian nationalism, by recalling Mariano Arosemena, the "grandfather" of the nation.
14. For the only account that comes close to scrutinizing this formal element, see Elena Grau-Lleveria, "Desencuentros en un proyecto nacional," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 82.2 (2005): 195.
15. Guardia 11. The original text is in both English and Spanish.
16. Guardia 11
17. Marixa Lasso, *Erased: The Untold Story of the Panama Canal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019) 52.
18. To characterize the class composition of the elite, I draw from Julio Manduley, "Panama: Dependent Capitalism and Beyond," *Latin American Perspectives* 7.2/3 (1980): 57-74; Ricauter Soler, "Panamá: Nación y Oligarquía" (1976), *Antología del pensamiento Crítico Panameño Contemporáneo* (Buenos Aires: CLASCO, 2018) 25-52; Humberto Ricord, "Los clanes de la oligarquía panameña y el golpe militar de 1968" (1983), *Antología del pensamiento Crítico Panameño Contemporáneo* (Buenos Aires: CLASCO, 2018) 83-101.

19. On the ideologies of Panamanian liberalism, see Ricaurte Soler, *Formas ideológicas de la nación panameña* (Habana: Casa de las Americas, 1963). It is also worth noting that Gloria Guardia belonged to this merchant faction of the oligarchic ruling class, which makes her novel, in a way, a laudable act of class betrayal.
20. The Canal was not reordered toward internal accumulation until the year 2000, when the ownership transfer to Panama turned official, as agreed upon by the Torrijos-Carter treaty of 1977. This is the same treaty the novel references in its plot.
21. For an account of the relatively autonomous agrarian structure of the isthmus, see Edelberto Torres Rivas, *History and Society in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) 22-36.
22. See Soler, "Panamá: Nación y Oligarquía" 30.
23. Guardia 78.
24. For more on the artistic dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, see Emilio Sauri, "The Abstract, the Concrete, and the Labor of the Novel," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 51:2 (2018).
25. Diana Balmori, Stuart F. Voss, and Miles L. Wortman, *Notable Family Networks in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 52-78.
26. Guardia 168-169
27. Guardia 154
28. Soler, "Panamá: Nación y Oligarquía," 36-46; Manduley, "Panama: Dependent Capitalism and Beyond," 61.
29. "Developmental Aspirations at the End of Accumulation," *Mediations* 31.1 (2018).
30. Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1976 [1867]) 789-790.
31. Vanessa Ogle, "Archipelago Capitalism" *American Historical Review* 122.5 (2017) 1451; Ronen Palan, "The second British Empire and the re-emergence of Global Finance," *Legacies of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 54-56.
32. Guardia 31
33. Crucial to Panama's pivot to global financial markets was the influence of Arnold Harberger, the "father" of the Chicago Boys and recurrent advisor to the Torrijos administration. See *Memorandum on fiscal incentives* (Panamá: Dirección General de Planificación y Administración, 1969). For another Chicago Boy economist writing about Panama's financialization at the time, see Harry G. Johnson, "Panama as a Regional Financial Center," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 24.2 (Jan. 1976): 261-286.
34. See Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu, *The Big Ditch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 8, 212-222.
35. In this regard, the form is influenced by feminist thinkers of the time, including Germaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir, Maria Esther Harding and Maria Zambrano. See Roy C. Boland Osegueda, "A Challenging Game," *Antípodas* 23 (2012) 35.
36. Guardia 10.
37. György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971) 182.
38. It is worthwhile to note that across the "foundational fictions" of Latin American literature, the national patriarch, be it intentionally or not, always comes across as pathetic and humiliating, even more so when novels like *Doña Barbara* are explicitly trying to compose a redeeming allegory. In this regard, *El último juego* represents a step forward after the fall of the lettered city; the tradition

achieves a self-conscious grasp of itself, but at a moment when it no longer holds the sway it used to in the construction of a national community.

39. Guardia 15.
40. Guardia 20.
41. Guardia 20
42. I follow the insights of Ruy Mauro Marini's version of dependency theory. See *The Dialectics of Dependency* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022) 113-153.
43. Gandasegui, "Sociedad y Nación: Dinámica electoral el Panamá de la pos-invasión (1990-2015)," *Tareas* 157 (2017) 5-25.
44. On "monetary subjects without cash," see Roberto Schwarz, "An Audacious Book," *Mediations* 27.1-2 (2013-2014).
45. Guardia 113.
46. Guardia 28-29.
47. Guardia 84.
48. Guardia 84.
49. My insights in this regard draw heavily from the work of dependency theorist Ruy Mauro Marini and its readings by Central American scholars, in addition to the German body of work known as value criticism or *Wertkritik*. It is important to note these traditions have points of friction that go beyond the scope of this work. My interpretation of the novel tries to hold to the insights of both as much as is pertinent to the novel, while also drawing from the work in world systems theory of Giovanni Arrighi and the scholarship on monetary theory of Prabhat Patnaik (see *The Value of Money*) and Costas Lapavistas (see *Profiting without Producing*).
50. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2013) 144.
51. The scene clearly mobilizes Asian stereotypes of a "dangerous productivity" that have a long history in American literature. See Colleen Lye, *America's Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 3-11. Guardia was educated mostly in the US. She did her BA at Vassar College and her MA/PhD at Columbia University.
52. Guardia 85-86.
53. Here I am thinking of *La Diabla en el Espejo* (2000) / *She-Devil in the Mirror* (2009).
54. My use of surrealist as descriptor has the work of Luis Buñuel in mind. The literary affinities with surrealist cinema are thematized by the prominence of montage in the composition, especially in the final scenes, and the constant reference to the image of "recording" pupils as seen in the opening line.
55. Guardia 187.
56. Guardia 188-189.
57. Guardia 190.
58. My exploration of the connection between thriller and class decomposition is heavily inspired by Roberto Schwarz, "City of God," *Two Girls* 223-234.
59. See Sauri, "The Abstract, the Concrete, and the Labor of the Novel."
60. Guardia 191.
61. Guardia 195.

62. Although outside the scope of this essay, an important sediment in the novel is the socialist realist work of Joaquin Beleño.
63. Marini, *The Dialectics of Dependency* 113-153.
64. Guardia 195.
65. Guardia 195.
66. Guardia 195.
67. On naturalism, surrealism and cinema, See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 123-133.
68. Guardia 197.
69. Fredric Jameson, "A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion," *Adventures in Realism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007) 266
70. "A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion" 265.
71. Guardia 197.

Chris Gortmaker and Jake Burchard. "Totality Beyond Class: The Limits of Value Criticism." *Mediations* 37.1 (Fall 2025) 85-93. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/totality-beyond-class

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Totality Beyond Class: The Limits of Value Criticism

Chris Gortmaker and Jake Burchard

Totality is a horizon of Marxist analysis in which objects of study are taken up in their logical and political relation to a general concept of the capitalist mode of production and its historical trajectory. This concept orients much Marxist thought because capitalism itself totalizes a set of objective and historically specific constraints that exert selective pressures on social life. While György Lukács originally identifies the methodological imperative to totalize with the potentially revolutionary class consciousness of the proletariat, the collapse of organized class politics over the past 40 years has accompanied not only widespread dismissal of this imperative but also — and more promisingly — avowedly Marxist modifications of totality as a concept. Fredric Jameson exemplifies and perhaps originates this transformed interest in totality in his 1988 essay "History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project." Jameson's key move is to claim that Lukács's critical theory is premised on an "insistence, not on abstract concepts such as 'class' or 'production,' but rather on group experience" (215).¹ Thus, as Neil Larsen argues, at the same time as Jameson makes a case for a return to totality thinking, he implicitly brackets "the very question, perhaps one of [Lukács's] greatest and most revolutionary theoretical contributions, of (class) consciousness as form, as structured in its relation to reification and to social form as such" (83).² Revised, in this way, beyond its immanence to a Marxist concept of class, totality thinking takes on a more abstract and capacious form.

Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital, a collection of essays edited by Kevin Floyd, Jen Hedler Phillis, and Sarika Chandra, brings Marxist research in value criticism, social reproduction theory, and racial formation theory to bear on this project of revising the concept of totality away from the concept of class — primarily within a U.S. and capitalist-core context. The strength of *Totality Inside Out* lies in its ambition to modify our general concept of capitalism as a totality and, in turn, to sketch a more expansive and flexible conceptual space for totality thinking than that afforded by Lukács and, more broadly, by twentieth-century Western Marxism. The volume’s theoretical introduction, shaped largely by the late Kevin Floyd, exemplifies this ambition. Floyd’s work on the concept of totality in relation to sexuality and gender invigorates the volume’s attempts to map the entailments of its “inside-out” Marxist totality across “sites of contemporary political conflict over racial and economic justice, materialist feminist and queer critique, climate change, and aesthetic value” (1).

How is the volume’s concept of totality “inside-out?” Oriented by the abstract categorial analysis of value criticism, the essays collected here build on recent de-centering projects in Western Marxism by shifting attention from the working class and capital-wage relation to surplus populations and, more generally, to “identities and ideas historically understood to be secondary to the primary functioning of capitalism” (12).³ The volume justifies this shift by ascribing an identitarian particularism to class politics in general. This appears in the theoretical introduction as the premise that the “universalization of the socioeconomic realm that sits at the center of orthodox totality thinking” is actually a projection of the identitarian standpoint of the labor movement — which can be grasped primarily as a “skilled, male, and often white industrial worker” movement (6). Thus, while Lukács and a value-critical theorist like Moishe Postone would disagree over whether the totalized whole is the true or the false, the wager of *Totality Inside Out* is that both share an identitarian standpoint because they falsely “universalize” capitalist value relations that are in fact particular to the conditions of the “industrial working class” (6).⁴ Altogether, the essays collected here posit or assume a general concept of capitalism according to which the concept of class is largely, if not entirely, commensurate with the concept of ascriptive identity in terms of how these concepts are structured by capitalism’s reproduction as a total social system. This analysis of class as a “social identity” brackets the common Marxist distinction between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself, and by identifying class with the latter, suggests that class is an affiliative relation that, for emancipatory politics, does not have a structural primacy — and therefore a strategic priority — over ascriptive identity categories like race or gender. Readers will find that *Totality Inside Out*’s six chapters are variably successful as test cases for this general concept of capitalism and its reliance on the abstract categorial analysis of value criticism. The volume at once enables incisive but generous critiques of intersectionality and liberal forms of identity politics while at the same time posing theoretical interventions that can be hard to distinguish from the latter.

Totality Inside Out's first two contributions — by Marina Vishmidt and Zoe Sutherland on one hand, and Tim Kreiner on the other — exemplify this approach to class and ascriptive identity. Vishmidt and Sutherland convincingly argue that the totality thinking of social reproduction theory (SRT) partially overcomes the analytical shortcomings of intersectionality. Since intersectionality “fail[s] to go any further than a description of experience, leaving capitalist power relations, and thus potential resistance to them, un- or under-theorized” (73), Vishmidt and Sutherland contend that “intersecting” forms of identity oppression must be situated within the capitalist processes of surplus value production and labor power reproduction. This critique admirably draws the now hegemonically liberal jargon of intersectionality into the fold of Marxism and is an exemplary way to introduce Marxist analysis to those who might otherwise be skeptical of its capacity to make sense of ascriptive identity.

Yet Vishmidt and Sutherland also argue that we need to decenter the category of “labor” in SRT and Marxism more generally, and this move proves less coherent than their critique of intersectionality. On their account, SRT tends to posit an “integrative ontology of labor” within capitalism that, in its synthetic ambition to grasp waged and unwaged labor within a totality, “could court the same danger that Marxist feminist critique once spotted in the ‘workerist’ politics of the factory — the moralized affirmation of labor” (76). Vishmidt and Sutherland are right to critique SRT’s occasional failure to grasp the political entailments of the distinction between waged and unwaged labor. Yet they all too quickly identify strategic labor politics with the “moralized affirmation of labor.” Applying their theoretical position to a strategic situation makes this clear. When organizing childcare workers, making sure not to “affirm” that they are paid wages is esoteric at best, and clearly less important than helping these workers achieve solidarity in the process of winning better wages — not to mention understanding that they hold more power within capitalism than stay-at-home parents. Vishmidt and Sutherland’s critique of labor’s “moralized affirmation” risks itself becoming a moralized position.

To ameliorate the danger of “affirming labor,” Vishmidt and Sutherland center the concept of “value” and decenter the category of “labor.” As their “analysis of value relations” falls into esoteric step with Moishe Postone, *Wertkritik*, and *Endnotes*, it risks an abstract and moralistic emphasis on “affirmation” at the expense of a strategic emphasis on concrete political problems. More pointedly, the question of whether or not to “affirm” labor risks an idealist condescension to working-class institutions like unions. Workers organizing as workers aren’t duped into “affirming labor” because they are trapped within a value-productive capitalist “social identity.” Rather, absent an institutionally powerful left, it doesn’t make strategic sense for workers to organize around demands that negate their structural, value-productive position within capitalism.⁵ Which is not to say that value-critical approaches to Marxism are not useful. Much incisive work in *Mediations* draws on the macro-

historical insights afforded by value criticism's categorial analysis of capitalist social forms. The point is that Vishmidt and Sutherland exemplify how value criticism's abstraction poses analytic and political liabilities. Indeed, their "analysis of value relations" leads them to claim that "gender and race are as operative within capitalist value relations as commodified labor power" (77) and, in turn, to posit a "'negative totality' that would situate the logics of gender, race, and normativity within the form of value" (79). While the imperative to relate ascriptive identity categories to the capitalist form of value is unobjectionable, the claim that these categories are "as operative" as "commodified labor power" is controversial, yet assumed here rather than argued. Arguing this claim would necessitate careful empirical study of causes and their complex interrelations. But much like the intersectionality theory Vishmidt and Sutherland admirably critique, their "negative totality" brings important social relations into view while falling short of a concrete analysis of how these relations function in capitalism.

Like Vishmidt and Sutherland, Tim Kreiner attempts a Marxist revision of non-Marxist theories of ascriptive identity. Kreiner argues that the New Left's embrace of anti-normativity is instructive for the Marxist understanding of class struggle today. Just as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* "illustrated a feminism the normative force of which was the *refusal of norms*" (43), Kreiner argues that his "critical" view of the proletariat should supersede what he calls the "normative" view. While this "normative" view holds "dispossession of the means of production," "subsumption beneath the wage," and manual labor to be the criteria for proletarian class position, Kreiner's "critical" view holds this criterion to be "differential access to the means of subsistence" (34-35). With these terms, Kreiner offers a rich comparative discussion of New-Left theories of identity. But his analysis of the problem of class demobilization since mid-century works via abstract rather than determinate negation. That is, in Vishmidt and Sutherland's apt phrasing, if social movements cohere around "wagers of unity" in which gender, race, or class "are often formulated negatively" (67), Kreiner's "critical" view of the proletariat makes a "wager of unity" whose formulation is far too abstract to be analytically meaningful. In short, Kreiner jettisons a century of Marxist class theory for the phrase "differential access to the means of subsistence." In the resemblance of Kreiner's argument to a post-structuralist rejection of normativity — and, necessarily, a rejection of class analysis — readers may find it difficult to see how his "critical" proletariat clarifies the terrain of emancipatory politics. This is because, like most "anti-normative" positions, Kreiner's position relies on an incomplete critique of a particular norm — in this case the Lukácsian or "traditional" Marxist norm that class is the primary historical medium for overturning capitalism. Kreiner's "critical" concept of the proletariat is incomplete because it brackets the question of exploitation, and therefore brackets the analytic and strategic force of Marxist class analysis. Marxism defines classes in terms of exploitation because exploitation confers a form of power on the proletariat to resist

their particular form of domination. Since workers are exploited, they can hurt the capitalist class financially by withdrawing their labor to interrupt production and circulation. But this is not the case for the “critical” proletariat Kreiner aggregates in terms of subjects’ “differential to the means of subsistence.” The surplus populations, “underclasses,” etc., of this “critical” proletariat may possess “revolutionary motives” (30) to expropriate the capitalists’ means of production, but they lack the “normative” proletariat’s strategic location in the structure of production necessary to do so.⁶

The volume’s next two essays — by Sarika Chandra and Chris Chen on one hand, and Arthur Scarritt on the other — also focus on surplus populations but emphasize how their often racialized character buttresses capitalist accumulation. Both essays, like those preceding them, take up crucial questions and offer some important insights, but generally bracket the strategic analysis afforded by Marxist class theory. Chandra and Chen try to break out of what they call the “race/class problematic” (136) by theorizing the concept of race not primarily in relation to class but in relation to a general concept of “accumulation.” Their lucid overview of racial formation theory maps out the stakes of various positions in this field of study and draws them into the orbit of “three co-constitutive, recursive, and specifically capitalist mechanisms: exploitation, expropriation, and expulsion” (138). Thus Chandra and Chen attend to how the capital accumulation process, in excess of the exploitative wage relation at its core, involves racialized processes like the naked theft of productive capacities and resources — as in chattel slavery, indentured servitude, colonialism, debt peonage, and prison labor (155) — and the expulsion of subjects from the labor process altogether — like the disabled or those whose skills are no longer fit for the new economy. Within this schema, they pursue the value-critical approach exemplified by Vishmidt and Sutherland. That is, Chandra and Chen argue that to bring these three “exes” into focus “does not require a claim of causal primacy but instead enables us to re-theorize how capitalism produces relational interlinkages among different domains of social life through a general measure of capitalist value” (157).

With this re-theorization, Chandra and Chen, like Kreiner, bracket the analytic primacy that Marxism has traditionally attributed to the material interests, rooted in the wage relation, that give rise to class struggle in capitalism.⁷ While Chandra and Chen are right to be skeptical of abstract debates about causal primacy, they inadequately defend the strategic implications of their shift away from the concept of class and toward a concept of the “general measure of capitalist value.” Like Moishe Postone’s concept of “abstract social domination,” their concept of “value” and its three “exes” risks abstracting their analysis of race beyond the realm of strategic politics.⁸⁹ Consequently, Chandra and Chen offer an incomplete critique of class politics at present. They argue that left critics like Barbara and Karen Fields, Adolph Reed, and Walter Benn Michaels approach race “as an ascriptive social phenomenon [that is] primarily subsumed within the project of forging working-class solidarity” (161), and that this approach’s focus on “economic inequality” and,

in turn, a “distributionist” understanding of capitalism forecloses challenges to the mode of production itself (175).¹⁰ Against this inequality-focused “distributionist” approach to critiquing race, Chandra and Chen suggest that today “simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-racist” strategy should not be “reducible to...the project of assembling affirmative multi-racial working class identities” (136) — in other words, should not be reducible to working-class organizing. They elaborate: “The choice of inequality as a measure of racial and economic injustice frames both racism and class formation mainly in terms of maldistribution, limiting the horizon of politics to redistributive measures aimed at closing the inequality gap between distinct groups occupying differential class positions” (154-55). Chandra and Chen’s “distributionist” epithet is a red herring because the point of egalitarian class politics is that class-based redistributive demands can fundamentally challenge the capitalist mode of production, rather than merely its form of distribution. Social-democratic demands in the U.S., like Medicare for All, Childcare for All, expanded unionization rights, etc., are immediately “distributionist,” but in their capacity to unify workers on a mass scale around their material interests, they harbor the potential to build the institutionalized left that is the condition of possibility for any progressive challenge to capitalism and the exploitative wage relation at its core. Merely anti-racist politics, on the other hand, necessarily entails nothing more than a “distributionist” political horizon because it aims to close discriminatory gaps between racial groups while leaving the exploitation intrinsic to the wage form unchallenged.¹¹ This is the anti-racism that today, in Chandra and Chen’s apt phrasing, has been transformed into “a vast counterinsurgent infrastructure that disrupts, delegitimizes, and demobilizes political insurgencies by both concealing deep intragroup conflicts over political ideology and stigmatizing emergent forms of interracial solidarity” (169).

So when Chandra and Chen assert that class politics focused on inequality can only define “the alternative to neoliberal antiracism in terms of the social democratic management of the distributive consequences of capitalist production” (175 n. 52), they are only partly right, and the incompleteness of their critique is exemplary of *Totality Inside Out*’s tendency toward the depoliticized abstraction of value criticism. That is, Chandra and Chen are right in their implication that mid-century social democracy is not reproducible at present, but the onus is on them to name a popular left demand that is not immediately “distributionist.” They are also right that the “self-expanding ecocidal character of capitalist imperatives, systemic constraints on redistributive policy, existing critiques of full employment as a normative ideal, and the historical trajectory of actually existing social democracies” (175) pose immense challenges for the left today. Value-critical Marxism helps bring these challenges into view — but its abstraction can also produce critiques of left strategy like Chandra and Chen’s that struggle to account for political exigencies like the necessity to build a mass, institutionalized left around material interests that, in the U.S. today, in part

take the strategic form of social-democratic demands. Overall, however, Chandra and Chen's essay is an ambitious attempt to map theoretical approaches to post-Jim Crow racial politics and investigate therein areas of possible compatibility with left politics. So while their reliance on Michael Dawson's concept of "linked fate" (162-63, 167-68) and Tommie Shelby's concept of "nested" solidarities (163) cashes out rather ambiguously in their argument, a deeper elaboration of this argument in their book-in-progress should be of high interest to readers.¹²

In the next chapter, Arthur Scarritt also deemphasizes the relation between class organizing and the analysis of racism at present, but does so on the grounds that neoliberalism is not primarily a regime of exploitation rooted in the class system but a system of racialized rentierism. While Scarritt's sweeping historical story agrees with the widely held Marxist analysis that modern racism emerged as part of an elite-driven process of disciplining labor and rationalizing inequality, he dismisses the centrality of exploitation to this process. For him, the early European colonists of North America and Peru sowed racial division in order to maintain their elite position in a feudal social order as an "aristocratic" end-in-itself. Scarritt uses this claim to draw an analogy between early colonialism and neoliberalism that is only skin-deep, for it is not clear how neoliberalism can be adequately grasped as a system of "global white supremacy." While the early-colonial rentier and the neoliberal rentier may both benefit from what David Harvey has called "accumulation by dispossession," Scarritt does not explain how the neoliberal rentier relies on an institutionalized system of racism. Rather, he points out that neoliberal rentiers or those they exploit are disproportionately one "race" or another. That the persistence of racial disparities into the present might be primarily explained by impersonal market forces, which invariably compound racial disparities produced under past regimes of institutionalized racism, does not seem to pose a problem for Scarritt. Ultimately, his argument relies on a conceptual separation of the "political" from the "economic" that cashes out in a historical separation of what he calls "the class system" of capital and labor from "the racial system" of rentiers and racialized surplus populations (115). He consequently argues that neoliberalism is "an explicit form of racial rule with its own independent racial logics" (115) and stages an analytical separation of race from political economy that mirrors the moralizing pathologies of liberal anti-racism. Nonetheless, his account of how rentierist processes of redistribution displace class bargaining in the neoliberal period is generally compelling. Less abstractly racialized accounts of this displacement — Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner's, for example — complicate Kreiner's narrowly race-driven account of neoliberalism and what may follow it.¹³

In the volume's penultimate chapter, Sarah Brouillette and the late Joshua Clover aptly remind us that "the consequential losses stemming from a divorce of the political and the economic are many" (196). They incisively critique shallow accounts of neoliberalism that split the economic from the political by failing to relate the

policy of the past 40 years to macroeconomic dynamics of capital accumulation. And turning to the realm of art, they critique recent left defenses of aesthetic autonomy as entailing “exactly the viewpoint we have been detailing, wherein the political is understood to exist as its own content, separated from the economic and thus able to stand in opposition to it” (197). This reified “viewpoint” follows, they argue, from “the fetish of autonomy” and its commitment to “‘unsubsumed’ art, characterized as possessing and/or figuring autonomy from the discipline of the marketplace, as bearer of value independent from and consistently opposed to political-economic value” (197). Brouillette and Clover rightly condemn art that would, as such, arrogate to itself an “*integrally effective* resistance to the depredations of contemporary capitalism” (207). But at this point in their argument, Brouillette and Clover construct a straw man of the specific left-autonomy position on art they have in their sights. Contra their polemic, left-autonomy advocates like Walter Benn Michaels and Nicholas Brown identify art’s autonomy with neither its “unsubsumed” status nor its political efficacy. Rather, for these critics, autonomy is an *artwork’s assertion* of medium-specific self-legislation that has no instrumental purpose; an artwork’s status as “unsubsumed” is, on the other hand, a *sociological description* of artistic production that is not subject to a certain degree of market heteronomy. Further, the left-autonomy position not only claims that no art at present is plausibly “unsubsumed” (thus, Brown contends, art must overcome its commodity character by asserting its aesthetic autonomy), but also holds art’s medium-specific self-legislation to be politically *ineffective*.¹⁴ Michaels describes the artworks he interprets as bearing a “class aesthetic” rather than a “class politics,” and argues that they embody “efforts to produce better art, not a better society.”¹⁵

The stakes of these distinctions about autonomous art are, in many ways, far removed from left debates about political-economic analysis and strategy. But in a journal committed to Marxist research in literature, arts, and culture, it is important to bring these stakes into focus. Brouillette and Clover begin to do so when they paraphrase how autonomous art is, ostensibly, “not determined by a totality of social relations but instead takes those relations in and assesses them from on high” (208). Immediately, “on high” implies a charge of elitism that exemplarily misinterprets the left-autonomy position. Following Brown, if the discipline of interpretation integral to the humanistic study of modern artworks relies on these works’ assertions of medium-specific self-legislation, and if it is unrealistic at present to demand universal access to the noninstrumental education necessary for this humanistic study, a defense of autonomous art constitutes

not a critique of the demand [for noninstrumental education] but, rather, a rebuke to the conditions that make it so. As long as the pursuit of noninstrumental knowledge is reserved for only a few, the directly humanistic noises we make about it are vicious mockeries of themselves.

But the degree to which we no longer make them reveals the degree to which we have stopped pretending our societies are fit for human beings.¹⁶

The distinction between art and nonart is not itself a class distinction, even if the humanistic education requisite for coherently making this distinction often correlates with class position. With the force of Brouillette and Clover's charge of elitism thus acknowledged, their paraphrase of the left-autonomy position brings this position's more general stakes into focus. For what does artistic production have in common with Marxist theory and practice but that each "is not [merely] determined by a totality of social relations but instead takes those relations in and," in a *moment of autonomy*, "assesses them" to produce an artwork, a Marxist analysis, or a strategic action toward an emancipatory end? That the assertion of aesthetic autonomy within an artwork can require a more expensive form of education than the assertion of political autonomy is true, but irrelevant to this point. The left-autonomy position holds that *both* art and politics require moments or aspects of autonomy, and that the failure to grasp the specificity of art's autonomy is a mistake. It is important to extract this basic claim of the left-autonomy position from the distortions of Brouillette and Clover's polemic because a defense of aesthetic autonomy from the left, while esoteric, dramatizes important questions on the left today and, for this reason, deserves more careful scrutiny than offered in their polemic.

Indeed, if the esoteric question of art's autonomy does find an exoteric grip on the arguments of *Totality Inside Out*, it does so heuristically in relation to the concept of class. That is, one of the volume's shortcomings is its inability to acknowledge the aspect of autonomy inherent to class politics. Following foundational value-critical thinkers like Postone and Norbert Trenkle, the working class appears throughout the volume as entirely heteronomous to the reproduction of capitalism as a total social system. Thus, *Totality Inside Out's* refusal of working-class autonomy mirrors Brouillette and Clover's refusal of art's autonomy. The point is that these distinct forms of autonomy are precarious and embattled at present, but both persist — and it is crucial that Marxism does not lose sight of either. Autonomous art may be commodified, but it achieves meaning as medium-specific self-legislation — which is precisely what distinguishes the artwork from the mere commodity: the former can sustain medium-specific interpretation, the latter cannot.¹⁷ Likewise, labor under capitalism may be commodified, but it can (but need not necessarily) achieve a form of self-legislation in revolutionary class consciousness that can contest the reproduction of capitalism. Grasping the autonomy of art necessitates medium-specific analysis of how artworks work on their own terms in historical context, and grasping the political autonomy of the working class necessitates strategic class analysis of the political-economic terrain faced by the left today. Both intellectual endeavors, that is, sublimate abstract theorization within the immanent critique of specific cases: a commitment to political-economic strategy orients class analysis, and a commitment to medium-specificity orients the interpretation of art.

At the root of *Totality Inside Out*'s commitment to turning totality "inside out" is a bracketing — and at points an outright rejection — of this immanent and concretizing approach to class politics (and art). For if there is no emancipatory political possibility, no moment of autonomy, "inside" the capital-wage totality, then — the argument goes — such possibility must somehow lie "outside" of this totality in racialized surplus populations. Given the global collapse of left labor politics and the total trajectory of capitalist development over the past 40 years, this inside-out revision is not without reason. However, its reasoning is incomplete. For this revision only attains coherence at the level of abstraction endemic to the Marxist discourse of value criticism; when situated within the concrete struggles of today's embattled left — particularly in the capitalist core and, more specifically, in the U.S. — the essays in *Totality Inside Out* raise important questions but struggle to achieve analytic or strategic grip. As Brent Ryan Bellamy observes in the volume's final essay on climate change, "the challenge of thinking totality and the Earth system at once is that the scale of abstraction leaves little room for practical action" (213). That is, beyond Bellamy's compelling overview of strategies for representing climate change in terms of the Marxist concept of totality, his ecological problematic dramatizes how the volume generally struggles to mediate between abstract categorial analysis and concrete political analysis.

To be clear, value criticism is indispensable for analyzing the macro-historical logic of capitalism's unfolding as a total social system; it enables incisive general accounts of how the left confronts a different terrain of struggle today than in the twentieth century. And totality's "inside" surely mediates its "outside," and vice versa; exploitation is interrelated with processes of expropriation and expulsion, just as working-class composition is bound up with surplus-population formation within processes of capital accumulation. But in order for a value-critical standpoint to be a substantive innovation within Marxist analysis, this standpoint requires, in every case, context-specific analysis of not only how these "insides" and "outsides" of totality are mediated by political-economic structures, but also how these structures present context-specific strategic openings or constraints for left politics. Crucially, left analysis must not lose sight of proletarian agency and the strategic primacy of class. While the conditions of class formation have changed, it persists as the primary medium of left politics. Workers subsumed within the totality of capitalist value production can think and act as a class to actualize a world beyond capitalism that benefits all. These workers need a left that will convince, welcome, and support them as they struggle within and against capitalism.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, "History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project" in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010).
2. Neil Larsen, "Lukács sans Proletariat, or Can History and Class Consciousness Be Rehistoricized?" in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics, Literature*, ed. Timothy Bewes et al. (London: Continuum, 2011).
3. See, for example, Neil Larsen et al., *Marxism and the Critique of Value* (MCM, 2014); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge UP, 1995).
4. Readers will likely want more explanation on this point, since, despite their differences, Lukács and Postone hold capitalist value relations to be logically rather than empirically universal. That is, they hold the universality of commodification and class to mean that anyone can be subject to its constraints, not that everyone is.
5. Adolph Reed and Mark Dudzik's definition is helpful here: "By left we mean a reasonably coherent set of class-based and anti-capitalist ideas, programmes and policies that are embraced by a cohort of leaders and activists who are in a position to speak on behalf of and mobilize a broad constituency. Such a left would be, or would aspire to be, capable of setting the terms of debate in the ideological sphere and marshaling enough social power to intervene on behalf of the working class in the political economy. Some measures of that social power include: ability to affect both the enterprise wage and the social wage; power to affect urban planning and development regimes; strength to intervene in the judicial and regulatory apparatus to defend and promote working-class interests; power not only to defend the public sphere from encroachments by private capital but also to expand the domain of non-commoditized public goods; and generally to assert a force capable of influencing, even shaping, public policy in ways that advance the interests and security of the working-class majority." Mark Dudzik and Adolph Reed, "The Crisis of Labour and the Left in the United States," *Socialist Register* 51 (2015): 351-52.
6. There is an assumption running throughout *Totality Inside Out* that the working class no longer exists as an organizable force for left politics. Instructive here is Kim Moody's critique of Clover's book *Riot. Strike. Riot.* (Verso, 2016). Contra Clover's demotion of class-based organizing in favor of a flexible and spontaneous politics arising from racialized surplus populations, Moody argues that the working class, with its "hands...on the high and low-tech levers of production, distribution, and social provision," has "both the numbers and vast potential far in excess of the surplus population" to challenge capital. See Moody, "Organize. Strike. Organize," *Jacobin*, May 22, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/05/riot-strike-riot-joshua-clover-review>.
7. Vivek Chibber mounts a powerful defense of the analytic primacy of class-based material interests for left politics at present in *The Class Matrix: Social Theory After the Cultural Turn* (Harvard University Press, 2022).
8. See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*.
9. Alberto Toscano critiques a similar form of depoliticization in the Postone-influenced "communization" theory of collectives like Endnotes and Théorie Communiste. See Toscano, "Now and Never," in *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles* (Autonomedia, 2012), 85-101.

10. Chandra and Chen concede Karen and Barbara Fields's argument in *Racecraft* (Verso, 2012) that "racial difference does not explain racial oppression but is itself in need of explanation," and that racism and economic inequality are analytically inseparable (149). Yet they do not follow Fields and Fields's consequential argument to its end, which entails the "abandonment of race as a coherent category of analysis" (148). While a more substantive engagement with Chandra and Chen's critique of Fields and Fields is beyond the scope of this review, it seems that the forms of "race" that Chandra and Chen claim exceed Fields and Fields's analysis are actually explicable within the terms of the latter's concept of "racecraft."
11. Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed, Jr. "The Trouble with Disparity." *Nonsite*, Sept. 2020, <https://nonsite.org/the-trouble-with-disparity/>.
12. For example, Chandra and Chen cite Michael Dawson's affirmative conceptualization of race as "linked fate or group solidarity" to affirm that in "contemporary postwar U.S. black politics... 'racial and ethnic 'group interests have served as a useful proxy for self-interest'" (162). Yet their attempt to re-theorize race as such begs the question of whether racial group interests actually serve as a useful proxy for self-interest today. Here, Adolph Reed's critique of Dawson's 'linked fate' concept is crucial yet not engaged by Chandra and Chen. Reed contends that while Dawson "notes that upper-status blacks are more likely than other blacks to see themselves as having benefited from the politics of racial advancement... he does not consider the possibility that the 'linked fate' phenomenon that he observes may reflect not a mitigation of class consciousness but its expression as an ideology through which those very petit bourgeois strata enact the dominance of a particular definition of the scope and content of black political activity." See Adolph L. Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 46. In short, it is not at all clear that "the concept of 'linked fate' emphasizes how race represents a dynamic context for action that remains in principle compatible with the broad vision of economic justice that the Fieldses endorse" (154). While in the U.S. under Jim Crow, progressive organizing on the basis of a racial "linked fate" was possible and obviously effective, it is debatable whether the Civil Rights Movement that resulted was ever compatible with a socialist egalitarianism. And today, in the contemporary U.S. and much of the developed world, anti-racist demands appear broadly incapable of building mass constituencies that unite workers' material interests and therefore make emancipatory left politics possible. See Adaner Usmani and David Zachariah, "The Class Path to Racial Liberation," *Catalyst*, vol. 5, no. 3, <https://catalyst-journal.com/2021/12/the-class-path-to-racial-liberation>.
13. Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner, "Seven Theses on American Politics," *New Left Review*, no. 138 (December 21, 2022): 5–27. Also see Matthew Karp's critique of how Brenner and Riley approach the racialization of contemporary US politics: Karp, "Party and Class In American Politics." *New Left Review*, no. 139 (2023): 131–44.
14. On the problem of art's subsumption, see Brown, "What We Worry About When We Worry About Commodification: Reflections on Dave Beech, Julian Stallabrass, and Jeff Wall," *Nonsite*, April 5, 2016, <https://nonsite.org/what-we-worry-about-when-we-worry-about-commodification/>.
15. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 171–72. See also, Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Duke UP, 2019), 34.

16. Brown, *Autonomy*, 34.
17. Obviously, art does not always assert its autonomy, and as such can be an indispensable source of pleasure, therapy, entertainment, decoration, propaganda, etc. But autonomous art, when achieved and interpretively grasped, produces new knowledge in sensuous form; philistinism that would reject this vocation of art must not be acceded to if the humanistic study of art is to retain its intellectual exigency as more than an exemplificatory adjunct to philosophy or the social sciences.

Davis Smith-Brecheisen. "A Correct Picture." *Mediations* 37.1 (Fall 2025) 101-108.

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Red Aesthetics: Rodchenko, Brecht, Eisenstein

Todd Cronan

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A Correct Picture

Davis Smith-Brecheisen

Todd Cronan's *Red Aesthetics: Rodchenko, Brecht, Eisenstein* intervenes in two registers at once. In one, it is a deep dive into the work of three towering figures in socialist art. It is by grappling with these artists on their own terms and in all of their complexity that *Red Aesthetics* makes the case for the relevance of these artists today. In doing so, it discovers its second major intervention by producing an account of political works of art that cuts across much of contemporary literary and aesthetic criticism. "Red aesthetics," as Cronan describes it, "is a political form of modernism that aims to capture the complex and changing modernity with an equally complex and changing mode of representation" (2) — modernist forms equal to the task of representing without reproducing social relations under capital. Cronan demonstrates how this aesthetic and political ambition threads through the work of Rodchenko, Brecht, and Eisenstein across five more chapters, one each on Rodchenko and Eisenstein and three on Brecht.

Red Aesthetics begins with Brecht's assertion that the aim of art is to provide "a correct representation of the world" (1), which is a reformulation of Marx's "correct grasp of the present" (1). All three artists, writes Cronan, "seek a means to create a new realism, one that offers a correct picture of the world by breaking with conventional understandings of what that world looks like" (2). If this seems naive, as Cronan suggests it might, it is nonetheless crucial to formally and politically ambitious art:

This “seemingly naive vision of the artist as offering an accurate picture of the world, one that will displace inaccurate ones, is both unfashionable and essential for any leftist account of art and politics” (1).

What makes the work of these artists unfashionable is baked into the very idea of a “correct representation” of the world: “nothing about the pervasive language of correctness, truth, rightness, and accuracy” that characterizes a Red aesthetics is “fashionable,” (2) writes Cronan. From Susan Sontag’s assertion in “Against Interpretation” that a critic’s role not to interpret the work but is instead to “show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is” to the post-critical turn inaugurated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in “Surface Reading,” major strands of critics have had a long-standing impulse to evade accounts of aesthetics that carry a socialist political charge. This political evasion, Cronan argues, cannot be disentangled from the evasion of questions of meaning, intention, and judgment about works of art as they are espoused and practiced by the authors here.

Cronan’s most forceful rebuke of the post-critical sensibility is his engagement with Jacques Rancière, whose “inaccurate picture of the world” depends on the “‘neutralization’ of ‘aesthetic hierarchy’” (3). Finding resonances with Walter Benn Michaels’s critique of both Rancière and certain kinds of art, Cronan argues that Rancière’s argument depends on a vision of the world and art where the primary problem is not exploitation or immiseration but a “‘hierarchical vision of the world,’ one that devalues the standing of the other and of the oppressed” (3). The reason Rancière opposes Brecht’s “dualist vision of art, one committed to surface and depth,” is because it is too polemical and too instructional — too bound up, that is, in the correct way of seeing the world. Indeed, what Rancière (mistakenly) likes about Eisenstein’s “affectively driven films” is that they are “predicated on the ‘direct communication of affects’” (4). One of Cronan’s central insights is to demonstrate that having a wrong view of art — one that privileges the direct communication of affects — and the wrong view of politics — one predicated on the elimination of hierarchies — entail one another and why the artists in this book are opposed to it. The opposite is also true: “The aim of any Red aesthetic is to retrieve the essential difference between redressing hierarchy (how we see one another, a problem of vision) and redressing inequality (how the capitalist exploits the worker)” (5). Thus, a Red aesthetic is committed to the view that art ought to help us “to understand the ‘real social forces’ of capitalism” (5).

As this gloss on Cronan’s engagement with Rancière suggests, there is no question that for Cronan and the artists he is discussing there is a right way and a wrong way to do art and criticism. The wrong way produces a world defined by how we see one another. The correct way addresses inequality as a structural problem. The correct picture of the world, in other words, is one that carries with it an assertion about how the world is and ought to be — “to make ‘simple’ a ‘vast and discouraging tangle’ of social and economic realities” (6). If none of this is popular

in contemporary criticism, it is because critics — even some who are nominally committed to class politics — often fail to recognize that a particular view of art (and criticism) is bound up with a particular view of equality: “deconstruction, affect theory, new materialism and post critique share a disinterest” (6), whether intended or not, “in what Brecht calls the ‘dominant factor in the causal nexus’ of our lives, the ‘class struggle’” (6). Counter to dominant trends in criticism and art, then, *Red Aesthetics* makes the argument by way of these three artists — Rodchenko, Brecht, and Eisenstein — that the correct picture of the world is a picture that articulates the centrality of exploitation and class struggle in structuring our lives. All three, Cronan notes, share a similar but not entirely overlapping set of aesthetic commitments, highlighting the different ways these artists “share a commitment to a vision of artistic production...that both mirrors social realities and models a different one” (7). The first chapter thus reveals one of the great challenges of the book, which is the complexity of lining up precisely why these three authors, despite their disagreements (explicit and implicit in their work) ultimately share a view that meaning making in art shares a logical relationship with socialist politics. That difficulty is no less one of the book’s virtues: *Red Aesthetics*, in its willingness to sit inside the complexities of each of these artists’ works, discovers genuinely new insights into the relationship between art and politics refuting, for example, common critiques of workerism and the ideology of production that have become common critiques of Soviet art.

The first chapter takes up critiques of Brecht by way of Adorno and Barthes, demonstrating a surprising affinity in the theoretical mistakes made by the two critics when it comes to Brecht. Adorno is famously critical of Brecht in “On Commitment” and elsewhere, writing, “Brecht taught nothing that could not have been understood apart from his didactic plays, indeed, that could not have been understood more concretely through theory.” Cronan argues that “Adorno is strangely dense when it comes to Brecht’s procedures, as though the plays were transparent or insufficiently mediated vehicles for obvious meanings” (23). He is quick to point out, however, that Adorno’s critique of Brecht leads to the defense of him: “By virtue of the very literalism of Brecht’s ‘engagement’ with reality, the meaning of his plays reverses their didactic intention and becomes autonomous art” (23). Thus, in Adorno’s view, “Brecht’s irrepressible artistry collides with his political aims” (23). Cronan’s argument, however, is that this is a mistake of Adorno’s view of art because it insists on separating the work from its meaning before suturing it back together by way of the dialectic rather than seeing that the politics inhere in the work itself. Surprisingly, Adorno’s point shares a “remarkably similar conclusion” (33) to that of Barthes. Cronan goes on to argue that “to be political for Adorno is to mark one’s distance from intending to be so” and similarly “Barthes imagines the power of the Text to consist in its displacement of any particular — that is, political/intentional — point of view” (34).

For this reason, Brecht and Eisenstein both are “ultimately censured for their political didacticism” (33). Cronan summarizes the overlap between the two artists this way: “Because Brecht and Eisenstein intend to convey political meaning, they foreclose the capacity for free audience response” (33), which is a problem for both Adorno and Barthes. The view espoused by Adorno and Barthes cuts across what Cronan finds particularly powerful about Rodchenko, Brecht, and Eisenstein: for these three artists, Cronan argues, “there is no sense in which the aesthetic and the political are inherent opposition to one another, as though art and politics follow separate laws and logics. There was no necessity, as they saw it, for a conflictual relation between either form and content or form and subject matter, just as there is no assumed *identity* between progressive politics and progressive art” (35).

As Cronan notes, “all three [of the artists in the book] worked for the state in some capacity, and certainly provided ideological support for the state, even of an increasingly complex and unreliable kind” (41). But rather than exonerating their work from this complicity or focusing on the propagandistic uses toward which it was put — which “at times matches the intent of the artist” and “at other times does not” (41) — Cronan emphasizes the formal qualities and capacities of each of these artists’ works. In the chapter dedicated to Rodchenko, for example, Cronan argues that one of the most “striking features of Rodchenko’s career is the unmistakable sense of artistic, and indeed, human, failure that haunts the last twenty-five years of his practice” (37). Photography is, crucially, tethered to the world in a physical way that other mediums are not. This has made it a particularly interesting site for working out aesthetic problems across the twentieth century. Rodchenko’s photography is no exception. To give an account of his failure, suggests Cronan, is “also to give an account of photography’s failure, of what the medium seemed capable of representing, and what it could not” (37). Put another way, “if the referent [world] was dead, so was photography” (41). One implication of this is that the abandonment of the utopian promises comes to occupy a central place in his work.

Cronan’s emphasis on the formal qualities of Rodchenko’s work is not only a point about photography — countering the idea that photographs are “transparently open to their subject matter” (41) — but about the “structuring intentions” of Rodchenko’s work, which emphasize the moment “when Rodchenko felt the photographic medium fell decisively out of contact with the world” (42). Through patient working through of Rodchenko’s practice, particularly the absorptive states of the subjects of his photograph, Cronan astutely demonstrates the way his photography projects “a complex vision of communist order” (77). Rather than one of mastery and domination, his photography often “provides a kind of standing counter to the whole notion of Communism as a kind of fixed order that leaves nothing live or dead of account” (77). For Rodchenko, “when the USSR began to define itself by the mastery of nature, both human and environmental — not by its temporary, and always fragile, coming to terms with it — the USSR’s mastery became synonymous with its failure” (80).

Photography was, Cronan argues, incapable of coming to terms with this view, not because it could not be captured but because it was antithetical to Rodchenko's view of photography as art. In a sense, then, Rodchenko's art stands as a corrective or counter to the politics of the Communist state and embodies instead the contingency associated with Socialist political formations.

Cronan's argument that the standpoint of the artists he is invested in here might do more than reflect the mistakes of the Communist state is most fully realized in his discussion of Brecht, which ranges over three chapters on Brecht's critique of affect, political abstraction, and the collision between class and race in his work. In the chapter on affect, Cronan wades into Brecht's at times conflicting sentiments on the relationship between his work and his audience so that what emerges in Brecht's work is a tension between "estrangement" or the distancing effect of his work and his own aim to produce plays that would have an "intended effect" that could bring the audience to see the world "correctly." The artist's task, in Brecht's view, is "to control effect; to attempt to foresee the result" (85). That is, the "to *intend* one's effects on an audience, even if that prediction might fail...is the aim of Brecht's aesthetics" (85). This, Cronan argues, is precisely why Adorno sees Brecht as authoritarian — "because of his prioritizing of political effect over artistic autonomy" (85). Cronan, as I have already suggested, points out that Adorno's sense of artistic autonomy is a strange one, as the work's political significance is "of an indirect sort" (85). Wading through Adorno and Brecht's views on art and objecthood, Cronan notes, that while both Adorno and Brecht are committed to an idea of aesthetic autonomy that hinges on distancing and negation, he notes a crucial difference between the two: Where "Brecht is forthright in his claims about effects.... Adorno's putative 'defense' of Brecht is that Brecht's didactic 'theses took on an entirely different function from the one their content intended" (85).

The argument here rehearses one early in the book about the inseparability between intention and meaning and between meaning and the political aims of the work and it is here that Cronan also distinguishes between what Brecht means by intended effects and affect. Affect, understood as an "unintentional or precognitive response to stimuli" (88), is too easily undone to be politically effective. Almost always one of empathy (though the same would be true of disgust), techniques aimed at producing such responses produce the wrong kind of effect. "It is not enough to produce empathy with the proletariat rather than the bourgeois,' [Brecht] insists, 'the entire technique of empathy has become dubious (in principle, it's entirely conceivable that you could have a bourgeois novel with encourages empathy with a proletariat)'" (89). Indeed, this describes not only Rancière's politics but the politics of so much that passes for ambitious art in the contemporary moment. Over a wide-ranging and technical discussion of Brecht's practice in dialogue with that of Eisenstein and Eisler, Cronan at once notes the shared concern with effects and affects and also differences (indifferences) to audience response, noting that "Brecht sharply

distinguished between the artwork and its reception” (101). In other words, art, if it is to have a desired effect, does not concern itself with individualized responses, but with the construction of the work and its capacity to produce an intended effect.

Being committed to “the framework” and to the construction of the work thus means being committed to making works that are invested in producing a vision of the world which is not assimilable into our experience of it. Taking up what it means to see “correctly,” Cronan returns to debates over expressionism taking place in the late thirties in the pages of *Das Wort* to highlight Brecht’s contributions, especially, by way of his engagement with Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch. Rather than simply retread this familiar territory, however, Cronan draws on Brecht’s other writings at the time to shed new insight on Brecht’s thinking: “To steer a dialectical course beyond the Scylla of formalist realism and the Charybdis of formless expressionism was Brecht’s contribution to the debates of 1937-1939” (108). If Brecht’s aim was to render an a “abstract world abstractly without losing a grip on its causes” (104), a naive realism would be insufficient. The “situation [of contemporary capitalism],” Brecht says, “has become so complicated because the simple ‘reproduction of reality’ says less than ever about that reality” (105). For Brecht, Bloch’s “Expressionist ‘master’ was just as ideological as Lukács’s formalized realism” (108). The task at hand, then, was to find a new form up to the task of representing abstract social relations. If, in Brecht’s view, Lukács is overly deterministic in his commitment to realism, Bloch’s expressionism is guilty of distorting and obscuring reality. “Any legitimate realism must ‘make abstraction possible,’” writes Brecht, in order to move “beyond the ‘immediately visible surface’ of reality to get a ‘more exact representation of the real social forces’” (110) at play — forces that are themselves abstract. Not all abstraction is up to the task, Cronan argues. Brecht’s aim was to “produce a form of theater that ‘enabled abstraction’ for the viewer, that encouraged viewers to step outside of their subject position to see the world in the right way, beyond the limited feelings that blind them to the complex, abstract reality around them” (121). In other words, the aim of art is not to concretize any particular experience of it — experiences that are definitionally personal — but to render abstract social relations visible. If Lukács couldn’t quite see that expressionism was capable of this just as he argues realism was in “Narrate or Describe,” Bloch couldn’t quite see that expressionism’s risk was to appeal to the sensibility of the beholder at cost of rendering these abstract social forces. Cronan’s account of Brecht, then, highlights just how important his contributions to socialist modernism are.

Red Aesthetics begins with the idea that the aim of art is to produce the correct picture of the world; it ends with the ways Eisenstein’s art — the “saturation of the frame” — does that by giving “expression to the classless society” (182). Eisenstein is emblematic of socialist art not by way of a democratic appeal to the viewer of his films as critics such as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Andrei Tarkovsky

argue, but by asserting that the work's meaning is inherent to its composition. When these critics argue that the saturated Eisensteinian image necessarily "expands beyond the author's intent" (176), the image, Cronan argues, collapses into real life and like real life "everyone feels life and art at every moment 'in his own way'" (176). As Tarkovsky puts it, "once in contact with the individual who sees it, it separates from its author" in a way that leaves it open to undergoing "changes of form and meaning." In other words, the moment the work of art is imagined to be separated from its intended meaning is the moment it loses its political force. Thus, in Cronan's argument, Bordwell and Tarkovsky make clear what is only implied in Adorno's effort to separate the meaning of the work from its intended meaning. (What they like about Eisenstein is what Adorno likes about Brecht.) When the work of art is imagined to be subject to the responses of the spectator, no meaning could plausibly be said to be any more or less valid than another and in this state of affairs the problem of what a work of art represents about the world is displaced by how different people respond to the work differently. This, as readers of *Mediations* are no doubt familiar, is the world of market capitalism where meanings are replaced with differences and desires. Rather than view Eisenstein's work as "the simple accumulation of associational imagery, digression without conflict" (179), Cronan argues it should be understood as an effort to "discover a path...to meaning, to drawing the dissimilar together to create a more inclusive whole" (179).

It is this totalizing and inclusive work that defines Eisenstein's project and its effort to produce a vision of a classless society. Cronan ends the book with a compelling reading of the final scene of *Ivan the Terrible, Part III* — the "Apotheosis of Ivan" — in which Ivan traverses the waves and calms them, as he calms the people who storm the palace, at once uniting the people and conquering nature. The scene has largely been read either as an apology for Stalin insofar as it represents a singular figure unifying the people and mastering nature or a subversive critique of him and a reflection on the failure of the revolution. Against either of these views, Cronan argues that while Ivan has unified the nation and the people "from Eisenstein's perspective, it could not possibly be the case that a tsar could give expression to the classless society" (181). Rather, the scene treats Ivan as a "progressive force" (182) of history, but at a lower stage of political evolution than full communism because the "people do not yet recognize themselves in their role as leaders" (181-2). The scene, in this sense, represents the coming into being of class consciousness, one that under the current mode of capitalist production is only legible through the work of art that can assert its autonomy from it.

Where Brecht's ambition, which begins the book, is to produce "a correct representation of the world" as it is, Eisenstein's project, which concludes it, is an effort to represent the world as might be, or could become. In tracing these shared commitments, Cronan's book offers a compelling reason to believe that if the work of art is to give "expression to a classless society" (182) it must assert its autonomy from

the society as it is given, such that it is neither collapsible into the capitalist market, nor reducible to the spectator's attitudes about it. What remains indispensable about Rodchenko, Brecht, and Eisenstein, then, is that their art demands a vision of the world that is other than it is. What is vital about Cronan's contribution to the study of these figures is not only his close engagement with them— this alone makes the book a must read — but the compelling case made that art and politics cannot be disassociated from the artist's intention to produce new ways of seeing.

Notes

1. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Octagor Books, 1966) 10. Quoted in *Red Aesthetics*.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 247. Quoted in *Red Aesthetics*.
3. See also Emilio Sauri, "Abstract and the Concrete," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 51.2 (2018) 250–271.
4. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Tarkovsky The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (New York: Knopf, 1987) 117. (Quoted in *Red Aesthetics*).

Contributors

Erich von Klosst-Dohna

Erich von Klosst-Dohna is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Illinois Chicago. His research and teaching revolve around the subjects of modernism, poetry, aesthetics, and theory of action.

Andrew B. Liu

Andrew B. Liu teaches history at Villanova University. He is the author of *Tea War: A history of capitalism in China and India* (Yale UP, 2020). His research centers on modern China with a focus on transnational Asia, the methods of global and comparative history, and political economy and social theory. He is currently developing a project on China and the postwar Asia-Pacific, set against the global economic crises and restructuring of the 1970/80s.

Anna Zalokostas

Anna Zalokostas is a Teagle Fellow and Postdoctoral Teaching Scholar in Interdisciplinary Studies at North Carolina State University. Her current research focuses on 20th and 21st century transnational American literature, globalization, and racial formation. Her writing appears or is forthcoming in *Post45* and the edited collection *The Return of the 90s: A Cultural History of the Present*.

Benjamin Crais

Benjamin Crais is a Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of English, Drama and Film at University College Dublin. He is currently at work on two projects: a history of the agrarian question in 20th-century political filmmaking and a study of literary narratives of deindustrialization in the long 1970s. His scholarship has been published in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, and *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics*. His criticism has appeared in venues including *Film Comment*, *Narrow Margin*, *Sidecar (New Left Review)*, *Screen Slate*, *MUBI Notebook*, and the catalog of the Viennale.

Josué Chávez

Josué Chávez is Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish at Bryn Mawr College. His current research project investigates the relationship between artistic forms and financial transitions in contemporary Central America.

Chris Gortmaker

Chris Gortmaker is a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the Department of English and in the College at the University of Chicago. He writes and teaches about Anglo-American modernism, African American literature, the contemporary novel, and critical theory.

Jake Burchard

Jake Burchard is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Department of Sociology at Duke University. His research is in the areas of economic and political sociology, social network analysis, and the philosophy of the social sciences. Jake Burchard
Jake Burchard is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Department of Sociology at Duke University. His research is in the areas of economic and political sociology, social network analysis, and the philosophy of the social sciences.

Davis Smith-Brecheisen

Davis Smith-Brecheisen is Assistant Professor of Literature at the University of Texas, Dallas. He is the author of *Mode of Address: The Modernist Novel and Theory After Postmodernism* (SUNY 2026).