The Culture of Capitalism and the Crisis of Critique

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Introduction

As over 200,000 people gathered on the National Mall in October, 2010 for the Rally to Restore Sanity, more than a few of Jon Stewart's fans were confused as to why exactly he had summoned them there. In fact, many people on the left end of the political spectrum felt distinctly uneasy about the whole project, as Stewart's call for reasonable and polite dialogue seemed to vitiate his voice as a political critic in the face of increasingly volatile bombast from the Right. During the weeks leading up to the event, Stewart mobilized a vision of "the 70–80 percenters" sitting down to discuss the nation's issues in a gracious, civil manner regardless of their party affiliation. This approach to the political process bears a striking resemblance to that which President Obama has promoted since taking office in 2009. During his campaign, Obama became famous for the sentiment that "there's not a liberal America and a conservative America…there's not a black America and a white America; there's the United States of America," as he stated in his speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Over the past few years, this call to civil agreement has taken the form of numerous failed attempts to reach across the aisle in the spirit of mutual

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cooperation. Indeed, Obama has even sought to solve several major crises of capitalism—such as the financial meltdown of 2008 and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico—with respectful and sometimes even jocular meetings with the CEOs of the corporations in question. Like Stewart, Obama seems to believe that if he can just get everyone together at the same table Americans will be able to tackle these “challenges” (as he calls them) in a sort of win-win exchange. In the process, he has seen fit to rely on the advice of neoliberal stalwarts like Lawrence Summers and Paul Volcker, the very men whose economic policies have helped create the crises at hand.

How is it that, during a moment of unprecedented social inequality and a massive recession generated by elite overaccumulation (see Harvey 2011), the Left has failed to articulate a compelling challenge to the economic status quo? How have we arrived at a place where the Left’s only plan for change is to further facilitate market deregulation and advance the consolidation of monopoly capitalism? How has neoliberalism triumphed even among those who should be its fiercest critics? Part of this can be explained by understanding the conception of politics typified by Stewart and Obama. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have put it, the problem is that “the notion of antagonism has been erased from the political discourse of the Left” (2001:xiv). This is where the main problem lies, namely, that the Left in America today promotes a depoliticized politics as it attempts to distance itself from socialism, reclaim the center, and establish a “modern” identity. The prevailing model of deliberative democracy and rational consensus on how to solve America’s “challenges” dispenses with the notion that capitalist society is shot through with deeply incompatible interests, choosing instead to believe that issues such as poverty, exploitation, and racism can be solved with multicultural tolerance and interpersonal goodwill. This model reduces structural violence to questions of individual sentiment, and places capitalism firmly in the non-moral realm of “science” where it remains insulated from serious political scrutiny (Ferguson 2006:69ff). The result, as Laclau and Mouffe have put it, is that “the forces of globalization are detached from their political dimensions and appear as a fate to which we all have to submit” (2001:xvi).

The Left’s departure from antagonism and hegemony in favor of inclusion and reconciliation proceeds in part from the ethic of multiculturalism, which rejects “fundamentalism” as the repugnant Other of the modern subject (Harding 1991). Liberal multiculturalism seeks a “safe” Other, an

Other devoid of fundamentalisms, an Other that matches up with the basic tenets of a "generic," egalitarian human nature; in other words, an experience of the Other completely deprived of its actual Otherness. For the Left, Obama has become the embodiment of this vision—a hybrid, cosmopolitan subject who obviates boundaries and defies essentialisms, heralding a multicultural world wherein there is no such thing as incommensurability. The Right, meanwhile, has stepped boldly in to fill the vacant space of hegemony, ready—like the Marxist-Leninists of a previous age—to construct grand narratives of antagonism, polarize the voting population, and stake out fundamentalist frontiers. As if following the playbook laid out by Leo Strauss, public personalities like Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity—with the financial backing of Rupert Murdoch and the Koch brothers—have asserted a monopoly over popular politics. The Left, having relinquished the hegemonic struggle and armed only with the message of moderation and tolerance, has found itself powerless to defend its ground.

As a result, neoliberal ideology has become a totalizing way of life, a worldview that furnishes the terms for everyday praxis and representation, creates its own forms of political participation and activism, and promotes a virtually unassailable notion of morality. It is not just a manipulative ploy to appropriate surplus value, but a regime in the truest sense of the term—a cultural logic that insinuates itself into every aspect of lived experience. Neoliberal logic cuts across class divides, religious and cultural affiliations, and political loyalties. It is articulated not only on the trading floors of the New York Stock Exchange, not only in university economics departments, not only in the marble halls of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), but also—crucially—in the politics of progressive institutions like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), by the fashionable environmentalists doing the rounds in American universities, by gender and racial justice advocacy groups, and by charitable philanthropists of all stripes. In other words, neoliberalism has spawned a form of progressive politics that has no investment in the radical redistribution of wealth and resources (cf. Gledhill 2005). We argue that the politics of many contemporary progressives are no less anchored in a neoliberal ethos than that of their conservative counterparts.

As indicated in the title of this piece, we seek to do two things in the following pages. First, we attempt to explain the cultural logic that underwrites neoliberal capitalism today, tracing its origins from the countercultural movement that came out of Berkeley in the late 1960s. We note that there was a certain strand of thinking located within the New Left that was generative of the neoliberal ethos, and that this strand has now come to dominate the politics of American progressives in particular. Second, we try to show how progressive politics today partake of and perpetuate that very same cultural logic: that the logic of capitalism and the logic of resistance against capitalism have converged. In other words, we seek to show how the critique from the left not only accepts the basic terms of neoliberal capitalism, but actually promotes “alternatives” that ultimately advance its cause. This is the effect of a double process: over the past few decades, marketing strategies have managed to co-opt dissent and package rebellion as a consumer commodity at the same time as questions of poverty and inequality have been thoroughly depoliticized by the discourse of “development.” We will demonstrate the structural parallels between these two processes, both of which—as with Stewart and Obama—tend to mystify the coercive dimensions of American capitalism and foreclose possibilities for critique.

The Neoliberal Cosmology: An Overview

Some of the earliest and most sophisticated ethnographic accounts of the United States have found the value of individual liberty at the heart of American culture. In the early 19th century, the eminent theorist of modernity Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) noted that Americans’ conception of liberty was inextricably linked to the notion of ontological equality. According to Tocqueville, Americans believe themselves to be free inasmuch as they hold that each individual can rely on their own equal capacity for reason to make decisions about truth and good without deferring to higher authority. This is possible because Americans believe that each individual partakes of a singular, abstract humanity; that every person—regardless of their social position—is just as good as anyone else. This perspective leads people to believe in a sort of “imaginary equality”—as Tocqueville calls it—even in the face of extreme chasms between the rich and the poor. Regardless of the real inequality of their conditions, Tocqueville found that Americans did not conceive of themselves as separate classes.

At the same time, Tocqueville noticed that industrial capitalism in the United States carried the seeds of a new class-based aristocracy; that the threat of serfdom lurked constantly beneath the surface of the egalitarian nation. In a society where people are able to amass great wealth and then bequeath it to their progeny, the people at the top would eventually contribute little or nothing towards the making of their own fortunes. A society governed by such men would be no different from medieval dynastic rule with its entrenched, generational hierarchies. Tocqueville's prophetic misgivings were proved correct during the Gilded Age, when growing social inequalities hardened into rigid class distinctions. By the early 20th century, Americans had begun to recognize that, without a certain level of "equality of opportunity," the very idea of liberty was being gradually sapped of its vitality. The central moral question of American liberalism became about how to protect the individual's autonomy and choice from the encroachment of others, which would require dismantling class distinctions through redistributive mechanisms.

This was rendered as a formal theory by economists like John Maynard Keynes (1936), who recognized that capitalism would spawn mass economic and political crisis if its excesses were not carefully managed. Like Marxists, Keynesians recognized that the key problem of capitalism was the problem of overproduction; expansion requires increasing productivity and decreasing wages, which generates deep inequalities, erodes the consumer base, and creates a glut of goods that cannot find a market. To overcome this, Keynesians promoted public and private sector investment with the aim of lowering unemployment, creating higher living standards, raising wages, and increasing consumer demand for goods. The basic idea was to enforce a class compromise that would forestall further crises by maintaining a basic degree of social equality. These principles were applied in the early 20th century to rescue American capitalism from the crisis of the Great Depression. Following Keynes' recommendations, mid-century capitalism was organized along a Fordist model, which exchanged a decent family wage for a docile, productive, middle-class workforce that would have the means to consume a mass-produced set of basic commodities. Production was characterized by the assembly line, collective representation through labor unions, and hierarchical discipline on the factory floor. David Harvey (2005) has called this the era of "embedded liberalism," which furnished the basic tenets of the New Deal and the Great Society.

This model of production was sustained by a culture that placed value in *conformist consumption*, where most people sought to acquire the same basic set of consumer commodities and had a fairly clearly delineated notion of “the good life”—a relatively uniform vision of the American Dream. It was during this period that an additional dimension of American individualism noticed by Tocqueville became particularly salient, namely, that individualism furnishes the basis for a very specific form of community, one in which the notion of “the public” carries immense currency. Tocqueville observed that, in a culture that prizes ontological equality, while each person is suspicious of accepting the authority of other individuals, their “very resemblance gives them almost unbounded confidence in the judgment of the public; for it would seem probable that, as they are all endowed with equal means of judging, the greater truth should go with the greater number” (2000:519). Under the conditions of embedded liberalism, the dominant mode of consumption reflected a specific idea of “the public,” organized around the symbol of the American worker, as well as a distinct notion of the “social good” (Taylor 1989) that sought balance between the forces of capital and labor, between owners and workers, and between elites and masses. The figure of the American worker emerged not only as the producer of commodities, but, crucially, also of American culture more broadly.

Strong labor unions and government played a central role in constituting “the public” through representation and orienting people towards this social good throughout the era of the New Deal. But they were not working alone in this terrain. The notion of “public opinion” emerged as a central pillar of marketing strategy from the early 1920s onwards. The term features in the titles of two highly influential texts, the American journalist Walter Lippmanan’s *Public Opinion* (1922) and Edward Bernays’s *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923). Lippmann spoke of the need for “opinion leaders” and “manufactured” consent, and Bernays, who was Freud’s nephew, argued that sociological and psychological research should be mobilized to shift popular perceptions. These early market experts harbored a deep suspicion of the masses, seeing them as the locus of irrational and chaotic impulses, and sought to discipline them through the new media technologies at their disposal. As Jim McGuigan notes, these market experts held an “elite/mass view of society” and felt it was their job to “manipulate artfully the irrational impulses of ordinary people” (2009:104-105). Conformist consumption, then, was not simply a natural outgrowth of some essential American culture, but a product of competition wherein labor, industry, and government all had a stake. Conformist consumption reflected not so much a general consensus, but a power arrangement which ensured that working families had the means to consume the goods that they produced.

While the idea of "the public" has not lost its significance in America today, increasingly corporations, marketers, and government see a much more differentiated landscape marked by multiple "publics," "niches," and "segments." This articulates strongly with the multiculturalist vision of the nation as a mosaic of cultures and identities rather than a homogenous unity (Friedman 2002). But neoliberalism has not so much done away with "the public" as a potent cultural object as it has argued that the aggregate of individual needs and desires are manifest and expressed in "the market." As is widely recognized, the key feature of neoliberal thought has been its argument against state intervention in the functioning of the market. This argument has succeeded not by proving the technical efficiency of markets against the inefficiency of state regulation, as neoliberal economists like to claim, but by making the moral case that beneath all acts of regulation lurks hubris and elitism—the desire of technocrats to manipulate the masses.

Critics of state regulation frequently evoke the idea that regulators claim to have knowledge that ordinary Americans do not have, insisting that all efforts to regulate are premised upon and reflect their essential elitism. This discourse came to prominence in the recent push by the Democrats to reform healthcare, with Right wing critics claiming that the Democrats want to place the government between the patient and their doctor and, therefore, deny individuals the right to "choose" their own healthcare. In this sense, neoliberal ideologues have precluded all redistributive measures by invoking the very egalitarianism of American culture that once secured the New Deal. If marketing strategists like Lippmann and Bernays were self-conscious of the fact that the nation was divided between elites like themselves and the masses, and cognizant that theirs was a project of discipline and reform, today's most prominent advocates of neoliberalism are fiercely anti-elite and anti-intellectual, claiming to be themselves *of* the people and *for* the people. The Marxist cultural critic Thomas Frank (2001) has aptly called this phenomenon "market populism," identifying the now pervasive penchant for heroizing "the market" as an autonomous space of freedom and choice, demonizing "the state" as an intruder in this autonomous space, and regarding redistributive measures as a technique of control that undermines the exercise of freedom. "The market," then, is the ideological linchpin of a neoliberal cosmology, standing in for both "the public" and the "social good."

Alongside the valorization of "the market," the "sovereign consumer" has emerged as the central character in the neoliberal cosmology (McGuigan 2009:85). If embedded liberalism was represented by the figure of the middle-class worker, the producer of national culture and collective well-being, then the touchstone of neoliberalism has become the all-powerful consumer who is "said to dictate production; to fuel innovation; to be creating new services in advanced economies; to be driving modern politics; to have it in their power to save the environment and protect the future of the planet" (Gabriel and Lang 1997:1 as cited in McGuigan 2009:85). McGuigan (2009:99) notes that, while the figure of the sovereign consumer as "an all rational, calculating subject, forever seeking to maximize marginal utility in consumption choices," was a necessary (if hidden and unacknowledged) character in neoclassical economic theory, since the 1970s the consumer has assumed a "totemic function" in public discourse as the agent behind all productive activity.

As we have argued, embedded liberalism reflected the recognition that the worker was at once a producer and a consumer, and identified the overall role that consumption played in the maintenance of the economy, but it never bound consumer activity off from the broader production process. This shift directly parallels the bounding off of "the market" from the broader political and social field. Both the figure of "the consumer" and the domain of "the market" are now imagined to be sovereign. This reflects the ways that business and economic theory have spilled out of their disciplines into public consciousness, just as the corporation has risen to become the dominant institution in contemporary America.

The Rebellious Spirit of Capitalism: A Recuperative Frame

While the era of embedded liberalism offers a crucial historical counterpoint to the violent inequities of neoliberal capitalism, it certainly had its problems. Although egalitarian in theory, the idea of the worker as the representative of national culture was shot through with racial and gender exclusions, relying on a model of normative personhood that was male, heterosexual, white, and middle-class. The protest movement that first developed in Berkeley in the late 1960s must be understood against this backdrop. The "counterculture" movement—free speech, women's lib, civil rights, etc.—was directed primarily against what they imagined to be endemic social conservatism in mainstream America. But it is crucial to recognize that, while there were genuine Leftist elements (such as labor unions, Black Power organizations, and the Poor People's Campaign) that articulated a trenchant class critique and sought a radical departure from the regime of private property, the general thrust of the movement was bourgeois and focused on issues of individual freedoms. The primary constituents of the New Left (students and professors) were largely elite and upwardly mobile, concerned less about worker exploitation and the cost of living than with breaking out of what they saw as a suffocating ethos of mass conformity and moral prudishness. While racism, patriarchy, and war were among their central concerns, these issues were rarely connected meaningfully in mainstream discourse to a critique of capitalist production. Indeed, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), for example, had a very troubled relationship with labor unions, which they saw as stiflingly bureaucratic, hierarchical, and socially conservative (Levy 1994, Anderson 1996).

The hallmark of the revolution of the 1960s was the defense of individual liberty against the constraints of mass conformist society. Resistance to the draft; the defense of free speech; the right to divorce, abortion, contraceptives, and other sexual freedoms all referenced the desire to make choices for oneself, through one's own reason and according to one's own conscience. The movement derived its charter from the logic of Western social science—specifically the writings of Freud and Durkheim—which posits a fundamental antagonism between the individual and society. According to this view, the individual self is repressed by social norms. This perspective came to inform the work of even the most celebrated Marxist critics of the time. For example, Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964)—the flagship text of the Frankfurt School—railed against how capitalism promotes mass conformity and the "suppression of individuality." Marcuse argued that capitalism imposes certain "false" needs and desires on the individual that the individual might otherwise not have, teaching people "to love and hate what others love and hate." According to this perspective, the individual's "true" needs and desires are suppressed. Freedom, then, means allowing each individual to determine their own desires and express their inner selves; freedom lies in the "autonomy" and "choice" of the individual.

Having fled persecution in Fascist Europe, the critical theorists that defined Western Marxism in the 1960s (Marcuse, Sartre, Adorno, Althusser, and so on) were preoccupied with the problem of propaganda-fuelled totalitarianism. Their critique of American capitalism, then—despite drawing on Marxist principles, specifically the idea of "false consciousness"—replaced a critique of class, labor, and exploitation with a critique of the suppression of individual autonomy in totalitarian society. These ideas found traction in the student movement, whose ultimate goal became about freedom for individual self-expression. Radical students directed much of their frustration at the Fordist organization of production and consumption, with its rigid hierarchies and paternalistic organization of power. They sought to buck the "repressive" trends of societal conformity and express their individuality, their true, inner, authentic selves.

Ironically, this critique of American capitalism gave rise to new and even more pernicious forms of it. The celebration of "individual identity" and the construct of the unique, creative self provided capitalism with fantastic new market opportunities. Responding to consumers' passion for "authentic," individual self-expression, companies began to market products according to various "lifestyle" or "identity" niches that appealed to the prevailing ethos of non-conformity. According to this new logic of marketing and consumption, the individual would seek to express his or her unique and authentic self by purchasing the accoutrements of the specific niche to which they aspired. Eventually, "counter-culture" itself became a marketable identity. To be counter-cultural, one would simply have to consume the commodities symbolically associated with counter-culture. The new spirit of capitalism was itself a *rebellious spirit*, and this has left an indelible mark on the culture of the American Left (cf. McGuigan 2009).

At the University of Virginia (UVA), shops on the main University strip feature a popular t-shirt. Sketched on it is the stoic face of Edgar Allen Poe with the word "Dropout" beneath in bold letters. The rebellious Poe, who is widely considered to be the inspiration behind our most dark and morbid literary genres, spent a year at Mr. Jefferson's University before going on to become one of the most significant literary figures in American history. The University takes great pride in this fact and has preserved the memory of Poe in engravings, statues, and monuments throughout the campus, and tourists can even visit the room that Poe once occupied. The Poe t-shirt is not "official" regalia, but it nevertheless references the

University. Of course, the most likely people to understand its significance are those that attended and probably graduated from the University. What encourages these UVA graduates to celebrate a man who made himself by rejecting, at least according to terms outlined by the t-shirt, the very institution that the students depend on for their future power and privilege?

The Poe t-shirt is but one exemplary symbol of our new capitalist ethic, an ethic in which the fetishism of commodities is taken to new heights. In the new commodity fetishism, the commodity stands in for a certain kind of awareness and consciousness, an identity—often a "political" one—that claims to be challenging the status quo. The Poe t-shirt refers to the institution that is the source of the students' political and economic status, but it also foregrounds their "political" awareness in the fact that individual creativity and merit, not degrees, are the real basis of success. By suggesting an alternative to the University's claim on Poe as well as to the "official" university regalia, the Poe t-shirt instantiates the value of non-conformity and acts as a public disavowal of the students' own inherited power and privilege. In a neoliberal age, consumers trade the signs of institutional power for the mark of a rebellious spirit.

One of us came across a glaring example of this in the London airport: a pink cashmere cardigan emblazoned with the iconic image of Che Guevara's face, and priced at an impressive $200. Then there are the posh bars and clubs built into sordid warehouses that are frequented by hip, alternative youth in New York. These establishments are often located in poor areas, and the people that frequent them place value in the fact that they are not mainstream. These venues represent the opposite of the corporatized, tourist-infested Times Square, though they are no less overpriced and certainly more exclusive. In these examples and many others, we find clear evidence in support of Slavoj Žižek's (2009a) claim that the new capitalist ethic is one in which "the very act of egotist consumption already includes the price of its opposite." Žižek is referring here to high priced commodities that claim to be advancing some kind of social justice agenda, like organic foods and other such "responsible" consumer products, but it applies even more clearly to examples where commodities index alternative social and political identities.

In all of these examples, the commodity-sign carries both the mark of institutional power and signifies a public disavowal of this very power in the service of creative self-expression. So, the Poe t-shirt evokes a canonized literary figure and also makes a cryptic reference to the university he is associated with. Then, in an act of rebellion, it rejects the “official” version, distancing itself from the mainstream. The pink cardigan makes a similar move by pasting the face of an iconic revolutionary onto an article of clothing that one is more likely to see at a polo match than at a protest. Finally, and this is probably the most forceful of all these examples, there are the warehouse clubs/bars. The very architecture of these venues evokes the contrast between power and its opposite; on the inside they are sleek and stylish with all the trappings of a high-end establishment, but from the outside they blend into the general working class environment where they are located. This last example is also the most insidious since the making of “alternative” space draws wealthier youth into these areas and inevitably leads to rising prices and gentrification that displaces the area’s actual working class inhabitants.

This form of consumption is a way to signal one’s rejection of the mainstream. Today, dissent is a highly valued commodity that is openly bought and sold in the marketplace. Substantive critical engagement and critique of capitalist excesses is replaced by an “alternative” consumer ethic that functions as a recuperative project for capitalism. In a neoliberal age, capitalism supplies not only a mode of production but also a form of resistance, though one that will never supersede the conditions of capitalist production. This appropriation of dissent is what Marxist cultural critic Thomas Frank (1998) has poignantly called “the conquest of cool.” This phenomenon is best understood as capitalism’s own recuperative frame. It is recuperative in the sense that it organizes forms of resistance (rebellion/dissent) in such a way that they advance capitalism’s goal of creating ever-greater consumer demand for commodities that are produced within a regime that is exploitative at its core. It trades a deeply felt political urge (revolution) for a passive instantiation of identity and difference (consumerism). It supplies people with a sense that they are expressing their unique and authentic selves and therefore produces the illusion of choice and freedom. In the end, each individual seeks to be different and unique, but they all do so in exactly the same way. By purchasing the signs of their identity, they mask their conformity in a thin veil of difference.

The “revolutionary” discourse of individual liberty not only supplied capitalism with new forms of consumption, it also furnished the logic for new modes of production. Companies began to abandon the hierarchical organization of factory discipline and focused instead on promoting more flexible forms of worker self-management and individual responsibility, which made exploitation all the more efficient. Furthermore, taking advantage of the anti-conformity ethos of the time, neoliberal economic policy—promoted most prominently by Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan—dismantled the paternalistic social compact of the postwar era and took apart many of the social protections that had been meticulously built up since the Great Depression, demolishing unions, curbing wages, eviscerating environmental regulations, and removing tariff barriers (Judt 2010, Harvey 2005). This allowed for an unprecedented and extremely rapid transfer of wealth from the poorest strata of society to the richest, and from impoverished countries to wealthy ones (Dumenil and Levy 2004). According to the 1996 UNDP Human Development Report, during the period between 1960 and 1991, the richest 20 percent increased their share of global income from 70 percent to 85 percent while the poorest 20 percent saw their share shrink from 2.3 percent to 1.4 percent. Today, the wealthiest 1 percent of the world's population controls 40 percent of the world's wealth, the wealthiest 10 percent control 85 percent of the wealth, and the bottom 50 percent control a mere 1 percent of the wealth (United Nations University 2009). This massive transfer of wealth has happened, for the most part, with very little resistance because it has been couched in a language not only of liberty and freedom, but even of rebellion and dissent, which is leveraged to justify the free market and grant it a certain unassailable moral appeal.

Development Discourse and the Virtuous Commodity

Over the past few decades, the problem of extreme global inequality has become the object of concern for progressive-minded Westerners. And the solution that they propose—with nearly unanimous consensus—is "development," usually modified with popular keywords such as "sustainable" or "community." The idea of development holds primacy of place in the progressive politics of American campuses. Nearly every college student these days is in some way enamored with the problem of poverty and the development solution, as evidenced by the enormous surge in student service projects like Alternative Spring Break. Development, it seems, is all the rage.

Participation in development projects has become a "rebellious" activity, in the mold of Che Guevara cardigans and gritty New York clubs. Young people can demonstrate their disaffection with the excesses of American capitalism and mainstream consumerism by going abroad to uplift impoverished communities, casting themselves as "global citizens" concerned about critical political issues. Indeed, they can use these experiences to craft their identity as "counter-cultural," thus expressing their individuality and non-conformism in a radical mold. They come home from Honduras or Ghana and post pictures on their Facebook profiles of their time spent working among the poor, holding hungry babies, sweaty from digging wells or building schools. Such images carry a tremendous amount of cultural capital, as they flag the most highly valued kind of "alternative" personal narrative. So valued, in fact, that having a development project on your resume can be the ticket to a better-paying job in the future, as it indicates the sort of individual creativity that competitive companies seek. After graduating from college, students who cultivate alternative identities along these lines often pursue careers in the development sector, where they can address the problems of global poverty while still securing a respectable middle-class income. Professional development work has come to stand in for substantive political activism. This is revolution made compatible with consumer lifestyles: development workers can enjoy well-paying jobs without feeling like they are "selling out."

Over the past few years, the idea of development has been packaged into the commodity-sign itself. You no longer need to leave the comforts of the Western world in order to join the battle against poverty in the most remote places. Indeed, you can do so every time you make a basic, everyday purchase. When you go to Starbucks, for example, or when you buy a bottle of Ethos water, TOMS Shoes, or purchase clothes or electronics marked with the Product Red symbol, you can participate in the project of development. The promise that these corporations make is that a portion of their profits will go to alleviating poverty and saving hungry children in underdeveloped countries. Product Red, for example, works with franchises like GAP, Apple, and Nike so that 50 percent of the profit on marked items (t-shirts, iPods, basketballs, etc.) goes to addressing the problem of HIV/AIDS in Africa. The slogan they use says: "Buy RED, save lives. It's that simple."

The virtuous commodity is an extreme example of what Žižek calls "cultural capitalism": "we primarily buy commodities neither on account of their utility nor as status symbols; we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful" (2009b:52-54). You are not just purchasing coffee, or water, or shoes, or organic apples—you are also purchasing an identity, namely, that of caring about poor people, that of having cosmopolitan global awareness, and even that of having critical consciousness. You purchase the feeling of being a good, thinking, *alternative* individual. Put another way, the companies that market these commodities are not just selling the commodities themselves, they are selling feelings. The existence of poverty, and the pleasure-giving illusion of fixing it, *becomes a commodity itself*, a thing to be bought and sold.

This is an extension of the lifestyle marketing that first emerged in the early 1970s. But the new cultural capitalism adds an extra ingredient to the type of consumerism that took hold in the wake of the counterculture movement by allowing consumers to use commodity consumption not only as a vehicle for critical self-expression, but also as a tool for obviating consumerism itself. In this way, the virtuous commodity takes the notion of fetishism to new extremes. The commodity assumes what Žižek has aptly called a “redemptive” quality: the commodity becomes the key not only to our personal pleasure, but also to our sense of moral well-being. In the act of consumption you buy your redemption from the evils of consumerism. But the fetish goes even further, promising not only our redemption as consumers but also the redemption of the suffering world, promoting the absurd belief that individuals can help fix the problems caused by mass capitalist consumption through further engaging in mass capitalist consumption, that they can remediate global poverty by buying more commodities.

This adds an additional layer of mystification to the commodity fetishism that Marx discussed. The fact that the commodity appears so redemptive, so salvific, obscures to an unprecedented extent the relations of production that lie behind it. Take, for example, the “social business” initiative launched by Nobel Peace Laureate Mohammed Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, to work with Nike to manufacture $2 shoes for poor children in developing countries. When this initiative was announced it was met with enthusiasm from progressives and development-minded people the world over; everyone wants poor children to have shoes. But development enthusiasts rarely recognize the fact that the production of $2 shoes requires the exploitation of workers—perhaps even child workers—in third world sweatshops. By eclipsing the violent relations of production that lie behind it, the virtuous commodity reproduces the very lesions that it is supposed to redress.

This contradiction parallels the logic of charity more broadly. Charity—or, on a larger scale, development aid—is only possible with excess profits, but the very act of accumulating such profits *requires* the exploitation of both labor and the environment somewhere down the line. As "variable" costs of production, labor and the environment are easier to manipulate than capital, which comes with the profits of other capitalists already entailed and appears as "fixed." Especially in foreign contexts with minimal regulation, corporations realize huge profits by paying workers less than living wages and by refusing to pay for the pollution and destruction they cause. In this manner, capitalism externalizes the costs of its own reproduction. The contradiction, then, is that the very process of accumulating enough profit to dispense charity is precisely the process that creates the problems that charity pretends to address. As Žižek (2009a) has aptly argued, the charitable endeavor merely seeks to repair with one hand what it utterly destroys with the other.

The crucial trick of the virtuous commodity is that the charity goes to targets (poor children in Africa, for example) that *appear* to be external to the regime of production, that appear to be in a static, "natural" condition of want. This process misdirects critical attention away from the relationships of exploitation that are at stake, enabling capitalism by obscuring its contradictions. The solution offered by the virtuous commodity is an illusion, a fetish. Consumers are not really buying a better world, they are buying the sense of pleasure that comes with the illusion that they are buying a better world. This is the hidden tautology that structures the new commodity fetishism; it allows people to rebel against the inequities of consumer capitalism while continuing to consume at their present rate. In this manner, capitalism colonizes its own critique. It sells its obverse. It turns people's unease and discontent with capitalism into a market, a gap to be filled with yet more commodities—even more pernicious ones than before.

A very similar irrationality underlies development practice more broadly; the assumption that everyone in the world should be able to rise to the basic middle-class standards that the first world enjoys. This is an absurd fantasy for the obvious reason that the world does not contain enough resources for every person to consume as much as, say, the average American—we would need a number of additional Earths for that to be possible. But more importantly, this fantasy obscures the fact that the very wealth of the first world *depends* on the poverty of the third world. The tremendous wealth that Americans enjoy, for example, would not be possible were it not for the systematic exploitation of the labor and resources of poorer countries (Wallerstein 1989, Isbister 2006, Rodney 1974).

These relationships of exploitation are obscured within standard development rhetoric. In the work of Jeffrey Sachs (2006), for example, poverty and underdevelopment appear as a static state, as if outside of history and politics and power—a perspective that lends itself to apolitical "solutions" that hail technological and technocratic interventions. As anthropologist James Ferguson (1994) has put it, development acts as an "anti-politics machine" (see also Ufford and Giri 2003, Crewe and Harrison 1998). It transforms the revolutionary urge of dissenters into a passive accommodation with capitalism. Development initiatives allow for wealthy people—such as service-minded students and philanthropists like Bill Gates—to pretend to address the problem of global poverty without ever having to confront their position within a global class divide. It allows them to continue accumulating and consuming while still feeling good about themselves for being charitable, even revolutionary. The mythology of development allows them to believe that they can eliminate the poverty of the poor without ever having to challenge the wealth of the wealthy, as if the two were entirely unrelated. In short, development attempts to redress the problems caused by capitalism without ever questioning capitalism itself.

Since the 1970s, development has been used as the primary vehicle for neoliberal globalization in the rest of the world (Mitchell 1995, Cooper 1997, Rist 1997). The "structural adjustment conditions" of many World Bank and IMF development loans to postcolonial countries have required recipients to lower trade barriers, cut social services, and curb protections on labor and the environment—all of which provide outstanding returns in capital, but carry truly disastrous implications for the poor (Pollin 2003, Klein 2008). In a twist of absolute absurdity, development prescribes ever more radical market freedom to fix the problems created by market freedom in the first place; it seeks to battle the contradictions of capitalism by extending capitalism itself. It is no wonder, then, that after some 40 years of "global development"—and billions of dollars of investment—we have so little to show for it besides widening inequalities and deepening poverty (Rist 2007).

Toward a New Progressive Politics

We began this essay with the observation that, at the very moment when neoliberal ideologues are zealously advancing the "free market" by invoking the grand moral principles of liberty and freedom, American progressives are content to speak in a utilitarian and technocratic language that aims for "balanced" solutions through rational consensus. This reflects how the Left in America no longer sees its historical role as one of ensuring socioeconomic justice in the face of exploitation by a clearly defined adversary like "the Right" or "the elite." Instead, progressives seem preoccupied with another, more diffuse constellation of threats: political polarization, the decline of civility in public discourse, and increasing ideological rigidity and zeal. This is why some representatives of the American liberal-left, like Jon Stewart, have been so adamant about blaming "extremists" on both sides of the political aisle, and why the Obama campaign succeeded on a relatively vague platform of cooperation, compromise, "hope," and "unity." That this appears to so many as a better kind of politics makes sense within a cultural framework that sees ideological conflict as illusory rather than substantive, as a result of misunderstanding and misrepresentation rather than a product of incommensurable interests or structural inequities. In such a world, conflict can be redressed through a shared commitment to civility, consensus building, openness, and diversity.

It bears pointing out briefly that this trend has been paralleled to some extent by discourses about globalization in culture studies, post-colonial studies, and, indeed, some strands of anthropology. Jonathan Friedman (2002) has famously criticized Bhabha (1994), Appadurai (1993), and Malkki (1992) for celebrating hybridity and cosmopolitanism as the antidote to the chauvinism of nationalist and other essentialist identities, which they see as inherently violent because they are preoccupied with defending cultural boundaries against the threatening Other. Friedman rightly argues that the celebration of hybridity and cosmopolitanism obscures the violent exclusions that face the vast majority of people who cannot partake of globalization's "cut 'n' mix culture" (2002:33). Like the forms of progressive politics that we have discussed above, this literature thoroughly depoliticizes globalization and rationalizes neoliberal capitalism. Fortunately, this has not been the last word on the matter: in the past decade, a number of anthropologists have gone to great lengths to theorize the violent contradictions of neoliberalism. Kalb, following Polanyi, insists on seeing globalization as "a political project of globally imposed marketization…sponsored by transnational class segments within the core northern states and its comprador allies in dependent economies" (2005:177). Friedman (2003) stresses how class polarization has created cosmopolitan elites who are self-consciously global and hybrid, while at the same time generating intense forms of cultural closure and chauvinism among those most adversely affected by neoliberal policy. Carrier and Heyman take a similar approach to the study of consumption, arguing for a radical departure from prevailing "psycho-cultural" analyses that tend to "ignore or simplify inequalities and conflict" (1997:355).

To quote Žižek (2009a) once again, "The aim of progressive politics *should be* to reconstruct society in such a way that poverty will be impossible." But the altruistic virtues of cultural capitalism and development hobble this project by obscuring the exploitative relations of production that generate poverty and inequality in the first place, and by appropriating the critical capacities of the Left. These new trends appear to sanitize capitalism, to obviate its contradictions. They make capitalism seem palatable and benevolent. Instead of imagining real alternatives to global capitalism, many progressives today content themselves with promoting TOMS Shoes, Ethos water, and Alternative Spring Break with evangelical zeal. This is the extent of capitalism's hegemony, that it has colonized our capacity to imagine alternatives, and has transformed our potential for meaningful political critique and activism into a profoundly depoliticized, consumerist passivity. As a result, progressives in America have largely abandoned the task of confronting the antagonisms intrinsic to market capitalism. This is not to say that progressives do not care about growing inequality and mounting human suffering in America and abroad. They do. However, in many cases, their energies have been channeled into the spirit of rebellious and virtuous consumption and the moral project of development, which may mitigate the effects of capitalist production (although this too is questionable) but will never address the ultimate causes of our contemporary economic crises.

This is partly the unfortunate, and unintended, legacy of some strands of thinking located within the New Left of the 1960s, and even within the much-lauded Frankfurt School. To be sure, the overriding concern with individual autonomy and authentic self-expression that permeated the intellectual and political milieu of the 1960s helped secure important legal and political rights, and made possible the notion of a more inclusive and multicultural nation. Broadly speaking, these legal and political rights have created opportunities for select members of racial and ethnic minorities and women to enter into an elite world from which they had previously been barred. Although their place within this elite remains suspect and conditional, often predicated on their ability and willingness to participate in cultural activities that are themselves marked by race and gender bias, these new rights have not significantly altered the actual distribution of powers either within America or within global capitalist society more broadly. Indeed, as we have shown, capitalism largely appropriated the idea of individual rights and liberties and the anti-society ethos of the times to facilitate neoliberal forms of consumption and production. Moreover, given that corporations also have the legal status of individuals, they have taken advantage of the very same laws that were designed to protect individual rights and freedoms, and this has facilitated an unprecedented consolidation of corporate power. What this period furnished in place of a substantial redistribution of wealth and power is the *appearance* of freedom and choice. Consumers—at least those with sufficient resources—now have the freedom to fashion our identities as mainstream or alternative and to choose between regular, rebellious, and virtuous commodities; but we cannot opt out of the system, and we are not free to reconsider the fundamental violence at the heart of our capitalist society.

Progressives in America today remain largely circumscribed within the neoliberal paradigm. This fact becomes particularly clear in debates about military policy. For instance, Democrats have fought hard to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” so that homosexuals can have the freedom to serve in the military, but they have left the military-industrial complex itself mostly unscrutinized. Discussions about the War on Terror tend to fall along similar lines. While certain progressive circles have advanced radical critiques, the dominant concern remains that “national security” has come at the expense of liberty and freedom for citizens at home. Generally speaking, this approach fails to recognize that liberty in America has always been a privilege primarily reserved for white, middle-class males, and that its extension or denial to others is largely contingent on the historical needs of capitalism. Furthermore, the notion of liberty that functions domestically as a critique of state overreach is deployed at the same time to rationalize the belligerent use of military force around the world, and to underwrite the imperial project of violently restructuring foreign governments and economies in accordance with neoliberal principles. In the Muslim world, this is the very process that—because of the humiliation, poverty, and conspicuous inequalities that it generates—bloats the ranks of militant movements. In light of this, any thorough critique of the War on Terror will require that scholars and activists examine the links between American imperial interests in the Muslim world and the systemic needs of capitalist accumulation.

As we have suggested, rebellious and virtuous consumption are products of a neoliberal logic that posits market solutions for political and economic problems, celebrates "the consumer" as the supreme agent of change, and obscures the coercive dimensions of capitalism that generate the very problems that these forms of consumer activism aim to remedy. These trends are deeply depoliticizing, and have largely eclipsed the movements in America that genuinely challenge the onslaught of neoliberal capitalism. Living wage campaigns, for example, have attempted to address the problem of worker exploitation at home by trying to bring about a return to the social compact of the pre-1970s. The anti-sweatshop movement has drawn attention to the ruthless exploitation that characterizes capitalist production in the third world. The anti-globalization movement confronts IMF structural adjustment programs and opposes the nefarious bi- and multi-lateral trade agreements Western powers press onto weak Third World governments. These forms of activism all picked up steam in the 1990s, especially among American college students. While they were never intended to transcend the conditions of capitalist production, they have brought into sharp focus the violent exploitation of labor and the deepening global inequalities that define the neoliberal age. As a corrective to the absurdities of cultural capitalism, these projects deserve the renewed support of mainstream progressives.

In view of neoliberalism's voracious attack on the poor around the world, some prominent Leftist academics are now calling for a return to Marxist class analysis and class-based political activism. These analysts often exhibit hostility to what they consider the intellectual focus on "culture" and the political commitment to "identity politics" (see for example Chibber 2006). While we sympathize with this renewed focus on "class" insofar as it serves to anchor a critique of capitalist excesses, we cannot endorse the assumption that class is more "real," grounded in objective material conditions and relations of production, while other "identities" are subjective and serve as ideological tools that mystify these material conditions. On the contrary, our own approach is greatly indebted to some of the intellectual currents that were constitutive of the New Left, especially those who, following Gramsci, took seriously the notion that capitalism is best understood as a cultural or ideological system (cf. Guha 1983, Chatterjee 1993). Indeed, we concur with Laclau and Mouffe's contention that—contra structural Marxism—class has never been an objective location (cf. Thompson 1968), that class cannot be understood as a privileged locus of political critique, and that "class opposition is incapable of…reproducing itself automatically as a line of demarcation in the political sphere" (2001:151). The failure of the Left has been its failure to deconstruct the central categories of Marxist theory (such as class interest), and to fabricate new, more compelling political antagonisms with which to mobilize Americans' political imagination.

The argument in this essay, then, is not that "class" is more objective, nor that it is more worthy of attention than the struggles for recognition of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, women, indigenous groups, third world nations, or other disenfranchised populations. Rather, our argument is that in a regime that distributes social worth according to what one possesses and consumes, radical politics must reconnect consumption to production and "tackle issues of both 'redistribution' and recognition'" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:xviii). Indeed, our criticism of neoliberalism is that it goes well beyond prior forms of capitalism—such as that which Tocqueville noticed—in decoupling redistribution from recognition, claiming to grant ontological equality but refusing on moral principle to reckon with the history of structural violence that underpins the modern capitalist system. This position mystifies the fact that without substantive redistribution, recognition is not a meaningful achievement. Progressive movements that disaggregate issues of recognition from those of redistribution, then, participate in a neoliberal logic that masks the very structural inequalities that they aim to redress.

As we have demonstrated in the pages above, consumer activism and development discourse have a profoundly depoliticizing effect in that they presuppose the fundamental features of neoliberal cosmology: the idea that "the market" is a distinct and autonomous domain and that the "sovereign consumer" is the principal agent of change. These are precisely the features of the neoliberal cosmology that progressive politics must dismantle. For the Left to reverse this trend would require calling out the violent antagonisms latent in neoliberal capitalism. As Laclau and Mouffe have put it, "The Left should start elaborating a credible alternative to the neoliberal order, instead of simply trying to manage it in a more humane way. This, of course, requires drawing new political frontiers and acknowledging that there cannot be a radical politics without the definition of an adversary. That is to say, it requires the acceptance of the ineradicability of antagonism" (2001:xvii).

In today's political arena, this would require constructing a narrative that draws equivalences between the plurality of antagonisms that constitute the new social movements that have arisen since the 1960s in addition to reconstituting antagonisms between working people and corporate elites. The Occupy movement that began in New York's Zuccotti Park has made remarkable strides in this direction by getting people to close ranks under the banner of "The 99%" and by articulating a shared moral struggle against a clearly-defined adversary. The movement presupposes the critique outlined in this essay inasmuch as it rejects the commodification of dissent and moves beyond concerns about individual self-expression. But, at least at the point of writing this, Occupy has been emphasizing national inequalities without paying much attention to global ones. Eventually, Occupy will need to highlight and challenge the processes of extraction that generate general affluence for the 99 percent in the West through austerity and dispossession for billions of people in the third world. Since neoliberal capitalism is organized on an international scale, real change will require a movement that is international in scope. Our collective well-being depends on forging global solidarities. ■

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