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REACTIONARY POLITICS IN THE US:
ANTINOMIES OF NEOLIBERALISM

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Justin Gilmore

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The Dissertation of Justin Gilmore is approved:

_____
Professor Robert Meister, chair

_____
Professor Deborah Gould

_____
Professor Dean Mathiowetz

_____
Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

REACTIONARY POLITICS IN THE US: ANTINOMIES OF NEOLIBERALISM

JUSTIN GILMORE

This work illustrates how a renewed right has emerged against the backdrop of a "progressive" mode of neoliberal capitalism. An intensifying strain between political economy and ideology has unsettled key constructs traditionally used to produce political legitimacy. To understand this, attention is paid to neoliberalism's legitimizing ideology, which I argue is conditioned by humanitarian reason and ethics. This ideological destabilization has opened space for new emergent reactionary politicization. Contemporary reactionary politics take aim at neoliberalism's legitimizing ideology rather than its political economy. This conjunctural dynamic has also brought about serious changes in areas typically understood as static in their support of reactionary politics, like whiteness and masculinity. This dissertation contours these changes and argues for a new analysis of reactionary politics in the US.

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Rane. Writing a dissertation is not an easy thing to do, but she has made it as easy as it could be. Rane helped me think through ideas, and she gave me the support I needed to complete. I have been lucky to have her by my side. The work presented here could not have been possible without the assistance of many others. I am indebted to my doctoral advisor, Bob Meister, who has discussed issues of right-wing politics and political theory with me at length for many years now. Our conversations have always been generative and Bob's graduate courses were formative for my research. My committee members, Debbie Gould and Dean Mathiowetz, have also been extremely helpful. I have appreciated their thoughtful input and the mentorship that I received from both. Aspects of this manuscript also benefitted feedback from colleagues in the History of Consciousness Program at UC Santa Cruz. Of course, any errors or problems with this work are entirely my own.

INTRODUCTION:

DOES THE RIGHT NEED TO BE THOUGHT?

This dissertation is an inquiry into thinking about the right. Much of the writing on today's right remains at the level of polemical description rather than a critical analysis. The justification for not producing a comprehensive analysis of today's reactionary politics is always unstated and undefended: that the US reactionary right is residual and thus has already been analyzed, that its emergence today is not necessarily new, and that it can be explored on its terms independent of broader social conditions. This work shows how contemporary right-wing politics has been reshaped in and through neoliberalism's ideological, economic, and political shifts. These transformations are both necessary for adequate understanding and salient for those conducting political work.

In my view, a critical analysis of today's reactionary politics is more necessary than ever. It is said that reactionaries threatened to reverse whatever social progress has been won. But if we have learned anything from the "postmodern turn," historical unfolding is neither unidirectional nor bidirectional. Forward and backward temporalities are either assumptions or arguments. Either way, an imagined backward or forward movement in time is an ideological move that naturalizes the political prerogatives of the person narrating. Born of the critique of progress, temporal openness is a fundamental theoretical and political lesson of our time. But the

destabilization of progress is not the exclusive property of leftward critics of liberalism.

Thinkers of the reactionary right now perversely make this same case. For example, Curtis Yarvin, darling theorist of the emergent far right, elsewhere invites his progressive readers to imagine what Wikipedia would look like if the German national socialists won World War II. The point of Yarvin's historical counterfactual is to demonstrate how Wikipedia's "neutral point of view" rule could easily exist in an alternative fascist universe. The political center of gravity bends towards history's victors, not towards enlightened truth. Yarvin attempts to get the reader to question today's liberal authority and the esteemed institutions that produce its knowledge and facts. His move is not entirely unlike Hayden White's orthogonal and controversial intervention about the historical understanding of the Holocaust: that one cannot "prove" history, as history's production always requires interpretation and the use of narrative tropes. This is to say that the unsettling of liberalism's certainty has not straightforwardly born fruits of emancipation. But to blame the so-called postmodern turn for these problems is to imagine sophists as the agents of history. Of course, thinkers are not today's historical agents. Nor have they ever been; classes make history move, and thinkers do not compose themselves into any distinct class.

Realism around the nature of institutional authority and its authorized truths should give reason to pause, as liberalism's 2022 counter-offensive against the right consists of re-asserting its truth statements and institutions. The branding of Trump's wager as "the big lie" demonstrates this move. So too are the United States House

Select Committee on the January 6 Attack's televised public hearings. Each seeks to frame the 2020 election fallout by putting onto the table the facts of the electoral process and the actions taken by former President Trump. Many liberals now appear to presume that the authority of congress and the respectable media will carry the day. What impact this liberal wager will have is an open question. Regardless, it is alarming to contextualize this liberal positioning within the right's sustained attack on the legitimacy of congress and the dominant liberal media. What appears as a counter-offensive is perhaps more appropriately described as a rearguard action.

A comprehensive look at today's conjunctural situation reveals how some historical options are more possible than others. The politics of contemporary neoliberal capitalism—politics is always determined by political economy on some level—has produced significant barriers to social, economic, and political progress. Egalitarian change remains bogged down by the material edifice of capital and by political forces with a fidelity for liberalism. But reactionary politics has not been blocked with the same vigor. The unavailability of a left exit from our historical quagmire has only strengthened the far-right by rendering it the only practical alternative to the status quo.[1] In an age of building crises, from climate change to social inequality, demand for a departure from today's political norms has heightened. Unfortunately, a departure from our historical trajectory need not go left.

[1] Though this dissertation is concerned with US politics, this dynamic of an extinguished left against a hard right was on full display in the 2022 French election, as Emmanuel Macron edged out the French left in a strategic calculation to face off against the far-right Marine Le Pen.

The dissertation's first chapter investigates the conjunctural situation around the right. I argue that reactionary politics has been organized around rejecting neoliberalism's legitimizing ideology: humanitarianism. This investigation must include a compositional analysis of working-class social forces. The demolition of an organized mass movement of working-class subjects has decisively reoriented reactionary politics, changing its basic self-understanding from opposition to egalitarian social forces. Now, the reactionary right juxtaposes itself against a humanitarian ideology and discourse that permeates the Democratic Party, liberal civic organizations, and multinational capital.

Chapter two shifts from a genetic interpretation of reactionary politics and focuses on the US racial formation and whiteness. This chapter contends that neoliberal society has reorganized whiteness alongside changes in the structure of accumulation. I make this argument by developing a concept that I call white social reproduction—an idea that demonstrates the capacity for whiteness to shift alongside political and economic changes. I use this concept to understand the emergence of contemporary "progressive neoliberalism," which sees the continuation of inequality alongside a discourse of equity, harm reduction, and the public recognition of trauma. This ideological form projects a set of normativities around whiteness that grate and grind against neoliberalism's stagnating and precarious economic conditions. Reactionary partisans have transformed a rejection of humanitarian ideology's normativities into a positive set of values evident in today's right-wing political culture.

The third chapter turns its focus to reactionary masculinities. Framed through an analysis of the "involuntary celibate," also known as "incel" subjects, this chapter shows how masculine forms inflected by neoliberal practices of autonomous self-betterment have elicited new reactionary masculine forms. I argue that incel subjects epitomize this dynamic. The incel is peculiar because they construct a biological hierarchy of masculinities that places themselves at the very bottom. I argue that this construction is a mode of resistance to neoliberal masculinities. Self-professed biological inferiority exempts incel subjects from the myriad forms of self-making—improvement of habits, exercise, sociality, and the like—that define neoliberal masculine sociality. Through a rejection of neoliberal masculine sociality arise novel reactionary subjectivities that have spurred a dangerously nihilistic political orientation and have spurred revisionist historical nostalgia for the postwar period.

These chapters seek to specify what is new about today's reactionary politics. Behind seemingly recurrent themes lie changes that have meaningful political implications. But to understand these implications requires investigation of even the most inconspicuous changes. It is easy to perceive the right as simply a continuation of the past. From embracing multicultural representation to the sustained attack on multinational capital—presuming continuity has tended to blind thinkers from observing and assessing novel aspects of today's right. Today's reactionary politics—if they find success—appears may well bring the political situation into a new direction. Any meaningful opposition must understand why and how this is happening. However, it is impossible to understand any of this without scrutinizing

the ideological processes, social forces, and political commitments of contemporary liberal politics.

CHAPTER 1:

NEOLIBERALISM, HUMANITARIANISM, AND REACTIONARY POLITICS

Thinking about the contemporary radical right through its relation with neoliberalism is not the typical approach to understanding today's stirring reactionary forms. For most, the problem is not posed through an analysis of capitalism, either broadly conceived or by periodizing capital's neoliberal configuration. The US radical right is commonly thought to have an illiberal ethos at its core. Illiberal ideas, concepts, and ideologies can appear as forms outside history, including capitalist society's historical specificity and accumulation.

I contend that today's radical right has been shaped by its resistance to neoliberalism's legitimization, or more specifically, to humanitarian ideology. It is not typical to think neoliberal capitalism and humanitarian politics together; very rarely have the literature of each overlapped. It would seem that the most common interpretation of neoliberalism's relationship to humanitarianism would be defined by a contingency of ideas and political economy. My claim—and I follow in the Marxist tradition in making this move—is that their relationship is more than simple contingency and that humanitarian politics has effectively functioned as the legitimization structure for neoliberal accumulation. In this sense, today's reactionary politics are "opposed" to neoliberalism. Though not articulating anything anti-

capitalist (and we have great reason to maintain skepticism of the idea that today's national conservatives are interested in something approximating social democracy), the politicization of the right takes issue with the particular manner through which neoliberal capitalism has reproduced itself in the ideological level.

I open up the chapter by arguing for a departure from the politics of anxiety as an explanatory mechanism for reactionary politics. Anxiety has been a recurring theme in explanations of the political problems of modernity. This theme has been carted into our present moment and used to explain the rise of the right. The chapter then departs from its discussion of status anxiety and moves towards a conjunctural analysis that discusses left weakness, neoliberalism's emergence, and the relation between humanitarianism and neoliberal capital. The chapter ends with an argument about how today's right has been shaped by humanitarian reason. From this, I conclude that a new structure of feeling on the right has been produced—one organized around feelings of indifference to suffering and trauma, sometimes even of one's suffering. As we shall see, this is a response to the normativities inherent to a human rights discourse that seeks to center historical injustice and separate these injustices from contemporary capitalist dynamics.

Departing from Status Anxiety

The defining dispute on how to think about the contemporary US radical right centered on whether race or class was its fundamental source. This discussion, which

eventually accelerated into a widespread debate, was explicitly focused on understanding the origins of Donald Trump's electoral victory. Content aside, the cadence of the discussion was illuminating. Hillary Clinton's electoral fortunes seemed formidable. Operating under the Clintonian name brand, her presidential bid was supposed to have been bolstered by support from the popular Barack Obama and by the full support of a Democratic Party captured by her political allies. The only practical challenge came from the social democratic margins, and this challenge has already passed. With Bernie Sanders routed, nothing was imagined having stood between Clinton and the presidency. As would become apparent, Hillary Clinton's presidential ambitions would be thwarted. Voracious discussion and debate would ensue on how this miscalculation would occur. All eyes focused on the dubious Trump supporters.

Naturally, the social sciences became a site for attempting to understand a situation that was never supposed to happen. The empirical analysis was to be mobilized for understanding how reality could make such a hard break with reasoned prediction. The stakes for reasoned prediction were especially high since the projections were carried out with approaches and personnel derived from the social sciences. Researchers paid their focus on understanding the specific dimension of Trump's popular support. The real source of Trump's support was demanded.

What is this thing called status anxiety? At first, it may be easy to confuse status anxiety with the concept of the "wages of whiteness." However, there is significant space between the two. The wage of whiteness idea—which is derived

from Du Bois and which will be treated with more care in the following chapter—is centered on a relationship between material advantages and a set of political objectives. What is achieved through the wages of whiteness is the liquidation of class solidarity and its replacement with cross-class racial solidarity. Status Anxiety does not imply such a rigorous idea; instead, status anxiety has tended to refer to the loss or potential of social esteem due to changing political conditions such as elevated racial equality. It is helpful to take a closer look into status anxiety as such.

Examining Anxiety in "Status Anxiety"

While discussion and debate proliferated, the political aspects weighed heavily on the specific interpretations. The great Trump debate often functioned like loaded dice, with political investment determining the particular role of race or class in the 2016 election. Even so, some studies have attempted to conclude the question once and for all. Perhaps the most widely cited study (e.g., Bieber 2018; Chokshi 2018; Marti 2019) conducted by Public Religion Research Institute ruled out economic anxiety as the culprit of right radicalization. Summing up their analysis, the authors noted that "White working-class voters who say they often feel like a stranger in their land and who believe the US needs protecting against foreign influence were 3.5 times more likely to favor Trump than those who did not share these concerns" (Lienesch, Jones, and Cox 2017). Feelings of white displacement—a general feeling that international white nationalists attempt to conjure through their conspiracy theory of the

"replacement" of whites by immigrants (Obaidi et al. n.d.)—are said to evoke resentment for other racial groups. For the researchers, the conclusion was clear—"status anxiety" animated Trumpism.

That white identification provokes profoundly existential anxieties among a significant group of the US population opens up more questions than it resolves. If anxiety about one's status within the US national formation has become dominant on some level, the most basic question we may ask is why. As already noted, far-right partisans have provided their interpretation of this apparent feeling. A "great replacement" is set to occur, with whites being overcome by non-whites presumably at every one of society's economic, political and social levels (Williams 2017). To the extent that this is not true—there is no evidence for replacement theory—then we are left with an open question about the nature of today's apparent anxiety.

The fusion of "status" with "anxiety" is a curious amalgam since each has a distinctive but, at times, overlapping tradition. As we shall see, their fusion into a concept for the present could be said to represent the dominant discourse of our time.

The contemporary term anxiety developed from the Latin *angor* (anguish), *ango* (constrict), and *angustus* (narrow). All of these share another root, which has produced the modern term angst (Crocq 2015, 321). Anxiety appears practically throughout modernity as a recurrent theme. The emergence of mass industrial society has long been thought of through the lens of anxiety. The demolition of traditional social ties embedded with mystical aspects and their replacement with capitalist

social relations eventually produced cultural and political homelessness that Max Weber would describe through his concept of disenchantment (Weber 2019).

Freud's depiction of anxiety through his early psychanalysis would eventually follow this thread (Freud 1961). In his later work, Freud spelled out a two-part theory amid considerable European tumult. Difficult or traumatic external events outside the subject's control could enfeeble the ego, thus throwing the subject into crisis resulting in anguish. But objectively present external circumstances need not exist to produce similar effects. Freud speculated that the possibility (or imagined possibility) of traumatic external events could also make these effects—a process that he distinguished as "signal anxiety." The ego registers external stimuli that have led to harmful outcomes in the past. Freud thought that similar external stimuli could produce an anxiety response as the ego was keen to avoid a similar outcome in the future. But similar external stimuli can always lead to different outcomes, so signal anxiety can often appear irrational. This distinction would prove prescient.

Debates about fascism have mostly revolved around Freud's anxiety distinction—sometimes intentionally but, ironically, sometimes unconsciously. The thinking that German support for fascism was derived from the facts of economic turbulence, hyper-inflation, and punitive war. First World War penalties could represent an anxiousness derived from objective conditions. Alternatively, the belief that Fascist support is based on the possibility of left-wing revolution, international communism, or racially-imbued conspiratorial discourses about Jewish dominance all map onto Freud's signal anxiety concept. Either way, fascism was primarily

understood through pathology as a kind of mental sickness that brought about ruin of the self and the other. Disaffected Mussolini supporter Curzio Malaparte identified the entire German culture just this way in his autobiography-fiction crossover book on Second World War's conjuncture, *Kaputt*, noting that German Nazi cruelty "is made of fear; they are ill with fear. They are a sick nation, a Krankesvolk" (Malaparte 2005, 11). His main character then delivers this monologue:

> They are afraid," I replied, "they are afraid of everything and everybody; they kill and destroy out of fear. Not that they fear death; no German, man or woman, young or old, fears death. They are not even afraid of suffering. In a way, one may say that they like pain. But they are afraid of all that is living, of all that is living outside of themselves, and of all that is different from them. The disease from which they suffer is mysterious. They are afraid above all of the weak, of the defenseless, of the sick, of women and of children. They are afraid of the aged. Their fear has always aroused a profound pity in me. If Europe were to feel sorry for them, perhaps the Germans would be healed of their horrible disease" (Malaparte 2005, 12)

Curiously, pity would become a secret calling card of the early postwar era, a time colored by the interpretation of national socialism as an outcome of a peace punitive towards Germany. Malaparte's conclusion represents a theory in which a punitive peace deal from the First World War supposedly facilitated German right-wing extremism. Here, the feeling of pity need not be heartfelt; one can feign pity after all, and if its performance serves broader human interests, perhaps its enactment becomes all the better. Operationalized pity serves a purpose—reducing anxieties associated with living under the thumbs of the victorious. The debate about the reality of Germany's punishment is open enough. But as Freud pointed out, the reality or non-reality of anxiety matters little—perhaps just as much as the antidote. Either way, a kind of mass anxiousness, cast in the language of irrational naturalisms and a desire

for cultural overcoming by a volk with a supposedly distinctive character that could be interpreted through the discourse of race.

The use of anxiety as a descriptive characteristic outlived both *fin de siecle* political culture and the mid-century extinction of European fascisms. Writing in 1949, liberal militant Arthur Schlesinger would diagnose the postwar period's "politics of anxiety," noting that:

> Western man in the middle of the twentieth century is tense, uncertain, adrift. We look upon our epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety. The grounds of our civilization, of our certitude, are breaking up under our feet, and familiar ideas and institutions vanish as we reach for them, like shadows in the falling dusk. Most of the world has reconciled itself to this half-light, to the reign of insecurity. Even those peoples who hastily traded their insecurities for a mirage of security are finding themselves no better off than the rest. Only the United States still has buffers between itself and the anxieties of our age: buffers of time, of distance, of natural wealth, of national ingenuity, of a stubborn tradition of hope (Schlesinger 1998, 30).

Interestingly, Schlesinger's project was not simply oriented to reducing anxiety effects but to conjuring anxiety among those he seemed too complacent. Schlesinger had determined that it was time for liberalism to depart from those to its left, especially socialism and communism. The political integration of liberalism and socialism in and through the joint effort of wartime anti-fascism had reached its limit by lifting away the common fascist enemy. Old conflicts were sure to remerge with absent liberalism and socialism's agonistic mediation by fascism. From this view, a Cold War was a worthy exchange since the unease would arise from a divided liberal house besieged by enemies on the left. Cordial relations with the classical enemies of liberalism were a fanciful enterprise that could backfire and bring about precisely the wrong kind of anxiety.

As we can see, “anxiety” is a reoccurring theme in the analysis of modernity. In many moments, anxiety has been made a reliable tool for describing effects that proliferate from social conflicts, economic transformations, and political fallouts that emerge from capitalist societies. Continuity between these moments is, at this point, unclear. In any historical time, the meaning of anxiety will fluctuate significantly. Anxiety is specific to the crisis it has developed around, making anxiousness an imprecise tool for thinking about our political moment. While contextually specific, the historical persistence of the politics of anxiety is striking. Its reoccurrence suggests that some continuity persists between otherwise distinctive historical moments. While anxiety holds no meaningful persistence at the level of political substantiation, there does seem to be some relationship between psychic dislocation and the politics of capitalism. Plumbing this relationship can help shed light on what anxiety is about.

Anxiety and Structures of Class

A closer look at the historical record of anxiousness and radical right phenomena demonstrates one rather persistent aspect, the awkward position of the petty bourgeoisie, also known as the middle classes. While anxiety has undoubtedly touched subjects at every level of the class ladder in any given historical time, the persistence of right-wing middle-class politics born of anxiousness is striking.

The historical origins of the petty bourgeoisie are complex, if only because it is composed of heterogeneous class fractions. Unlike the proletariat, which has arguably remained a specific category in the division of labor despite significant transformations like its labor, the middle classes have continuously changed since the inception of the capitalist mode of production. This transformation has remained so continuous that any definition of the middle class must include its proclivity to change considerably over time. And this constant tendency for the capitalist economy to induce transformation processes forms the heart of its proclivity toward a politics of anxiety.

For one thing, it is necessary to understand how the middle classes differ from the working class. The distinction is clear for some middle-class positions, like small and medium-sized business owners or the self-employed. These middle-class fractions do hold direct access to the means of production. Their holding is typically highly tenuous, with most small firms going out of business within their first four years of operation (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Part of their problem has to do with how the economy works. Intense competition between firms is supposed to liquidate the inefficient; those who can remain productive, keep costs low and find healthy demand to connect with may survive. Of course, smaller firms must find their niche amid the giants of industry that constantly threaten to liquidate their firm's conditions of possibility by dint of their asymmetrical size. This competition mode is distinctive from workers within a labor market, as selling one's capacity for work is fundamentally different from building a productive firm. Other forms of middle-class

work, like those occupations associated with “white-collar” labor, are perhaps less distinctive than the working class. David Lockwood’s classic study of clerical employees is demonstrative of this distinction. Of most importance is the relative stability of these workers compared to manual labor, the likelihood of advancement into management positions, and the non-pecuniary advantages like cleanliness, hours, time off, hourly flexibility, etc. (Lockwood 1966, 204). These distinctions, for Lockwood, mean that the problem of “false consciousness” that is sometimes used to criticize these white-collar workers has derived from a misunderstanding of the nature of the work (Lockwood 1966, 137-200). Thus, even though some white-collar work has become included in the trade union movement, the subjective disposition of this class faction contains essential differences from the traditional working class.

The combination of capitalism’s tendency to facilitate economic tumult and political contestation makes the relative advantages of the middle classes, in general, a source of anxiety and possible despair. Indeed, this dynamic is less individually psychological than it is structurally pathological. C. Wright Mills, in his introduction to his book White Collar, C. Wright Mills argues that the middle-class condition was always one of structural ambivalence, a perpetual state of political insecurity. Caught between classes that have historically organized themselves into formations that can represent their interests, the middle classes can only become a kind of accessory to the other class forces: “He is pushed by forces beyond his control, pulled into movements he does not understand; he gets into situations in which his is the most helpless position” (Mills 1968). The middle class tends to find itself on unstable

political ground, moved by invisible forces and thus oscillating between various political poles.

An essential aspect of the politics of anxiety is the impersonality of the forces that produce the political problems of the middle classes. The classical proletariat had faced off with forces that were sometimes essentialized into the figure of the boss. While the issue of capitalist accumulation was often imposed systemically onto the firm itself, it is understandable to place the employer's subjective capacities within broader objective conditions. Even if the problems of the working class were sometimes overloaded onto the figure of the employer, there was still enough reality to such a claim to produce political action with legitimate possibility of success.

The position of subjects within the middle classes is often more ambiguous than that of the worker, and this ambiguity is related to anxiousness. For those for whom the boss is somewhere between an authority and an aspiration, the experience of economic insecurity becomes difficult to crystalize into a coherent ideological perspective. The coordinates for political action become increasingly shrouded by this lack of concrete consciousness, making the experience of falling an existential problem. Thus, the middle classes—despite their heterogeneity—have historically driven political volatility. Structurally unmoored and politically disconnected from coherent class politics, petty bourgeoisie class fractions are generally encoded by political anxiety. And while the content of anxiety is conjecturally-specific, the tendency to project this tumultuousness into a general social code must be understood as an expression of hegemony.

It is no wonder that, in the wake of the 2016 election, the apparent political tumult was not simply encoded as "white" but as "white working class" despite evidence that the hardcore base of Trumpism existed within the specific geographic and economic sections of the middle class. This prevalent dynamic follows a broader historical trend. Ironically, political petulance has historically been identified not with the politically homeless middle classes but the working class. Endless struggles from below—for equality, liberty, freedom—continuously upended the order of society is the source of this interpretation. The tendency for middle-class persons, including white-collar workers, to opportunistically demand the repression of working-class movements is also not new. It is evidenced in various historical moments and distinctive contexts: the pre-civil war US against abolitionists (Richards 1975), Klan insurgency against Reconstruction (Parsons 2019, 30) white-collar antagonism to postwar period industrial actions (Lockwood 1966, 104). Many more examples exist, and these seem to suggest that the politics of anxiety are more structural than psychic.

An ever-inchoate militancy arising from the desire to defend such small things is demonstrable in the relative benefits of the middle class. Defense of these minor benefits has turned out to be decisive. Perhaps anxiety is better understood as a symptomatic nihilism derived from the preening of lackluster conjunctural benefits that are facilitated the banal structures of political economy.

Examining Status in "Status Anxiety"

Following the thread of anxiety has naturally brought us onto the subject's terrain. What is anxiety without the subject who suffers from it? On its own, anxiety is simply an interpretive concept, a product of the Archimedean view of social scientific or humanistic inquiry. In its application, anxiety implies something in excess of it. This is why anxiety could be deployed without the adjacent term, "status," since the former presumes that the malady has something to do with some subject somewhere. But the mobilization of status regarding the contemporary radical right is meant as a signpost. Our attention is directed toward the construction of social standing in US society. Specifically, the destabilization of one's standing position is at stake in this analysis. And from this view, it appears that we have not yet wandered far from the tendency toward anxiety among middle-class fractions.

It is tempting to argue that the subject of anxiety could be reduced to the intersection of middle-class fractions who find themselves in a problematic conjunctural situation. Implied in this interpretation is the idea that only in specific conjunctural situations can the otherwise stable position of these middle-class subjects become thrown apart. Here, two temporalities co-exist. One temporality is defined by volatility and rupture, and another temporality by its opposite, namely stability and continuity. This empirical view of history produces a neat arrangement of two distinctive political situations. But this ostensibly neat division facilitates immense problems in our analysis of the right. It also contributes to the ideological view that capital and capitalist society crises are exceptional departures from the norm of stability.

The theoretical problem of this couplet is that neither seems related to the other, which means that the emergence of anxiousness and any related political turbulence appears sealed from moments of apparent stability. How the mental serenity of the petty bourgeoisie becomes disturbed and how this disruption can escalate into a fervent right-wing militancy is opaque. Put this way, the dividing lines between these temporalities are contiguous; their borders remain clear-cut, and their respective substances are distinguishable. Imagining that each overlap, and therefore the assertion that there exists some liminal zone, does not address the fundamental problem of their relation. Instead, this amendment only aggravates our analysis by multiplying the number of definite borders between apparently different temporalities and effects. Though this typological approach has the benefit of certitude—you know it when you see it—it also has a reifying impact that makes each appear natural and homogeneous.

This type of skewed understanding has immense political implications, the likes of which we have witnessed throughout the neoliberal period. Suppose we accept that petty-bourgeois volatility (in terms of volatile objective conditions and the subjective political volatility that follows) represents a departure from the regime defined by continuity and stability. It follows that the political project—regardless of the directionality of middle-class militancy—should be directed towards departing from that volatile moment by returning to what is expected. Reminiscent of the 1980s right-wing talking point, this circular motion is the temporal representation of "there is no alternative" since the departure from normal times is already encoded with

angst, destabilization, and the possibility of inchoate revanchism. But suppose the concept implies a "return" in the normative sense. In that case, the politics expressed by those affected by this anxiety also appear determined to institute a different kind of return.

Here, we arrive at a tension embedded within the discourse of status anxiety. While the discourse suggests a kind of "return" to an imagined status of normality, the politics of the late neoliberal conjuncture does not seem to match. It is commonly understood that the US right monopolizes the politics of return. Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan demonstrates this point. It may at first seem that Trump's slogan is a confession of the critique of status anxiety and that the politics heralded by Trump are simply barefaced. But as we have seen, the mobilization of the concept suggests a "before" in which anxiousness did not increase. One is left wondering when this moment could be—and if the liberal version of a return is as skin deep as the eight years that Obama held office. The concept of status anxiety appears unable to accomplish the work it is expected to achieve.

While "status anxiety" contains considerable theoretical problems, it expresses something real about today's politics, not how those who take up the concept believe. At the surface level, status anxiety represents a demand to return to an imagined moment in which anxiousness does not animate a radical insurgent right. But this apparent return is an assertion of a new class project, one projected by a specific alliance of class fractions. The mobilization of status anxiety is an artifact of a hegemonic political maneuver. Its proliferation within the mainstream, and its

renovation into a common-sense language, is part of a broader attempt to respond to the crisis of liberalism.

If this oscillation between anxious volatility and serene restoration is a political dynamic, then it is justifiable to ask questions of the nature we often require returning to. Who determines the apparent status of temporal normality and, therefore, the conditions of escape from the politics of anxiety? Addressing the question demands that we renovate the terms used thus far. Unless we are happy with reinforcing this temporal dualism—and we should not be, since there is scant evidence that this dualism exists outside of the status of ideological construction—then we must develop an alternative framework for understanding this apparent back-and-forth.

Status Anxiety as Class Struggle

Marx's most fundamental insight was that some mode of class conflict lie behind the pyrotechnics of official politics. This approach has been historically understood through the dynamic of the great war between proletarians and the ruling class. Often, the petty bourgeoisie has been an afterthought to this broader dynamic. In this determination, fractions of the middle class are understood as appendages to the more general class conflict that has unfolded between a well-organized proletariat and sections of the ruling class. This model of a bifurcated class struggle has become more challenging to detect since the emergence of neoliberal capitalism. Therefore,

the class struggle seems outmoded as a framework for understanding the current dilemma of the US right. But his fuzzy picture comes into focus if we refuse an understanding of the middle classes as a mere appendage and instead accept that these class factions, too, can have their political prerogatives arising from their class positions.

Understanding the generic articulation of class conflict is necessary for interpreting how various middle-class fractions have contributed to the emergence of the radical right. This can at first seem difficult because the classical coordinates of the class struggle appear to have been washed away. Where is the working class truly on the march today? Or, where is class struggle emergent in the neoliberal period? It is helpful to begin by looking at the problems of attempts to specify class dynamics in the preceding postwar era. In the early 1970s, Poulantzas convincingly argued that interpreting the petty-bourgeois class factions as the great tailers of history obfuscates the heterogeneous complexity of hegemonic or contending power blocs (Poulantzas 1978, 194-196). For Poulantzas, the great mistake of social democracy had been its misinterpretation of the class alliance between the working class and the middle classes, as the latter was considered an extension of the former, albeit with specific working conditions (Poulantzas 1978, 204). This brought about a misidentification of the fragility of the social democratic-dominated coalition since no special attention had to be paid to maintaining working class hegemony. Thus, over-confidence around the hegemonic project is known as the postwar consensus.

Looking at the neoliberal situation, something close to a perverse reversal has occurred. With a working-class beaten into what appears to be a continual retreat, the working class as an independent political force is often considered an outdated formation. In the place of the political project led by proletarian forces has come a newfound perspective of "populism" for which the prospects of a working-class politics recede into the background and are replaced with a sectional, cross-class constituency (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001 for the dominant left-populist iteration). The overall effect of this tendency has been a broader hegemony in and through the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie (Ehrenreich 2020, 3-16; Roediger 2020, 85-89). Or, at least these political forms appear to deliver to the middle classes a level of hegemony.

Typically going by the name "polarization," today's political camps are poised against one another, often militantly. Later in this chapter, it will be argued that the internal ideological dynamics of these political cultures and the nature of the political contestation between them structure the conjunctural situation in which right-wing forces challenge the dominant neoliberal humanitarian ideology. But before tracing the conjunctural situation out, it is essential to note that each political culture—typically perceived through a litany of aestheticizations that pit "red" and "blue" regions against each other—represents a power bloc that includes distinct fractions of the ruling class and the petty bourgeoisie. Though many working-class voters have tended to drop out of the political process, it is still true that sections of the working class vote for either party. Yet, with the decline of organized labor and

its ability to pressure the party system, working-class voters have tended to find themselves in subordinate roles within either party. The same is true of today's dominant political cultures.

For each, these sections of the petty bourgeoisie do the essential work of structuring the political imaginary, broadly conceived, that is to be projected outwards. Both sides' ethical, aesthetic, and political determinations pass through these middle-class factions before "trickling down" into the broader political body (Ehrenreich 2020; Piketty 2020, 807). With the decline of the postwar consensus, the traditional left-liberal, social democratic, and socialist parties that had once represented the working class fell into sharp decline and continue to experience attrition of their prior bases of support (Mair 2013). Looking at the transformation of mass parties across the European and American landscape, Piketty shows that the formerly class-based parties have shifted to a cross-class constituency that relies heavily on educated professionals (Piketty 2020, 812-818). As a power bloc, the highly educated do not stand alone. At the levels of political culture and party politics, these sections of the middle class have become fused with multinational capital, which has become increasingly "progressive" relative to other segments of capital that populate the high echelons of right-wing politics, such as privately held family firms and medium to small business (Cooper 2022). On the right-wing side, the fractions of the petty bourgeoisie it has courted are distinctive from the liberal-left. The lumpen petty bourgeoisie, owner-operators, and other small-time merchants sanctify right-wing political culture's cultural and political aspects. For these

fractions of the middle class, multinational capital continually beleaguers them, threatening their liquidation by way of competition.

From the perspective of these competing power blocs, the terms and conditions of "status anxiety" can now be properly understood. For the right, status anxiety is a product of the multinational cosmopolitanism of the liberal-left. Policies that have eschewed "taking care of own's own" in favor of the international market become easy discursive prey. Particularly, these policies were often thought to have aggregate positive effects, despite not attending to the needs of the US public directly. Policies like NAFTA, for example, had sacrificed US industry on behalf of an economic theory that was supposed to have positive outcomes for jobs and economic growth. Calls for a new conservatism that does away with the fusion of traditionalism and global markets have now been made (Ahmari 2022) though these desires have thus far only gone so far. On the other side, the idea of status anxiety suggests that various dislocations have occurred and that these dislocations have produced considerable stress on subjects hitherto dominant.

Left Weakness

A significant determining aspect of today's right has been the collapse of organized left-wing social forces. The intensive decomposition of the left has also meant weakening the concepts and political ideals that had animated past emancipatory pushes. But the existence (or lack thereof) of an emancipatory political alternative is

not the only consideration. Indeed, a lack of a political alternative may technically bolster all other available political tendencies. From a superficial perspective, a lackluster left-wing bolsters, but does not necessarily shape, the alternative political trajectories of the right and center. As we shall see, organizational weakness has enabled a progressive form of neoliberalism to emerge. Absent the vehicles of class struggle that once existed, capitalist institutions may now openly avow self-criticisms without fear of transformation. But to understand why this is important for analyzing the right, we must look at how the reactionary tradition has been shaped through its opposition to egalitarian politics.

The tradition of reactionary politics finds its historical development intimately shaped by its resistance to mass, left-wing emancipatory politics. A politics of traditionalism seeks to diminish the left such that the already-existing structures remain unchanged. Reactionary politics, however, not only resists mass, left egalitarianism. Unlike traditionalism, reactionary politics seek to depart from already-existing political systems.

For this reason, the most reactionary political movements have tended to call into question and, in some cases, dissolve existing social structures (Robin 2011, 41-60). This impulse to change everything so that nothing may change is, in fact, more rational than the traditionalist perspective. Solidifying inequalities and producing a situation unfavorable for mass egalitarian politics requires that one remake the entire political field.

The distinction between traditionalism and reactionary politics is evidenced in the premier thinkers of the reactionary tradition. These thinkers are not "discovering" certain forms of thought. They instead negatively reflect certain emancipatory or progressive political situations; opposition to egalitarian movements tends to shape the political contours of reactionary thought. Ironically, emancipatory politics may serve as a boon for far-right political thought.

What follows is a brief detour into the tradition of reactionary politics. The point is to demonstrate how each thinker had developed a theory of politics based on their rejection of the egalitarian left. As we shall see, this insight is essential for understanding how the dissolution of today's left has reshaped how reactionary politics develop and grow.

Of these thinkers, perhaps Thomas Hobbes stands out the most. The now widely accepted idea in the liberal political thought of a sovereign state that stands above all other authority comes from Hobbes. While some thinkers have been inclined to claim Hobbes as a liberal ally, his concept of an all-power sovereign whose justification rested on its composition of "the people" worked directly against popular opposition movements of the time. Hobbes's Leviathan was bookended by contestations of state power between monarchists and liberals in England and France. At the core of this dispute was the idea of where a government's legitimacy comes from. Does it arise from the masses' activity or by way of divine right? If legitimacy derives from the movement of the groups, then does the absolutist state have any right to exist?

On the contrary, if legitimacy is pegged to an enchanted theory of divinity, what can we say about the self-activity of the masses? The ingenuity of Hobbes was to break the impasse between this couple. This was accomplished through the integration of each into a composite theory. In Hobbesian theory, the conservative desire for an absolute state is sheltered by bringing on board its legitimization of the people's consent, a process that "naturally" arises out of the desire to avoid a life of chaos, disorder, and decline (Hobbes 1988, 96). Indeed, for Hobbes, consent for a robust and towering state is produced because of equality rather than the opposite (Hobbes 1988, 86-90). This was a significant departure from theories of divine right, which tended to envision differences in power as produced by forces of enchantment from above. Hobbes transformed this problem by arguing that humans are too equal (Hobbes 1988, 145-154); humans are too capable of overpowering one another to fulfill whatever their passions demand. This dynamic of equality-to-chaos produces yet another passion—fear—and is the raw material for the process of consent to be ruled. By bringing into the concept of sovereign power a rationale of consent, Hobbes effectively presented a new mode of legitimization that has outlived the author. But this theoretical production did not simply occur in the author's mind. A critical historical determination of the Hobbesian theory was movements that sought to displace the *ancien régime* state and its ruling elites (Hobbes 1988, x-xii). The idea that an all-powerful state could persist not despite the people but because of the people was a reactionary response to historical contests that reactionaries sought to head off.

We can detect this move in yet another elemental thinker of the conservative tradition, Edmund Burke. Like Hobbes, Burke's reactionary politics was the unalloyed product of intellectual production amid egalitarian enthusiasm from below. Burke's model of politics was directly and intentionally conditioned by the French Revolution; his arguably most crucial text was written in open opposition to the 1789 revolution (Burke 1999, 409-416).

Burke's skepticism and rejection of fundamental political change are predicated on rejecting a rationalist approach to social criticism and construction. Writing against the idea of a rationally-informed human community, Burke appealed directly to the masses' prejudices:

> You see, sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of untaught feelings: that, instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree; and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and he more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them (Burke 1999, 451).

And within the prejudices, Burke saw "latent wisdom which prevails in them" (Burke 1999, 451). Emboldened by the culture of the Enlightenment, emancipatory politics became primarily concerned with the possibilities of democratic processes based on the idea of widespread capacity for rational thinking and practice.

Enthusiasm for using rationality among the broadest masses opened up space that could legitimate new modes of democratic rule. As we now know, these emergent practices would challenge and, in many cases, displace older elitist-driven forms. Against this backdrop, Burke would theorize pre-rational reflexes as a decisive aspect of social and political life: the capability to understand the world through perfect rational assessment was simply too tricky, and the subordination of thought

for intuition provided an affect basis for practical political activity. This move presaged later broadsides made against central planning in a socialist economy. Burke sought to validate, not disregard, the masses by validating their social instincts—a validation that would eventually become displaced onto practical market activity. This move did not straightforwardly reiterate the natural superiority of legacy power structures, like the aristocracy. Instead, Burke's theory subverted an elemental link within emancipatory politics—between the people on one side and a revolutionary process on the other—by arguing that the rationalist pretensions of the revolutionary processes denigrated intuitive politics for everyday people. From this view, revolutionary leaders like the Jacobin club would become easily delinked from the people's consent.

Like Hobbes, Burke's theory was, in the end, about the production of a new model of reactionary legitimization. Long held prejudices would provide the basis for the legitimacy of the reactionary state (in his case, the old constitutional order). Burke's political trajectory would set the stage for later reactionary criticisms made against the socialist left by Carl Schmitt (a thinker who would also turn back to Hobbes in his thinking on "decisionism"), who would describe the Soviet experiment as a "rationalist dictatorship" (Schmitt 2000, 52). In a much weaker way, this move is also visible in contemporary conservative depictions of modern liberals failing to understand "common sense" by emphasizing science, facts, and the like too much emphasis. But the critical point is that Burke's innovations arose from his encounter with episodic movements from below. His rejection of emancipatory politics

propelled him towards a theory of a "democratic" politics of prejudice. Though seemingly alike, prejudice would depart significantly from the Hobbesian model of the passions. Hobbesian theory has been taken up as a justification for a strong state whose legitimization was cemented in an imagined people; Burke's contention is less ambiguous about the nature of this state and calls into question the substantive structure of the state outside of its capacity for instituting order. What allows the two to be thought together is not a shared set of political principles but their reaction toward the legacy of the iteration of emancipatory politics in their respective lives.

Of course, irrationalist sentiments (Hobbesian fear, Burkean prejudice) would only stand as a positive cornerstone of reactionary politics so long as their egalitarian political enemy was organized in a bifurcated manner, with a political cadre discernable from the broadest masses. With the eruption of the Paris Commune, reactionary thinkers would begin to render non-rational forms from a feature into a flaw. We can see this in Gustave Le Bon's arguments about the psychologically-defunct crowd.

For Le Bon, the emergence of movements manifesting as crowds in the urban environment demonstrated a collective psychosis that discredited the peoples' capacity for political action and self-governance. Inspired by the emergence of psychology, Le Bon projected a kind of mental incapacity onto the people. The "mental unity" of the crowd—in other words, the fact that a crowd has a collective rather than individual character—had a hypnotic effect that disallowed both reasoned thought and intentional action (Le Bon 2001, 1-9). When the masses became

aggregated, the capacities that the Enlightenment assumed for them wilted (Le Bon 2001, 29-37). From this view, Le Bon's experience of the Paris Commune (Le Bon 2001, 107-108) is interpreted as collective madness rather than an emancipatory wager. In Le Bon's hands, the legitimacy of political action of the masses—be it physical action or the mediated action of mass democracy—becomes dethroned. Prevailing is a skepticism of the masses' ability to govern themselves. This is not at all unlike Burke's infamous remark about the intellectual skills of a hairdresser, but how inegalitarian conclusion is fundamentally different.

In Le Bon, we encounter a more apparent volte-face than Burke's departure from Hobbes as popular sovereignty becomes interpreted as mob rule. From an abstract view, these twists and turns could be reasonably interpreted as simple inconsistencies within the reactionary tradition. If we depart from the field of pure theory, however, apparent inconsistencies become more understandable. Each transformation of thought contains emancipatory social forces that reactionary study sought to subdue outside of a political situation. Le Bon's emergence onto a historical scene of augmenting working-class insurgency would direct him to move the tradition's critical rhetoric away from the cadre and back towards the masses. It was no longer that a cadre attempted to install a rational dictatorship. Instead, Le Bon's problem was centered on the inability of the broadest masses of people to compose themselves into a socially or politically useful collective formation. The reactionary tradition's common denominator is its reflexivity to extant social forces poised to

produce an egalitarian outcome. The practice of reactionary and conservative thought is highly reflexive and malleable.

What does this insight tell us about today's reactionary right? It describes to us that today's reactionary politics are likely also organized around mass egalitarian politics. But this lesson is a problem that must be considered further, especially because today's left is so weak.

For one thing, the category of the "masses" is inaccurate for today, and focus must be paid toward the working class. Our interpretation of today's reactionary right must include an analysis of the politics and organizational status of the widest stratum of people. What category is adequate for considering this stratum's composition is crucial since it will ultimately bear down on an interpretation of how contemporary reactionary politics is configured. The development of national industrial capitalist societies into global financialized societies has not done away with the proletariat and its condition of exploitation (Gindin and Panitch 2012, 111-162). While it is sometimes assumed that this transformation displaced the category of the proletariat, economic changes have at most complexified the composition of this class rather than moved beyond it. Most of today's subjects still depend on capitalist values. These values are still typically, but now not exclusively, accessed through labor's wage. But even where values are not accessed through wages, as with inflation of assets, all imbued values are in the final determination derived from surplus values produced at some point in capitalist history. These surplus values continue to circulate, augment, and pass between various individuals and institutions at a high velocity. But the rate

of value movement represents more quantitative than qualitative change; capitalism still dominates. The proletariat remains the primary subject with the potential to force change upon social structures.

Identifying the proletariat as the category that best describes the class against which today's reactionary politics defines itself brings immediate problems. With the passing of the Cold War and the demise of the socialist alternative, an organized political alternative linked an emancipatory project with the proletarian movements from below has been erased (Eley 2002, 470-490). The mass parties that defined 19th and 20th-century politics have become increasingly defunct. At best, their base of support has been transformed into passive constituencies. At worst, these parties have become hollowed out of any base, remade into small minoritarian formations without any connection to their respective proletariat. Under these conditions, periodic ruptures from below still emerge, but they are disconnected from a self-aware political project that brings discrete movements into a comprehensive emancipatory project.

Destruction of mass working-class organizations and transformations at the level of political economy have made struggles from below defunct. Its capacity to facilitate struggles that culminate into sequences of social contestation is now weak. The contemporary proletariat is without independent organizational forms that can take the initiative according to a political strategy and produce a dynamic of political contestation that can outlive episodic movements. Where class struggles do not disappear, they are reoriented into an ensemble of ossified liberal civil institutions

with little mass membership (Putnam 2001). This alternative trajectory traps emancipatory energies within status quo organizations and subjects these energies to the "realism" of its structure (Rodriguez et al. 2017). For example, militant research conducted by radical scholars funded by the Ford Foundation may have a critical edge that cuts against liberal ideas. But the practical consequences of this research are disconnected from class organizations that could transform necessary research into practical consciousness and new modes of struggle—be it internal line struggle around political strategy or external class struggles against other class fractions. Under these conditions, critical or radical research is constrained within the institutional logic of the liberal institutions that help to generate them.

This dynamic accounts for the emergence of an odd contemporary situation: progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2019). The strange confluence of free market economic imperatives with space for self-criticism around subjectivity, inclusivity, and representation.

Today's progressive politics have tended to express themselves within capitalist formations, sometimes even within the premier institutions of capitalist exploitation and domination. Without organized social forces of the working class to take up these critical interventions and translate them into practices of resistance, the institutions of capital and the capitalist class may openly confess criticisms made of themselves without material recourse. If organized proletarian class formations had existed, as in previous historical moments, it would be feasible for these formations to take up progressive rhetorics and incorporate them into a comprehensive egalitarian

strategy and political horizon. Inevitably, such a strategy would end up opposing the same multinational corporations that espouse progressive discourses.

Having detected progressive discourses supported by, and sometimes generated within, capitalist institutions, some thinkers now criticize the discourses as being status quo and, thus, inadequate for emancipatory politics (Catherine Liu 2021). But this move supposes that discourse and framing produce politics rather than the balance of power between classes (Poulantzas 1978). To critique the discourses on their own is to misunderstand the role that today's proletarian disorganization has on the operability of any discourse, including a discourse predicated on class. Put differently, with a lack of proletarian organizations, the meaning of any discourse is susceptible to becoming reoriented for liberal use. The ability of multinational corporations to stand for social justice tells us more about the status of the balance of power between classes than the status of any given discourse.

All this means for the US radical right is that it is without its traditionally dynamic antagonist; the relationship between emancipatory forces from below and the construction of reactionary politics is currently out of sync. Absent a proletarian enemy, reactionary politics has shifted its focus exclusively towards liberalism instead.[2] This reorientation has had three effects. The culmination of these three effects has produced a radical right that tends to position itself against neoliberalism.

2. Taking a step back, it could be asked how a powerful left alternative would simply bring about reactionary disempowerment. More relevant would be the opposite case—our situation today—in which a weak left begets a strong reactionary right. The answer has everything to do with the historical context of capitalist societies, and specifically the class structure produced by these societies. Historically speaking, a well-organized left supported by a densely-organized proletariat aggravated other class fractions to take stances in opposition to proletarian power. This dynamic is no longer relevant. And thus we have multinational capitalist entities that are prepared to support "progressive" politics.

First is the emergence of the so-called "culture wars." The old hegemony and counter-hegemony politics featured political tussles between capital and political formations that included working-class organizations (such as the liberal-labor coalition). But these contests no longer exist. The breakdown of working-class organizations set free electoral agents of a hardwired support base. This opened a new mode of politics predicated on cultural maneuvers that can lure or repel specific voter constituencies to either political party. Rather than through a process of institutional articulation—i.e., political ideas that arise from within mass working-class institutions with legitimacy among their members and beyond—a politics of cultural warfare sees free-floating discursive battles centered on framing, publicity, and resonance (Lakoff 2014). At the most abstract level, the culture wars represent a transformation around how politics happens, as opposed to an assertion of novel cultural fronts that challenge older cultural values.

The second effect is the more recent breakdown of fusionism, as the religious right has soured (at least to some degree) on the business right. Fusionism represented a political consensus within the conservative movement, between religious traditionalists on one side and social forces committed to free market enterprise on the other (Bottum 2004). Fusionism started in the 1950s as a response to the liberal-labor coalition. Buttressed by the power of organized labor, liberal-labor politics assumed a consensus of an ostensibly pro-worker Keynesian political economy and a liberal orientation towards social values. Fusionism was united opposition to the liberal-labor coalition on both fronts. Against labor was a cadre of business owners

and petty-bourgeois subjects who argued for pro-market orientation that argued against state intervention at almost every level. And against liberal values, an ascendent hardcore of traditionalist social forces, such as Christian fundamentalists, took issue with the so-called cultural decadence of the postwar consensus. The breakdown of a left composed of organized working-class people dissolved the bond between these two. Labor rapidly dissolved as a coherent social force through the 1980s and 1990s, and liberals increasingly abandoned any dedication to labor politics. In its place, free market ideals were taken in by leading liberals. The political pressure that had hitherto "fused" traditionalism and free market politics has increasingly fallen apart. Bitter recriminations made against fusionist politics have become increasingly normalized on the right. A renewed slate of criticisms is being made against liberalism and its neoliberal political economy (Ahmari et al. 2019).

The third effect of left implosion has been the bifurcation of capital into two leading class fractions. A key feature of neoliberalism is multinational financial and tech capital's ascendency as a leading faction in the Democratic Party (Broockman and Malhotra 2017). Across the aisle, small-time regional capitalists, private capital, and upstart small business owners are now a leading faction of the Republican Party's base (Cooper 2002). While the postwar consensus saw a subordination of capital to the liberal-labor coalition, today's warring political cultures have each dominant fractions of capital with outsized influence on the political direction. One important axis between these two fractions of capital is their global reach. While finance and tech capital have a global presence, private capital and small business are

fundamentally rooted in the domestic political economy. The labor left's demolition has brought the fundamental contradiction between international and domestic capital to the level of political contestation, as each fraction is now free to establish its political agenda and respective policy positions.

The shaping of political contestation can be taken further in our analysis. As a whole, this dynamic has moved the contemporary right to reposition itself. Absent the traditional enemy of the masses—which in today's situation could be described as the proletariat—we have a reactionary movement that is forced to organize itself differently. This has contributed to a reactionary politics increasingly positioned against the legitimization process for today's multinational neoliberal order.

On Neoliberalism

To say that the right is positioned against some aspect of neoliberalism immediately questions neoliberalism's specific meaning.

The term "neoliberalism" has become fraught with overuse. Neoliberalism is used in both analytical and normatively derogatory ways. And the work that this term does is considerable. Often "neoliberalism" loses its meaning because of its repetition in many contexts. This has brought some to question the efficacy of the concept as its users appear unable to accept neoliberalism's specification. This position often begs the following question: do we need the idea of neoliberalism? Before offering a response, perhaps we should interrogate the reasons for neoliberalism's ubiquity. A

better question may be: why is this term subject to widespread use? Maybe it has something to do with the work the term attempts to do. Regardless of the context, what neoliberalism specifies are current and ongoing conditions.

As it turns out, specifying what is both current and ongoing is a difficult thing to do. What's desired is knowledge of the now, which in our case is still new in the sense that we have not gotten beyond it. Daring to attempt to name the conditions that shape one's time is bound to produce problems not typical of concepts developed for understanding moments past. With this in mind, we should commend the use of neoliberalism. Its circulation is demonstrative of a desire to know the new critically.

If the term neoliberalism represents what is new in our moment, then the question that follows seeks to know what exactly is new. This probing inquiry demands some distinction be made between what is, in fact, novel and what is not. This question is more complex than it appears; neoliberal capitalism is still capitalism. And capitalism is not exactly novel. How could a concept defined by its determination to understand the new contain so much residue of the old? Within this question lies a second aspect of the idea of neoliberalism: a recognition that while there are new forms in our moment, these forms persist amid the old. While the current period exhibits novelty, this novelty shares continuity with the recent past. From its political economy to its sociality, our moment is inextricably linked to recent history. Historical novelty is distinct from those social formations that share no distinction with the past. Perceiving and detailing these distinctions is necessary for justifying any periodization. The point of understanding what's new today is not

simply about discarding it from the old. Integration between the old and the new is precisely what must be centered on our concept of neoliberalism.

The temporality of our time, where the new is enmeshed into the old, is a kind of strange return, or as Badiou puts it, an Anabasis (Badiou 2007, 81-97). The term's neo- prefix suggests the return to the moment of high liberalism before the unprecedented postwar era. But as Badiou puts it so well, the problem of a return is that the return is no duplication of the time before. A return, in other words, also insinuates a "lostness" (Badiou 207, 82). Like Xenophon's experience, hitherto reliable coordinators for understanding the social and political situation have become scrambled. To be lost is to know that you are somewhere that could be knowable, as opposed to being somewhere that has never been viewed by human eyes and is therefore unknowable from a historical point of view. Looking upon today's political reality, we may recognize many things in our time: social conditions, processes of accumulation, and so on.

The concept of neoliberalism promises that it can potentially help navigate this uncertain terrain. A first step is to build an idea around what is new and old, and in doing this, we can begin to put current conditions into words so that these conditions can be understood. In this register, the neoliberal term demonstrates how novelty persists amid continuity, or how a newfound type of liberalism has been constructed simultaneous to significant transformations in the capitalist mode of production, but not its overcoming.

Knowledge about the conditions of economy and politics during the previous era—the postwar period—are well known. Then, the capitalist mode of production consisted of strong manufacturing bases consigned to national boundaries and subject to activist intervention by the state. In the global North, labor and capital tended to map onto one another, producing a shadowing effect of labor behind capital, an understanding that Tronti's work famously reversed (Tronti 2019). This doubling, which mapped onto longstanding geometric theories of labor and capital like "labor aristocracy" or Kautsky's concentric circles of labor-capital relationality, was ultimately decisive in facilitating the emergence of the "welfare" or social democratic state and its consignment to national boundaries. The political aspects of this moment contained distinct possibilities for moving material equality forward, while its economic function was about stimulating consumer demand such that economic growth would continue to surge at unprecedented levels. Of course, interpretation of this economic function was defined in political terms that departed from the function of a demand-to-growth circuit. Liberals, in coalition with labor, could claim to make good on issues about both general social welfare and minority uplift, and labor could claim to make good on augmenting wages and the achievement of a "middle-class" lifestyle. As is well known, the postwar's delicate equilibrium between economic growth and liberal political claims would become imperiled during the turbulent 70s. Black civil rights exceeded hitherto established norms, labor sought to defend their historic gains, and capital would demand discipline from them both amid spiraling economic turbulence.

What are the economic and political aspects of contemporary capitalism that neoliberalism attempts to specify? Several tendencies present themselves, each with demonstrably novel aspects embedded within the capitalist economy's old framework.

First is the emergence of a frictionless global financial system that enables near-complete capital liquidity. Economically, the post-70s moment has been conditioned by relative freedom for capital's movement and an absolute inability for the movement of labor. During the postwar era, labor and capital had roughly corresponded to one another, a congruence that enabled each to operate within the boundaries of the state form. As already noted, this unity has changed and has significant effects. For one thing, the transformation opened up a newfound hyper-liquidity of capital and solidified capitalist finance as the cornerstone of the global economy. The possibilities of this system are most apparent when the world falls into crisis. The capacity for the US to act as the world's de facto banker—a function once described as an" exorbitant privilege" due to asymmetry—is one such effect. Another important aspect has been the capacity for strategic disassociation between assets and their imbued values. With a relative overabundance of means of production (i.e., factories and other durable productive forms) strewn across the world, there seems to have developed an ability to divest values from those rigid forms if political problems manifest. Ultimately, this means that nationalization implies disaccumulation rather than bringing accumulated values from the private sector into public ownership. Behind this problem is the fact that capital flight is now easier than ever, meaning that

the means of production do not, in themselves, function as an anchor for value as they may have in the past. Despite these significant changes, there has not been a restoration of the levels of profitability witnessed in the 1970s. A lack of profitability in manufacturing has only solidified already unfolding financialization. Still, the international financial system never found such absolute interconnection between the world's social formations.

But a question remains: How could the entire economic transition have moved forward without political legitimization? It's not a given that marketization accomplishes the task of legitimization, a social and political process different from mere economic justification.

As many have pointed out, the economic justification for neoliberal political economy is not necessarily new. The idea that private firms require affirmative state support Keynes famously understood his tasks as saving capitalism from itself, which meant that the state would ensure predictable and ever-augmenting demand for the goods of private firms, especially those producing consumer durables. Today's state remains largely an activist one, except now focusing on maintaining liquidity, labor discipline, inflationary containment, and most importantly, acting as the emergency bank of last resort. As a more sweeping change, the sudden liquid mobility of capital through financial means has nevertheless been justified in the same manner as Paul Volcker's shock doctrine, which is based on economic solvency and competitive dynamism of the capitalist political economy. Thus the *raison d'etre* of today's economic aspect may be found in one of these effects, namely the disarticulation of

vertical integration and the resultant proliferation of modular subsidiary firms that, spanning the entire globe, contingently come together to constitute today's sprawling logistical chains. As the COVID-19 moment has demonstrated clearly, these logistical chains are considered precious. And thus, the justificatory proof seems to lie in the pudding since the interruption of contemporary economic arrangements is socially interpreted as bad for the mass consumer.

While some have claimed today's principal subjectivity is centered on homo economicus, people have generally remained unwilling to sacrifice their own lives for market efficacy. Legitimization requires an excess of what already exists in the market: a set of political ideals that can deal with the system's dark side and its history.

This set of legitimating political ideas may be described as humanitarianism.

At first, the humanitarian doctrine appears to cut against the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. For one thing, humanitarian ideology appears to hold the promise of something outside of market dynamics. Even at their most basic, humanitarianism's ideals seem to direct subjects toward universal civil, social, and political rights that are non-optimal for market functionality. Uneven civil rights, for example, could allow firms to hyper-exploit specific populations, subjecting them to unjust labor conditions that result in elevated levels of surplus value. And in the wake of serious socialist alternatives to capitalism, human rights have surfaced as the alternative tradition for resistance movements to make sure of. This is why human

rights scholar Samuel Moyn's prognosis is given an eponymous title, The Last Utopia (Moyn 2010).

In Moyn's view, it is, at best unclear that humanitarianism has functioned as a legitimizing ideology for neoliberal capitalism (Moyn 2014). For Moyn, humanitarianism's function and the latent possibilities for progress expressed by the humanitarian doctrine prevent humanitarianism from legitimizing neoliberal capital. Neoliberal market rationality demands that all social relations are subsumed under market competition. Moyn's point is that human rights have given groups a basic minimum social and political rights threshold. It is from this absolute minimum that social agents can organize and demand more.

There are, of course, innumerable examples of how the floor of human rights has failed to establish adequate protection. But pointing out these failures is not itself a take-down argument. For instance, Moyn points out that the human rights discourse can sometimes legitimate the claims of victims whose most basic rights have been violated. Resistance to hyper-exploitation may potentially benefit from widely established norms around human rights. In such moments, human rights discourse may provide a language for articulating political contests, and institutionalization of international human rights may give legitimacy to challengers. But the question of pragmatic usefulness is beside the point. It is perfectly feasible for challengers to lean on a dominant discourse to be taken seriously but in a manner that does not destabilize a production regime or an elite political structure. The ability to metabolize resistance such that capital remains unscathed is a feature of the political

tradition of liberalism. For example, liberalism's capacity to incorporate some level of resistance into the structure itself—epitomized by the explosion of the non-profit industrial complex (Rodriguez et al. 2017)—played no small part in capitalist democracy's ability to outlive its rival socialist bloc.

Legitimization is not always about allowing capital to do as it pleases, and a legitimizing process can include limitations to economic and political dynamics without their abolition. Since the postwar era, legitimization has been achieved by containing the politically possible within a certain acceptable threshold. For example, the emergence of widespread business unionism (defined by the collaboration of union leadership with corporate stakeholders, exchanging compensation and union recognition for no-strike clauses, depoliticization of labor struggle, and firm control) (Moody 1988) in the mid to late-postwar period helped to stabilize the status quo and open the way for uncontested accumulation. An accommodation of capital by labor ascended as a cornerstone of the postwar political consensus. Then as now, legitimization is a favorable outcome for capital and capitalists that is produced by a comprehensive ideological framework that can be engaged productively with social, political, and economic discontent without upending accumulation and the agents who benefit from it. What is the ideological form that provides this same process of legitimization today? What set of ideals has subordinated resistance to the social structure of neoliberal capitalism?

The economic logic of neoliberal capitalism has not doubled as a social and political ideology, and we must look elsewhere to understand how today's political

stabilization has been built. Once again, the recent past is instructive. While a version of a Keynesian political economy dominated the previous historical moment, Keynes's thought was not constructed into a ruling ideology. What dominated was a kind of collectivized liberalism that represented particular entanglements of the liberal-labor coalition (Eley 2002, 299-328). This conception of a managed mode of capital had room for expressions of workers' power that could cut against the demands of capitalist actors (Harvey 1989, 125-188). Today's humanitarian ideology has had a similar effect. Human rights discourse provides space for systemically-produced resistance to express itself. As a discourse, it grants subjects a particular rationale for thinking through their problems, but always in a suitable manner.

At the heart of the dispute over human rights and neoliberalism is a confusion of an age-old problem of ideology and how ideology is "determined" by the political economy (Williams 1978, 83-89). As I will explain below, to think that any mode of thought which contradicts capitalist accumulation cannot function as a prevailing ideology is to hold onto a crude reflection theory. Reflection theory presupposes that there is a one-to-one relationship between ideology and political economy. What is being reflected—or what is expected to be reflected—are the straightforward needs of the material base in the "superstructure." Reflection theory, being itself a crude Marxist idea, collapses all superstructural conditions into the economic base. In doing this, an economistic view of the relationship of ideas to materiality is produced. Marxists have disputed reflection theory, and in its place have come various concepts of ideology and hegemony.

The presumption is that if humanitarianism works to legitimate neoliberal capitalism, then it ought not to contradict the dynamics of neoliberal accumulation, for example, by placing limits on exploitation. But this assumption of reflection-as-ideology has no theoretical bearing in the Marxist literature on ideology. Gramsci's concept of hegemony conceives popular ideas as originating in civil institutions and eventually maturing into a "common sense" about the world (Gramsci 1985). Althusser's concept of ideology, stated as compactly as possible, depicts a set of ideas that work through various semi-autonomous apparatuses that are directly or indirectly linked to the capitalist state. These popular conceptions do not reflect capital at all, but enable capital to reproduce itself (Althusser 2020). Žižek, working through the tradition of psychoanalysis, depicts ideology as symptomatic of capitalism—meaning that ideology does not reflect anything but is instead an excess of thought produced by capitalist society (Žižek 2008). Although briefly stated here, we can see that a theory of reflection is not a serious idea of ideology. It follows that any legitimization process would not reflect political economy directly. In the case of humanitarian ideology, it need not reflect the material edifice of neoliberalism in order for it to help with capitalist legitimization.

Humanitarianism, Neoliberalism

The US radical right is positioned squarely against an ideological ensemble that *justifies* multinational and financialized neoliberal accumulation. Much to the lament

of those on the left, contemporary radical right political culture is not focused on the aspects of neoliberalism that may be grouped under the sign of political economy. Instead, reactionary resistance has taken shape around a dominant ideology that legitimizes the contemporary neoliberal political economy. This ideological form is commonly known as humanitarianism. Though developed from a complex history of humanism, the emergence of the humanitarian ideology and the concrete institutions from which it circulates is the outcome of a process of defeat followed by adjustment by left, progressive, and liberal political forces. One cumulative effect has been a world without an alternative to capitalism.[3]

Today's humanitarian ideology carries within it specific values, normativities, and structures of feeling that are ostensibly progressive.[4] Most generically, humanitarian doctrine demands absolute minimum respect for negative "freedom from" rights. Yet, a formal rights-centered analysis of humanitarianism is incomplete. Humanitarianism is not simply a legal regime of rights but an ideological ensemble that operates as a dominant mode of thinking and understanding such that neoliberal accumulation is stabilized. As the uneven allocation of rights demonstrates—human rights violations take place regularly in the US, for example—the ideology of human rights does not require a fully elucidated and legally-mandated set of rights to persist. Instead, the development of negative rights has their practical application through a kind of "moral psychology." More specifically, humanitarianism today is a dominant

3. Badiou describes this through the neo-platonic language of living in a world "without an Idea."

4. Though sometimes alien to contemporary analysis, it is worth remembering that Marx understood capitalism as containing progressive features. Progressive aspects of the capitalist mode of production, however, do not make capital above critique.

ideology, complete with a set of normativities—a common sense as Gramsci would have it—that is prominent in left and liberal milieus. This dominant ideological form has the function of stabilizing neoliberal accumulation. Potential challenges are metabolized through a humanitarian discourse and practice that delegitimizes radical practices that could also be interpreted as violations. Today's humanitarian discourse moves disruptive structural change to the farthest horizon. A closer look at this process is necessary to understand how this works. We can understand this legitimization process as having two interconnected aspects.[5]

First, historical injustices, be they material harm or psychic trauma, experienced by historical victims must be identified, recognized, and celebrated in the public sphere (Meister 2011, vii-x). Those who have experienced injustice are to be elevated and their narratives fashioned into a regime of truth, however uncomfortable these stories may be. The historical beneficiaries of injustice are expected to confess the criticism (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 155-216). This congeals the confession into a consensus statement, thus completing the social process by which moral arguments are converted into an ethical, social fact. One example of this is indigenous land acknowledgments (Robinson et al. 2019), which are now regularly used to begin some corporate and state meetings. The history of colonial takeover is discursively confessed by the institutions that had benefitted directly from this history.

5. My thinking on human rights has been immensely shaped by Robert Meister's work. The language used here—between beneficiaries and victims of injustice—is derived from his book *After Evil* (2011).

Colonialism is acknowledged by individuals and the institutions of capital and state openly and without reservation.

Notably, the confession of the criticism is not simply an individual act. The confessionary act takes place through an amalgam of state and civil society organizations that, in total, serve as important vectors of ideological proliferation. And, if enacted alongside the implementation of proper "human rights"—meaning, in the US case, the erosion of various forms of legally-enforced discrimination, such as Jim Crow laws—the combination of this ethical regime and the demolition of legal barriers can allow subjects of historical injustice to traverse the economic, social, and political landscapes as social equals, at least from the viewpoint of negative freedoms. Traversing these various terrains as social equals cannot be confused with equality; creating an ethical regime alongside relative equality of opportunity is thought to allow the subjects of historical injustice to fulfill their *potential* within prevailing market relations.

Second, in exchange for creating a new ethical regime predicated on the public acceptance of the uncomfortable facts of historical injustice, the historical beneficiaries of injustice are not materially sanctioned. Whatever benefits of injustice had been transmitted to them are theirs to keep. Once again, this process is not simply embodied in the individual subject. Individualizing the process obscures the totalizing aspirations of ideology. Aspects of the state and various civil society organizations

operate as the representatives of the institutions of historical injustice[6] (Althusser 2014, 103-149). But since this process also presumes that any system of legal inequality is also to be removed, it follows that any benefits accumulated from the past are not at all indemnified. Responsibility to confess past crimes is therefore tethered to the burden of maintaining one's economic position. This is a gamble for historical beneficiaries—they become subject to risk but tend to face risk from an elevated position. Like anyone else, they could lose it all, but they tend to have more to lose. Of course, all who have benefitted from historical injustices are not in the same situation. It is fundamentally more accessible for institutions to preserve their economic status than individuals, for example. And even between individuals, there are divisions. A meaningful gradation of risk has emerged between individuals in different geographic and economic situations—a condition bound up with intergenerational wealth transfers, asset ownership, and especially real estate ownership.

The Post-Postwar Situation

Though I have elsewhere made ample use of the postwar period to demonstrate how legitimization and ideology work, the humanitarian ideological arrangement is unlike postwar ideology. This has as much to do with ideological differences as with

6. Take, for example, the Ford Foundation, the Gates Foundation, or the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. All of these support progressive causes and proliferated ostensibly progressive discourses.

economic situations. Then, the social station and economic location of injustice's beneficiaries were supported and, to some degree, insured by an unequal social system. The flip side was that an ever-dynamic economy and a labor-capital compromise saw "all boats rise," even if unevenly so (Maloney 1994). Inequality, most notably between whites and Blacks, was offset by a dynamic economy with historically unheard-of growth levels (Gordon 2016). This spurred the development of economic growth theories, like the Kuznets curve, whereby market dynamism would eventually even out inequality only after exacerbating it (Kuznets 1955). Of course, many problems plagued the postwar era, but a dynamic economic situation and welfare state management provided ongoing material stability for working-class subjects.

Today, this former stability has been done away with. And while subjects who had relative advantages in the past have more or less retained them today (for example, whites), all subjects have been subsumed within the calculative waters of personal responsibility now that the social safety net is gone. This leveling has produced distinctions and cleavages, which have manifested as ideological tensions undergird today's counter-hegemonic right-wing political culture. The effects of these trends have tended to grate against how humanitarianism has been taken up as a contemporary hegemonic project; together, the two aspects of this common-sense arrangement are supposed to terminate into a condition of "reconciliation," not instability and partisanship.

The wager of neoliberal ideology is this: those who came out of the long postwar period with some advantages can maintain their position. But these subjects are no longer indemnified from falling down. All subjects, regardless of race or gender, are subject to market competition and its effects. The work that humanitarian ideology does is vital in this dynamic. As a common sense ideological framework, humanitarian ideology enables significant inequalities to persist and to even exacerbate alongside demands for discursive recognition of exploitation and domination that had taken place in the past.

The contemporary insistence on surfacing harm and trauma is symptomatic of this ideological form. Contemporary liberal politics has tended to reorganize discontent into struggles for recognition of harm and trauma in the public sphere. It is not that redistribution or restructuring has been taken off the table, however. Distribution has always taken place under capitalism. And structural adjustment is always a possibility, mainly when capitalist accumulation falls into crisis and requires change. The difference is that now, under the neoliberal marketized regime, distribution stages itself without significant state intervention and is naturalized by the myriad ways the current market functions. Likewise, structural change is framed through the seemingly democratic language of harm towards the consumer and the worker. A Federal Reserve-induced recession may be necessary to jumpstart accumulation, but it will be justified based on the purchasing power of the proletariat.

The Democratic Party and the wide range of liberal civic institutions that connect with it have positioned themselves as the inheritors of the humanitarian

legacy. The turn away from the postwar consensus and towards the neoliberal order was justified based on continuing a legacy of progressivism despite abandoning the welfare state project. While most members of the postwar Democratic Party had attempted to thread the needle between a commitment to labor and opposition to socialism (Mann 2012, 241-279), the majority of today's liberal party is now free of this obligation. Now the project of the Democratic Party has changed—it must thread a new needle between maintaining the political allegiance of its core constituencies with an experience of historical systemic injustice and maintaining fidelity to neoliberal, multinational capitalism (Giddens 2000; Kazin 2022). The humanitarian ideology has been essential for navigating this new dynamic. Humanitarian ideology has provided liberals with the necessary conceptual and intuitive tools to project a reconciliation between its new priorities.

The reader will undoubtedly know that the neoliberal moment cannot be defined through pure and simple reconciliation. Vast political cleavages have emerged, often at the behest of authoritarian leaders. But these political disputes are symptoms of the ideological form that has forestalled social transformation in a period of economic, political, and social stagnation. To understand the symptom, we must look at the cause: humanitarian ideology's dislocation of past and present, economic and political. Through these divisions, an ersatz reconciliation is made, but at a high cost.

Past and Present

Reconciliation refers to the ability of subjects with prior enmity to transition and live peaceably (Arthur 2009). In the past, struggles for justice had often included the possibility of physical harm of the corporeal or economic type. This historic approach would now become interpreted as revenge without justice. Accepting this mentality, the frame of "revenge without justice" is a difficult dictum to justify. The core problem of revenge without justice is that it is cruel. It is no accident that, in the tradition of liberalism, cruelty is sometimes described as the worst evil. Judith Shklar's demand that we "put cruelty first" echoes this view:

> "Those who put cruelty first, as he guessed, do not condemn it as a sin. They have all but forgotten the Seven Deadly Sins, especially those that do not involve cruelty. Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God; pride, as the rejection of God, must always be the worst one, which gives rise to all the others. Cruelty, as the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear, however, is a wrong done entirely to another creature. When it is marked as the supreme evil, it is judged so in and of itself, and nor because it signifies a rejection of God or any other higher norm" (Shklar 1982, 17).

The codification of ethical norms through the church had processed profane matters through an enchanted lens. Mediating human activity and ethical discourse by a divine form fundamentally changed the content of these ethics. In a sense, Shklar's view of cruelty is a compact ethical version of religious morality. In distinction to heterogeneous religious codes, Shklar's cruelty is a total reduction of transgression into an unalloyed substance of "supreme evil." Perhaps this is the upshot of the movement from monotheism into secular society. If so, this transformation only extends the prior collapse of polytheism into monotheism. The latter's demolition of

the old Gods also implied a rationalization of ethics articulated through the authority of a singular legitimate God. The emergence of a single substance of secularized sin under the aegis of evil—cruelty—is a rationalization of the ethical universe. This is not unlike Walter Benjamin's reflections on the empty and homogeneous aspects of capitalist temporality (Benjamin 1969), except now an ethics of evil have become homogenized, their content emptied of its specificity.

Benjamin's temporal intervention and the production of a homogeneous ethical mode are not simply contiguous ideas. In fact, the production of homogenous evil through normative moral psychology implies a specific temporal order.

Benjamin's critical understanding of historicism, which for him arose from the conditions of capitalist modernity and the emergence of factory despotism generalized to the level of social relations, is operative in the production of evil and in its reconciliation. For one thing, humanitarian ideology makes evil almost always as that which has passed by us. Evil is thought to exist yesterday. Evil is made to have come and gone, but it must not be forgotten. In fact, the need or right to forget, which is used by some as a criticism on the humanitarian ideological regime (Todorov 2001), is simply not desirable. What does forgetting deliver to us when it has become so necessary to demonstrate injustices suffered for basic social provision, access to education, and even asylum? Conservatives may have demanded the "right to forget," but what they are really attempting to do is condemn the desire to confess. The confessionary form, now brought to the level of systematicity by the state apparatuses in the form of access to resources and institutional support (Fassin 2011, 83-107), has

the effect of ushering away any perceived evil that dwells alongside present life. This is why the contemporary situation is never truly evil (Bevernage 2015).

To the extent that evil presents itself today, it is rendered as an exception to the temporal trajectory of liberalism. This exceptionality acts like a buffer; the particular evil in question becomes enveloped by a liminal zone that ensures its interrelation to the current world is severed. Islanded from the present, evil is already rendered anachronistic before it has passed into history proper. It is pre-packaged for yesterday, a residuality that will eventually pass. The Russian war against Ukraine, which is unfolding as of this writing, may serve as an example in real-time. As of 2022, Putin's belligerence has brought the entire Russian military into an operation that spans the Ukrainian territory. But Russian belligerence is already discussed as an artifact of President Putin, who has been produced into a *persona non grata*. Putin's pariah status is obviously related to the threshold of international, liberal acceptability. Putin's abject consignment contains a particular temporal assumption. Putin is rendered anachronistic, a person outside of our time (Zygar 2018). This is accomplished by way of delinking his actions to the wider geopolitical situation; Putin's actions are not simply individually-generated, but they are contextless, meaning that they are without any relation to the wider geopolitical scene—and, in this case, post-Cold War expansion of NATO towards Russian borders (Wood 2022). Similarly, the so-called "war on terrorism" that came in the aftermath of 9/11 followed a similar sequence of development. The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City were rendered through the lens of exceptional barbaric violence enacted by

forces outside post-Cold War liberal history (Neocleous 2011). There, the personification of the "Islamic fundamentalist," which was often represented through the sign of Osama Bin Laden, embodied an evil whose temporality was not part of liberal modernity. The conditions and politics that led to the empowerment of reactionary forces in the Middle East become irrelevant.[7] The evilness of Putin's actions, as with the actions of "Islamic terrorists," are both hermeneutically sealed from the wider social and economic situation from which each was generated. Like Shklar's interpretation of cruelty, an idea of homogeneous cruelty quickly develops into an evil outside of the now.

Making current problems into evils that are temporally delinked from the present is an important precondition of humanitarian "reconciliation." Reconciliation retards the impulse to organize and agitate against the lingering effects of injustice and the subjects and institutions that benefit from the injustice. *Effects of injustices* are delinked from their origination. The injustice's effects become less ethically dubious; they become exempt from sanction, seizure, repossession, or destruction.

Humanitarian ideology's tendency to produce reconciliation is, in reality, about depoliticizing the effects of the past struggles that facilitate ongoing systemic injustice. Even the grammar used in the previous sentence reinstates the initial division that humanitarian ideology seeks to naturalize. To think of "injustice and its

7. Ironically, Fred Iklé, who wrote the book *All Wars Must End* (Iklé 2005), was credited with helping to defeat the Soviet Army in Afghanistan by supporting radical forces with high-tech weapons. From these forces would eventually come the organizations that would support violent anti-US actions. Though the Soviet war had ended, it formed an important node in the genealogy of "terrorism" that was to facilitate further warfare, down the line.

effects" is to reiterate the basic ideological presupposition of the first-order event with second-order impacts. Cast in these terms, the unjust event is always freighted with negative values, making it an evil that is qualitatively distinct from its effects. Effects of the injustice are, in comparison, benign since the weight of the ethical implications is ordered around the language of origination.

This temporal schism demolishes the conditions of possibility for capitalism's criticism, thus opening up major "common sense" thoroughfares that legitimize neoliberal capitalist accumulation. By dissolving any link between evil in the past and processes in the present, neoliberal capitalism becomes a purely economic condition that shares no relation with a politicized past. But this interpretation of history and the present is not reflected by the reality of capitalist accumulation. Capital is defined by its inter-temporality; values extracted yesterday are brought into the present and are used to entrench the exploitation of the working class in real-time. This is what Marx meant by "dead labor"—the domination of labor living in the now by labor that had been congealed into various types of fixed capital that are essential for heightening exploitation and immiserating the working class (Marx 1992, 340-376). Capitalist regimes of property and political power must consistently deal with the past. This dynamic of a past linked to the present through capitalist accumulation has become more entrenched than ever. Capital's systemic interpenetration of past and present has reached its most fluid form in today's financial capitalism (Krippner 2012). Financialized capital rests on the availability of surplus values for financial investment (Meister 2021, 19-23). As Marx's commentary on dead labor clarifies, the

surplus values extracted from labor do not simply go away; capitalism has been producing surplus value for the duration of its existence. A fully financialized capital, therefore, traffics in the material of the past, using values derived in various historical moments to reproduce new value in the present, and with these values come new political possibilities (Meister 2021, 162-189). While contemporary capitalists conspire with the past to dominate the present, the humanitarian doctrine presents past injustices as distinct from contemporary political economy.

Emphasis on origination has not always guided those who sought justice or progress. In the case of Marx, primitive accumulation was just one aspect of the total process of class injustice that arose from the process of capitalist accumulation (Marx 1992, 873-895). Though primitive accumulation was an important start for the capitalist economy, class inequality was not simply an effect of the original injustice of primitive accumulation. The two are inextricably linked. Marx's view was that, if anything, the so-called "effects" of this initial injustice were the primary problem to be understood, hence Marx's three volumes of *Capital*. Though many in the liberal camp have become concerned about inequality's rapid expansion, it is never discussed through a discourse of evil. It's for this reason that inequality has become a primary problem for the left to repoliticize. That inequality does not automatically appear as a social evil is itself demonstrative of an ideological process that has rendered it into a banal substance; inequality's depoliticization can be interpreted as perpetually putting emancipatory left-wing social forces on the backfoot as they work against a "common sense" that deprives evil of its imminence. The rendering of

inequality into a fact that is not considered to be evil is, in fact, an intentional outcome of the process of "reconciliation," by which beneficiaries maintain their historic gains and the less fortunate get access to ostensibly equal market competition.

To be clear, what this bifurcation of time has accomplished is a hyper-naturalization of the division between the political and the economic. This division has a longstanding place within the tradition of liberalism and has been necessary for the reproduction of the conditions of capitalist accumulation (Meiksins Wood 1981). Humanitarian ideology reproduces this division and packages it as the progressive position in today's political field. What humanitarianism makes political are the injustices of the past, or those moments of the present that, we are told, should be abolished because they are anachronistic. Economic inequalities, including contemporary exploitation, do not qualify as such. Thus, exclusive focus on moments of injustice and delinking these moments from the systemic reproduction of capitalist social relations has had the effect of naturalizing a division between the political and the economic.

All of this has contributed to the disarticulation of injustice from ongoing social struggles that are from time to time conducted by specific social forces. A framing that was an axiom of socialist and communist theory. The Marxist interpretation posited that social forces linked roughly with class factions had to be foregrounded above any specific injustice of the past. This subjective focus was linked to the objective conditions that arise automatically from capitalist social relations, i.e. a class structure. The balance of power between classes served as the

schematic for understanding what we now describe as the "effects of injustice." The separation between injustice and its effects represents a break with this older framing. Presupposed in this separation is the idea that there is no continuity of social forces that have carried forward an injustice. Absent a structural framework for understanding the relationship between an initial injustice and its effects, social problems are easily rendered into depoliticized questions of personal responsibility. The dynamics of "personalization" have become helpful objects for reactionary politics to put to use.

Reactionaries and Ideological Combat

Today's right-wing political culture is shaped by its challenge to a humanitarian ideological process, a cornerstone of neoliberalism's legitimization. From its start, the reactionary tradition has been shaped by egalitarian movements from below (Robin 2011). But the defeat of proletarian movements—the workers' movement and the movement for socialism—have deprived reactionaries and reactionary thought of its typical inspiration. This suggests that reactionary politics has gone through something of a transition. Searching a field bereft of its traditional enemies, reactionary politics has reoriented itself. Indeed, today's reactionary politics are incentivized to see within even the most establishment Democratic politicians stalwart enemies of the past. Marxists, socialists, and communists are often presumed to operate across the corporate Democratic Party. Obama is often portrayed as a Marxist radical, Biden as

a socialist patsy, and so on (Jamin 2015). This phantasmic and conspiratorial method of producing a new enemy is bolstered by real antinomies between the tradition of conservative and reactionary politics and contemporary liberalism. To understand the reorganization of the reactionary tradition, focus must be paid to its rejection of humanitarianism's processes of producing and sustaining a set of normative practices around injustices.

The Anti-Normative Politics of the US Right

Burke's intervention against the French Revolution attempted to reify assumed normative cultural aspects of the masses. His wager was that the masses of people held sentiments about authority and inequality that would cut against rationalist arguments of egalitarianism that were percolating on the left and in movements against elite structures. In a sense, we can interpret Burke's demand for respect for prejudice and avoid starting from scratch (Burke 1999, 430) as an affirmation of widely held normativities of the moment. This is a helpful view to juxtapose the contemporary right against. Rather than attempting to reify common normativities, as Burke sought, today's right combats an emergent dominant normative set. This rejection of humanitarian normativity has, to put it in the language of Nietzsche, given birth to new values and expressions. As we shall see, this dynamic of rejection and production has led to novel aspects in the US radical right.

What do these anti-normative politics look like? Today's right-wing political culture takes issue with the normative interpretation of themselves as the historical beneficiaries of injustice. To understand this, it is necessary to detail how the humanitarian ideological regime imposes particular normative meanings onto the subject.

Recall that humanitarian ideology is reproduced through a combination of popular discourses and public rituals that surface historical injustices and elevate various forms of remembrance of these injustices. Public sphere discourse is not simply imposed from above. This normative discourse works through subjects horizontally (Rouse 2007). Of course, recriminatory utterances against past injustice are expected from those who experienced or were affected by past injustices intergenerationally. But under conditions that have seen no adjustment of the social structure (which would presumably happen through a socio-economic transition that included moments of reform and social rupture), transforming a subaltern claim into a commonsense truth requires those who have received some benefit from past injustice to also speak openly against the injustice. Bringing the beneficiary and the harmed into discursive alignment can enable a common understanding of the past, or in short, a kind of consensus without transformation.

The confession of bad history allows a discursive unity between subjects perceived to have little in common outside of a shared human existence. To a large degree, this perception is an outcome of the ideology of humanitarianism. Feelings of disjointedness between subjects are produced and sustained. In splitting apart

historical injustice and its effects, the potential for solidarity around the effects of injustice becomes weak. Capitalism's tendency to generalize exploitation and domination through a system of accumulation becomes depoliticized, and politicization is consigned to a moment that no longer exists. This is a radical departure from previous thinking on historical justice. To use one popular example, Du Bois argued that postbellum white chauvinism was a short-sighted enterprise that eventually subjected working-class whites to exploitation and domination later on (Du Bois 1998). While the initial injustice of supporting white supremacist politics was an unjust situation, the effects of this injustice were understood as generalized (Ignatin and Allen 1976). In prying the politics of justice into two—into a politicized past and its depoliticized effects—contemporary ideology facilitates capitalist exploitation by inviting a surplus of politicization around past unjust situations. The naturalization of the division between subjects in the now comes from this division. One is either the victim of an unjust past or the beneficiary of this same past. Between subjects lie a dearth of materials for practical solidarity.

Humanitarian ideology presents an avenue for apparent remediation and reconciliation (Arthur 2009). As noted, subjects perceived as the beneficiaries of injustice can keep their relative advantages (if they still have them) but, in exchange, are expected to repudiate past injustices on behalf of the other. The structure of this ideological process produces significant pressure for a confession to take place. Why shouldn't beneficiary subjects walk down this path? Mutual recognition of the past injustice brings these two divergent subjects together, and the gains of historical

domination and hyper-exploitation are depoliticized. Through this convergence can come a consensus around the now-past injustice, thereby engendering a kind of public truth and opening the way for what is sometimes described as a hopeful reconciliation.

On the other hand, opposition to reconciliation is beset with apparent problems, and the broader logic of reconciliation circumscribes any opposition. If the premise of reconciliation is accepted, then the politics of resistance to this process by the beneficiaries of history is hardly defensible. Such opposition is rendered into something that can be outright condemnable. This was Hillary Clinton's assumption when she publicly referred to Trump supporters as "deplorables" (Reilly 2016). As we know, Clinton's remark backfired as she misunderstood the weakness of the ideology that she had operated within. Ongoing transformations in contemporary society have eroded the strength of humanitarian ideology, opening up space for subjects to reject its impetus.

Notably, the process outlined above requires that each subject identifies with either role, meaning that the ideology attempts to produce a dichotomous set of subjects that can justify future reconciliation together. In other words, a determinative pressure is exerted on both types of subjects. The US right has benefitted from destabilization of how this pressure operates on "beneficiary subjects," opening up space for new modes of reactionary politicization.

At a minimum, any successful ideological formation will produce particular kinds of subjects. This is what Althusser meant with his concept of interpellation; the

subject hailed by the shouting police officer becomes a subject of the state at that very moment (Althusser 2001, 127-187). What this example demonstrates is how even a micro-interaction can have ideological effects. Contemporary ideology has a similar structure, with myriad modes of interpellation occurring through everyday sociality.

Exertion of pressure is embedded into the structure and grammar of humanitarianism itself: to think of a subject or group as the product of past injustice deprives these same people of the agency of social struggle. For example, anti-colonial violence and colonial violence around Israeli colonialism tend to converge in their public meaning, despite distinctions made around anti-colonial political violence (Fashina 1989). And in many cases, the former publicly overshadows the latter. A likewise situation was discernible in the movement around George Floyd's murder. Joe Biden, as with many others in the Democratic establishment, sought to bifurcate the movement by splitting movement participants between "good" peaceful protestors and "bad" protestors who engaged in property damage (Biden 2020). Of course, the reality is that many subjects could be—and were most likely—both at one time or another. This presents a problem for emancipatory social movements, and it is a problem that movement participants have remarked on for some time. Less discussed is how this same normative operation has worked to shape right-wing subjects.

Humanitarian ideology has a similar effect on beneficiary subjects: to demand that those who have benefited from past injustice publicly represent themselves as such. This demand for self-representation has a confessionary form, and a confession of this type includes a transformation of guilt and its release. Thus the ideological

process also has the effect of potentially resolving feelings of guilt or shame that it helps to produce. To determine that one is someone who has benefitted from past injustice is to determine that they are in some way complacent in the broader historical facts of that injustice. At its most basic, this ideological form requires one ascent to the idea that one is, in fact, a beneficiary of past injustice. Here, we arrive at the core animating aspect of today's emergent right.

What happens when subjects who feel they are not beneficiaries are demanded to act like it? Today's emergent right benefits from the fact that an increasing amount of subjects now defy the normative demand of identifying as a beneficiary of injustice. This very normative demand reflects contemporary resentment on the right at the popular level.

But the growing resistance to being interpolated as a beneficiary subject has profound material origins. There are, of course, innumerable ways that individuals may feel like they are not a beneficiary subject for real and imagined reasons. But to say that the entire situation was produced through an imaginary process is to assert the old concept of false consciousness, except now with a new patina. Assuming the false consciousness argument may be ruled out—even if there are some potential uses for the concept (Augoustinos 1999)—and that the idea of mass duplicity by way of right-wing propaganda is not compelling, then another route for understanding is necessary. Current economic conditions point towards an answer.

Growing tension between economy and ideology has unfolded in the neoliberal period. Today, there is ongoing economic destabilization (Brenner 2006),

generalized precarity (Lorey 2015), the demolition of the social safety net (Harvey 2011, 64-86), and the smoldering ruins of those working-class organizations that hitherto resisted economic immiseration. Against this backdrop, today's humanitarian ideology performs its normative function, asking subjects to identify as history's victors. For many—especially those who are shut out of capturing values from coastal and urban real estate inflation (Stein 2019)—identification as the beneficiaries of bad history does not resonate. Even for those who have not experienced intergenerational class downgrades, the fact of precarity and inequality loom large (Cilluffo and Kochhar 2018; Piketty 2014). It is a grave empiricist mistake to perceive one's current economic situation with one's economic self-assessment, especially for those that see themselves as "middle class" (Mills 1968). It is apparent under current conditions that economic solvency today can become insolvent tomorrow. Political consciousness does not merely "reflect" material conditions like a scale reflects weight (Williams 1978, 95-100). Consciousness is formed through one's particular location in a composition of the class and social structure (Mohandesi 2013).

The idea that one had benefitted from injustice appears to move against the various economic trend lines. For those on the right, beneficiary subjectivity is itself an affront. They do not feel like they are benefitting from anything in particular. Instead, they feel like the ideological normativity is victimizing them since their depiction as a beneficiary does not affirm whatever difficulties arise from life in contemporary neoliberal society.

Today's right-wing political culture is defined by its resistance to humanitarianism's norms. Persons within right-wing political cultures invalidate the bare assertion that they are the beneficiaries of historical injustice.

The denial of the beneficiary position is not at all a private activity. Instead, it is now performed as a political act. What makes this act "political" is its articulation as an anti-normative intervention against an ensemble of cultural norms arising from the humanitarian ideology. The right resurrects the old concept of tyranny. Except it is now rendered through the lens of "normativity"—a politics hitherto taken up in different capacities by each wave of the feminist movement but applied through the lens of oppression. From a historical register, tyranny and oppression hold different genealogies. Each has tended to arise from other political traditions. But in bringing an unconscious ethos of libertarianism into anti-normative politics, today's radical right has melded them together.

This production of a new set of cultural values can be read as an emergent right-wing counter-culture. Similar to subculture, todays right situates itself within and against a culturally dominant formation to produce a new sense of things:

> "The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life" (Hebdige 1998, 17).

Positioning the self against what is perceived to be a stultifying set of cultural norms is not a new maneuver. It is common to understand the interventions of the New Left and the adjacent counter-culture as movements that had been motivated by anti-

normative commitments. The collapse of an anti-system left, and its replacement with a status quo liberalism has shifted the terms of anti-normative action.

Here we arrive at a politics of denial, of saying No. This denial, however negative it truly is, is a productive maneuver. Saying No is a generative act that almost promises self-transcendence. Even so, the feeling of self-transcendence is easily achieved, if only because the normative pressure emanating from liberal ideology is felt like an alien force. Here, the humanitarian ideology's limit point can be identified; a threshold that has demonstrably stopped short of achieving total hegemony and instituting an incontestable political consensus. Perhaps this helps to explain election denial among those on the right; the point is not to assess the facts of a situation but to attempt to facilitate the birth of new values that can bind together the movement.

Reactionary Novelty: Indifference as a Reactionary Structure of Feeling

This positioning against the dominant ideological formation of today's neoliberalism means that today's US radical right has departed from its recent historical existence. The legacy of conservatism focused on ensuring that the lower orders of society remained solidified into an inegalitarian economic and political structure. This also meant conservatism's most strident intellectual and organizational moments occurred in periods of intense class struggle from below. Conservatism would, almost symptomatically, reimagine its raison d'etre in periods of aggravated social struggles

that pitted subaltern classes against social betters. Burke's defense of the old regime against the French Revolution would become a foundational document in this more general process, as attempts to reconstitute a new egalitarian social order have found capable enemies who articulate their wager as an irresponsible process that jeopardizes everything "civilization" had made. With the demise of a natural enemy from below, this enduring logic of reaction has broken down. Absent an organized proletarian economic movement, and the adjacent political project of socialism, the traditional structure of right-wing politics has become disturbed. Humanitarianism and the politics of human rights, even in their more theoretical valence, have a fundamentally different form than the various projects that arose from radical proletarian movements of the past. In reorienting its enmity, the organizational and political aspects of the extreme right have also changed.

Perhaps the most interesting and wide-ranging change has emerged a new structure of feeling organized around indifference. The central demand made of beneficiary subjects is that they express care and compassion for the suffering of the other. This is made demonstrable through a litany of discourses that pay tribute to oppression or domination in the past. In rejecting this process of subjectivization as beneficiary subjects, today's right-wing political culture rejects the adjacent demand for care and compassion that the beneficiaries of injustice are supposed to express to subaltern others. This has brought about an embrace of an alternative structure of emotion, one predicated on the performance of indifference to contemporary suffering.

The emergence of an "alternative right" was predicated on its ostentatious expression of indifference towards injustice. Their self-branding was based on their willingness to flaunt traditional ethical standards, like calling for summary executions of political opponents or calling into question subaltern standpoint theories by juxtaposing the standpoint of white men (Neiwert 2017). But their emergence was made possible because the alt-right trafficked in other broader trends in right-wing political culture. A primary example was a thematic approach to discussions and for making mediate: "triggering the liberals" (Caffier 2017; Marcotte 2021). Videos, interviews, and photos were produced and circulated at high volumes that featured individuals having breakdowns, crying, or in some distress. In a sense, this theme is a type of "comedy," as right-wing subjects found comedic enjoyment in watching the suffering of the other.

But indifference was not consigned to popular practices like the phenomenon of "triggering." Indifference towards suffering had also led to support of particular reactionary theories. Nick Land, an established reactionary thinker with a support base on the far-right, is one such thinker. He produced theoretical tracts that directly attacked the tradition of humanism, arguing that a new mode of authoritarianism will be required to overcome the limits of ethical life that currently structure liberalism. His early academic book on Bataille, The Thirst for Annihilation, demonstrates the predicates of his reactionary trajectory. There, Land forwards a philosophic argument against the legacy of humanism, arguing through a Bataillian lens that the basic human aspects ought to be "aborted" (Land 1992). Land's later theorizations would

follow this theme, taking on a more polemic attack on the enterprise of the Enlightenment. In its place would come a "bionic" (Land 1993) mode of existence, one devoid of the raw materials that currently move forward the humanitarian ideological form—empathy, trauma, bodily autonomy, empathetic discourses—by contending that their opposites may fuel a new trajectory (Land 2012a). Here the themes of intense sacrifice loom. Exposure of the body, validating self-destruction, disregard for harm, and other forms of death drive's embrace (Noys 2014), punctuate Land's theoretical discourse (Land 2012b).

Indifference moved beyond informing theoretical tasks and made its way into the practical world, expressing itself in various forms of reactionary practical consciousness. Far-right groups and subjects tended to embrace an indifferent style, sometimes at their own expense. Incels—short for "involuntary celibate" subjects—generated an entire theory of their inferiority to explain their sexual failure and ward off dominant discourses of self-betterment. The particular condition of incel subjects will be discussed in chapter three. But emergent groups on the far-right fringe also manifested, often taking up a hyper-violent cadence that traffics in the indifferent structure of feeling. The Atomwaffen Division, a neo-nazi group, embraced open disregard for life as such (Thompson, Winston, and Hanrahan 2018). Their promotional videos displayed a compilation of armed men firing automatic weapons, skulls obscuring their faces, yelling "race war now," with intense techno music playing in the background (Atomwaffen Division Training video 2018). The videos had been made to produce a fierce cadence composed of unconstrained killing. Even

their chosen name, German for atomic weapons, exhibits the desire for indifference as no other weapon kills so indiscriminately. Their posters display the usual neo-Nazi references but are juxtaposed with portraits of Charles Mansion and references to Helter Skelter. Their discourse can be described as accelerationist, though even this label fails to encapsulate their attempt to express an imminent, violent intensity. One of their leaders—John Cameron Denton, who is now in prison for Y, chose "Rape" as his organization pseudonym (Owen 2020). Though there is a history of white nationalist radicalism, the aesthetic and subcultural sensibilities of groups like Atomwaffen Division are far beyond even the most egregious examples (Zeskind 2009). They represent the desire to capture the repudiation of the humanitarian ethos that now circulates in far-right political culture.

These are just a few examples of how an emotional structure of indifference has surfaced in opposition to the normative residue of today's humanitarian ideology.

Indifference Against Generalized Humanism

What the future holds for any of this—indifference, the rejection of humanitarianism, or the implications of this rejection on the right's view of neoliberalism—is unclear. It is not possible to predict the future. It is essential to recognize the relative openness for transformations on the right. The specifics of today's conjuncture have brought reactionary politics off its historical rails. Reactionary politics are open to new trajectories and novel political modes that may depart radically from what is expected.

Openness for the transformation of radical right politics presents a problem for political analysis and practice. Right-wing politics in the US have a full historical record that has shaped expectations about what they will look like and how they will work. Even beyond the US national frame are anticipations around radical right politics. However, today's conditions have broken apart the atypical route for reactionary politicization, and it is perhaps more necessary than ever to carefully observe even the most inconspicuous transformation.

Though it is impossible to know how reactionary politics will develop, we may observe that reactionary transformation has happened in the past. Interwar fascism is, of course, the cardinal example. Fascism broke apart the old expectations of reactionary violence. Counter-revolutionary violence, nationalist sentiments, nor residual elite resistances had prepared the interwar left for fascism's emergence. Leftists of all types were caught off guard. The left had struggled to understand the

nature of the fascist threat, and great misunderstanding about fascism's relation to capitalism's changing class structure elicited strategic errors that reverberated across history (Poulantzas 2018). For them, fascism was entirely unknown. Perhaps today's social forces can understand it differently—as a known unknown.

CHAPTER 2:

THE FINANCIALIZED WAGES OF WHITENESS: WHITE SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN CRISIS

Multiracial rebellion arose in response to George Floyd's murder, piercing cities and towns that are not usually known for their progressivism. This movement against racist police violence was the largest social movement mobilization in US history (Buchanan and Patel 2020). What comes after these impressive street protests is still being worked out; if and how the marches will become institutionalized is an open question. But, suppose the movement succeeded in inscribing its ethical positions into durable forms, be it law or powerful civic institutions. Would this success represent a landmark departure from the problem of racial division, a "problem" that Du Bois once perceived as an aspect of African American subjectivity (Du Bois 1998)? An answer requires us first to acknowledge that the Du Boisian problem of the color-line, as he described it, was bidirectional. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois suggests that material and psychic structure—often described as the wages of whiteness—facilitates white advantage and obviates class-based solidarity. This concept has inspired considerable work on "whiteness." The whiteness research is concerned with the mental, organizational and economic structures that block inter-racial solidarities by encouraging cross-class solidarity among whites. As we can see, solidarity is not the intellectual property of those fighting for social progress. Political and social

history is rife with competing solidarities. Questions concerning who, precisely, solidaristic behavior is forged between, on the behest of what constituencies feelings of solidarity are erected, and which factions lead and follow are salient questions in understanding the political nature of solidarity. Yet, these questions are potentially obscured if we do not know how social conditions contribute to or shape visions of solidarity. There is never a complete separation between competing social movements or solidarities, much less the historical context within which the contest happens. In the current situation, understanding right-wing populism requires understanding how broader social and economic conditions and subjective political opponents have together conditioned the emergence of right-wing political forms.

This chapter argues that the transformation of how whiteness is reproduced is a decisive factor motivating rightward populism. What's powerful about white identification today is its historical adjustment to reproduce and function within a financialized political economy and a stagnating manufacturing economy (Pal Singh and Linh Tu 2017). Still, this transition of whiteness into a form appropriate for today's socio-economic situation is not seamless. Whiteness's financialization has not been able to produce adequate stability for many people. Right-wing partisans have exploited contradictions of this updated form of whiteness, and these problems have become the basis of right-wing politicization today. To understand how whiteness can change, I have developed a concept that I call white social reproduction. Conceptually, white social reproduction is derived from a reading of W.E.B. Du Bois through Marxist feminist thinkers. White social reproduction lays out a basis for

historically periodizing how white identification has continued to circulate without claiming the ascription as ontological. White social reproduction shifts our focus away from the being of whiteness and towards its becoming. In doing this, we can understand how white identification has continued to mutate alongside monumental political shifts and how its mutation has produced new political opportunities for right-wing politics.

Importantly, this conceptual approach also has the benefit of allowing us to avoid the essentialization of whiteness. The use of white social reproduction allows for a historical understanding of white identification and its historical persistence. While white identity has remained important for US politics for some time now, its interpretation as a perennial social object has sometimes had the effect of casting whiteness into an ontological frame. This is often done unintentionally, typically through popular polemics and in lay conversations about race in the US. Still, some have made this claim purposefully to argue against liberal modernity, arguing that anti-Blackness has remained an indispensable aspect of modernity that cannot be overcome without a total social and ontological break. In either of these cases, whiteness is dangerously elevated to the level of ontology, making whiteness a quasi-natural formation divorced from historical conditions and politics. This brings us dangerously close to the far fringe of the US radical right, which has also sought to cast whiteness into a natural entity that structures politics and society. Brought to this level of inevitability, whiteness becomes an insurmountable problem that must be fully accepted as a natural aspect of the political. Or, in some cases, whiteness is

perceived as so thoroughly integrated into politics and society that only the most intrusive episode of world-historic transformation can knock it down. But either of these cases tends to think of whiteness as a relatively intransigent static entity, and this interpretation is not born out in the historic record. In thinking about whiteness through white social reproduction, we can understand that white identity has gone through monumental changes in its social function, political use, and economic efficacy. Far from static, white identification is a thoroughly historical rather than ontological formation, and its conditions of possibility and therefore not at all absolute.

The conditions of possibility for white social reproduction are no longer dependent upon juridically mandated racial segregation of the labor market. Financialization has enabled the benefits of whiteness to become carried forward simultaneous with the deployment of a progressive stance on race in the US. *Financial asset inflation continues to enlarge white wealth accumulated in the past, and financial instruments innovated amid the neoliberal transition have enabled these accumulations to move along intergenerational lines quickly.* Transforming value accumulated in financial assets through intergenerational lines does not require discriminatory discourses inherent to a segregated job market. As the economic demand for traditionally lucrative employment in manufacturing has continued to stagnate, the relative purchasing power of wages has dropped, resulting in a newfound dependency on a dual dynamic of financial asset inflation and intergenerational wealth transfers for the reproduction of the US class structure. I

claim that this transition towards a financial-economic regime demands a reexamination of what Du Bois had famously described as whiteness's social and psychological wages (Du Bois 1998, 701) and what other scholars call the wages of whiteness (Roediger 2007). Thinkers have followed Du Bois in viewing how white chauvinism, and even white identity, has historically arisen through a racialized mode of compensation that is both material and immaterial. In distinction, I read Du Bois as asserting a system of white social reproduction that enabled white workers preferential access to high wages, be it through better schools, freedom of movement, legal representation, access to better job training, etc. This reading of white social reproduction can be carried over into our time, as social reproduction has transformed alongside changes in the regime of economic accumulation. Now, a substantial aspect of white social reproduction is predicated on values acquired from the postwar period—a time more economically buoyant and also a time characterized by juridically-enforced racial exclusion from these economic fruits—through a financialized matrix of assets and financial products that operate on these assets, such as homeownership and the various mortgage-related products used to extract liquidity of multiple forms. I call this new model the financialized wages of whiteness and today's emergent right-wing populism has been elicited by this transformation. Contemporary right-wing populism represents a politics of skepticism. Doubt is cast on the potential for the financialized wages of whiteness to deliver adequate social provision into the future.

An important caveat must be made—namely, that the financialization of white wages, like the period before it, is a politically short-sighted one, especially from the perspective of working-class whites. As Du Bois noted in *Black Reconstruction*, white chauvinism has always been carried out to the detriment of white workers and has enabled warfare, economic inequality, and a worldwide democratic deficit (Du Bois 1998, 30). The postwar period's racially-policed wage system has been replaced by a financialized system in which asset wealth can be strategically accessed through financial products. Indeed, white social reproduction has become shot through by the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. The white subject may no longer count on a patchwork of manufacturing jobs to fall back on, as was roughly the case in capitalism's supposed golden age. The logic of financial assets requires one to become a competent portfolio manager, a responsible subject with prodigious market discipline, or to treat one's finances as if it is a portfolio even if it isn't. If not impossible for most, perfect adherence to market discipline is demanding, and adverse effects are impossible to avoid. Thus, the ethics of a financialized neoliberal mode of white social reproduction also correspond to an actual economic condition of system-wide precarity and the always looming possibility of déclassé. From this viewpoint, we can begin to understand today's emergent right-wing populism, with its nostalgia for racialized Fordism and its ambivalent relationship to demands of market discipline.

Furthermore, this understanding of financialized wages of whiteness problematizes the prevailing distinction between economic anxiety and status anxiety.

Recent research has attempted to understand financial and status anxiety as two isolatable variables (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Lienesch, Jones, and Cox 2017). Yet, a view of white social reproduction moves us beyond this apparent dichotomy. This reflects less the specific argument made here than it does the framework of the "wages of whiteness," which have always been materially centered within the process of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. Yet, with the ascendancy of a financialized form of white social reproduction, the relationship between status and economy is perhaps further obfuscated. Under conditions where white economic stability is directly linked to protecting white wages within certain aspects of industrial production, the link between status and economy is clear for all to observe. Under conditions of segregated industrial production, white chauvinism appears as both justification for this system and a methodology for retaining a racially-fragmented labor force. But if white social reproduction must now be understood through the metaphor of a "financial portfolio" and is embedded with the use of financial asset products. The link between economic uncertainty and race becomes more challenging to detect. The secular trend of wage stagnation has replaced the need to enforce racial boundaries politically; breaking into the housing market through wages alone has become ever more challenging. The reproduction of racist limitations has been deprived of their usefulness.

This chapter discusses the transformation of white social reproduction from a wage-based mode into a financialized one. I then discuss the financialized wages of whiteness and detail how its financialization has aided in its reproduction. The

chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications of this social reproductive arrangement for the politics of populism and neoliberalism.

Whiteness Reconsidered?

Trumpism appeared to make the problem of white reaction seem relatively straightforward: White chauvinism reared itself forward because of the success of the Obama administration's eight consecutive years, the proper staging itself as a racist backlash against Obama's Black presidency. This discourse presumes bastions of racism, residual as they are persistent, take on an ahistorical character. But what is really on offer from interpretations that cast whiteness into the annals of history is a particular problem characterized less by systemic detailing than by ontological prescription? Often enough, a position of ahistorical whiteness renders writing on white chauvinism into a liturgical exercise. Whiteness becomes eternal to the present and past. However, it should be noted that the most apparent problems with liturgy have less to do with form than content. If ceremonial iterations arise from and accurately represent actual material conditions, then perhaps their discursive repetition, ahistorical whiteness, in this case, is beyond critique. But this begs the following question: can we interpret whiteness as something ontological? If we can, then there is sufficient justification for developing a theodicy of whiteness. But if we cannot—and investigation into the historical record of this thing called "whiteness" grants ample evidence to the contrary of its eternalization—then present shibboleths

around whiteness can be interpreted as fetishism. Ultimately, such evidence is related to Theodore Allen's stand-out remark that when settler colonialism began to occur, there were no white people in the Americas (Allen 2012). Allen's point, which is historically extrapolated in his two-volume work, is that ascription we understand as whiteness had to be constructed or produced from a position of power. And though the annals of history accurately portray colonial endeavor as violent and remarkably terrible, it would be an obvious mistake to represent its ostentatious vileness through an ascriptive form produced later on. A problem, then, is that discourses that attempt to make sense of Trumpism have done this, often enough unintentionally and proceeding from a position of good faith. Here we arrive at a frequently presumed but very rarely defended position.

Though periodization is helpful, the historicization of whiteness only brings us so far. We need concepts that allow us to understand the stubbornness of whiteness without elevating it into an ontology. As later iterations would describe, the Du Boisian concept of a "wages of whiteness" brings us closer to a historically-sensitive approach. But we are only brought *closer* because the conceptual basis of Du Bois's remark and later iterations like David Roediger's eponymous text are at their strongest when read as particular to historical conditions discussed, respectively. For Du Bois, the passage in question comes to the reader very late, after 700 pages, and appears as a reflection that attempts to align the author's experience with the solid historical argument presented in the text. Roediger's view is similarly at its most potent when discussing early 19th century modes of differentiation by *some* workers

who endeavor to mark themselves as *white* workers in distinction to *Black* enslaved workers. But is periodization enough? While we have interesting historical examples of the origin story of white ascriptive identity, we still lack a conceptual apparatus that can allow a systemic method for discerning the problem as time has moved forward. We need a conceptual framework for understanding how this crucial ascriptive mode functions and gives off its variegated appearance—historical iterations with distinctive contours whose understanding can lend itself to a better analysis of this social object at its most generic level.

An immediate difficulty in conceptualizing the wages of whiteness is compounded by the present and past-tense slippage with the later term "wages." One may speak of wage*s* in two ways. First, wages are understood in the trans-temporal sense across historical times and places. But we may also talk of wage*s* in a historically-bounded manner since the benefits that define whiteness are often varied across any given class structure in a specific historical moment. The tendency to presume the wages of whiteness, or even whiteness as such, as a stable category requires this last aspect to be obfuscated. But if this latter aspect were untrue, we would have to see no class schism among those ascribed as white. We can now begin to see how this sense of the white wages—in which "wages" refers to a spread across a cross-class constituency in a particular time—is in direct tension with the former interpretation of trans-historical white wages because of the relative structure that sutures together a cross-class white coalition has a distinct design, functionality, and political wager in every historical period. For example, the wages of whiteness under

the postwar Keynesian New Deal order. These wages of whiteness during Fordism were constructed into a demand-side state-interventionist system. They saw a homologous intervention in the social construction of what Marx would call concrete labor. Under Fordist conditions, sustained reactionary intervention modified the conditions around concrete labor, producing a hardened color-line within it. The effect was a bifurcation of labor, an arrangement that bestowed some white advantages predicated on labor market distinctions often encoded into law. Under these conditions, the benefits granted to white workers served as the material base for various white chauvinisms. We can say that white chauvinism still exists today, but does it take this same arrangement? Two well-evidenced facts defy thinking that this specific arrangement still exists—first, the demolition of Jim Crow, and second, the absolute stagnation in wages. Therefore, what's needed is a conceptual approach that allows us to consider how the reproduction of whiteness proceeds under these various historical moments, especially as changes to the capitalist political economy continues to unfold.

This chapter's argument asserts that the wages of whiteness change amid transformations in the relations of production and the social relations constituted in the sphere of public culture. This can be seen in the necessary modification of this text's "wages of whiteness" concept. "Financialized" has been added to specify a fundamental transformation in how cleavages between white and non-white subjects are reproduced through capitalist accumulation. Though few will defend an interpretation of the capitalist mode of production as a static, almost platonic form, it

is necessary to remind ourselves that capitalism has transformed over time. Indeed, as historian Sven Beckert notes, while looking at colonization and the internationalization of the cotton industry, the capacity for transformation has made capital such a historically dynamic mode of production (Beckert 2015, xv). The dynamism of capitalist accumulation must be situated in its various changes amid its long historical gestation. Even capital's response to bottom-up class struggle has led to new inscriptions cast into the capitalist mode of production (Tronti 2019); the demolition of capitalist slavery—a particular type of slavery innovated on the shores of the Americas under capitalist conditions—is an example that Du Bois sought to clarify in his chapter on the Civil War "General Strike" (Du Bois 1998, 55-83). Capitalism is capricious. Our job is to understand how wages of whiteness follow suit.

While we must also move beyond an idea of a singular wage of whiteness, transmutability does not happen by mere providence. From where does a social construction arise? Or, to be more precise, what is behind the appearance of any social construction? Here we arrive at the basic concept of reproduction. When an object of inquiry is observed and described, what is being observed is an object's being. But all things that stand before the eyes of an observer had to become what they are now, and to continue to observe them; they must continue to become what they are in real-time. Even in death, the living being unbecomes living, but the corpse embarks on a new phase of becoming dead and decomposing into the earthly matter. The point here is that we cannot understand being without also understanding

becoming, and this dual understanding is even more critical with social phenomena than with organic substances. In other words, what is missing in the wages of whiteness concept is not being. What is missing is an idea of its becoming, a process we can conceptualize as reproduction. How the wages of whiteness have persisted through various historical cycles is precisely what is being sought. Becoming, therefore, cannot be understood as a question about origins. Though the origin of white ascription is undoubtedly essential, research on its origin does not necessarily tell us about the reproduction of white identification through time and space. Nor does it give a view of the facilitation of various reactionary coalitions. Though describing the origins of the wages of whiteness and whiteness itself is a crucial step, it does not give us a theory of their reproduction.

In the Marxist tradition, the conceptual uses of "reproduction" have been twofold. First, reproduction has been used for understanding the reanimation of capitalist circuitry and production. Reproduction of the production conditions, or put differently, reproduction of the social relations that enable capitalist production, are at issue here. The second view of reproduction is deployed around integrating gendered relations and non-waged work. This gendered fusion works as a linchpin for reproducing the essential commodity in the capitalist mode of production—labor power. We must state outright that the question of the wages of whiteness does not seem to fit perfectly into either of these conceptual interpretations of reproduction. But we can take from each of these traditions and use some of their insights to construct a robust concept of the reproduction of the white wages.

For either interpretation, reproduction strongly implies a level of plasticity—the capacity to change and transform without becoming something fundamentally new. This is to say that reproduction is *generative*. Reproduction of the conditions of production is, by definition, fungible; for the reproduction of these conditions has weathered the most strident of changes, from laws that regulate production functions, like the introduction of "scientific management" approaches (Braverman 1998, 59-82), to changes in the dominant sector of accumulation, for example, the move from industrial capital to real estate capital (Stein 2019). Likewise, the coupling of femininity with non-waged work that enables labor's reproduction has survived the rather monumental changes to the gendered sociality, the most conspicuous of which has been the elimination of the Fordist family wage (Cooper 2017). In either case, reproduction remains plastic, and this capacity to bend and transform must be understood as a cornerstone of our concept of the reproduction of the wages of whiteness. In distinction, social phenomena that rest of tensile conditions must be understood to have no reproductive function. This is why such phenomena do not become integrated into patterns of daily life and have a one-off-ness or contain the aura of singularity within them. This singularity stands out because it belies the social objects that must have a reproductive function in the secular and everyday world. From this view, a certain respect is due for true exceptionality. Respect for exceptionality is surely why reactionaries of all sorts—Carl Schmitt, Edmund Burke, Thomas Hobbes, and Nick Land, to name a few—have attempted to institutionalize

the exceptional in various ways.[8] It is no small consequence that "reproduction" may also be used for discussing a possible outcome of sex, namely the birth of the child, a complete process for which the Virgin Mary is said to have miraculously avoided. Nevertheless, there is no justification for elevating the wages of whiteness, or ascriptive whiteness for that matter, to the level of the exceptional.

Absent an attendant concept of reproduction, whiteness becomes essentialized. Perhaps this is why whiteness has found itself reified by those who seem to oppose its political use. At the practical level, a phenomenon that lacks no transparent mode of reproduction easily slides into outlandish folklore. Cast into a position of epistemological exceptionality, whiteness sometimes feels ubiquitous, manifesting its prerogatives in every political contention. But the apparent empirical awesomeness of whiteness derives its dynamism from conceptual poverty.

There seems to be no order of determination for whiteness at the conceptual level. Even when the "wages of whiteness" are marshaled, the concept too effortlessly embodies a transhistorical and essentializing stance. This suggests that a wider spectrality informs the weakness of contemporary discussions of whiteness around the American racial order. Barbara and Karen Fields' important book, *Racecraft*, takes issue with this racial exceptionality. Subjecting this mode of fetishization to intensive analysis, the text demonstrates how quickly racial discussions devolve into racial myth-making. Their book shows how racial thinking is reproduced as an

8. The Marxist response to the reactionary attempt to institutionalize exception can be read in Benjamin's work on history, or more schematically in Badiou's work on the Event.

ideology and how even those who are politically opposed to racial inequality tend to participate in this reconstruction of racial thought. Following this insight, we can situate the condition of whiteness within this larger racial ideology. *But success in doing this requires an adequate understanding of how the relative benefits of whiteness are reproduced. Only in understanding this may we relinquish the whiteness of its negative aura and place it into the demystified field of ideology.* An understanding of whiteness that is reproduced materially is justified due to the verifiable tendency in the historical record of white cross-class alliances becoming brokered over terms and conditions that tend to benefit, albeit in a fundamentally short-sighted and entirely contested way[9], those who participate.

What ideological function does whiteness play in the American condition? Perhaps a comparative approach is practical. Unlike the US, the European historical situation drew from a model of nationalism that, while imagined in the sense that Benedict Anderson describes it (Anderson 2006), was nevertheless informed by a history that was deeper than the US's settler colonial expansion. Marxists have long understood the US as lacking a historical legacy of a landed aristocracy and the conditions of the serf. But this lack of preceding universal oppression, in the sense

9. It is important to add conditions to the question of material benefits, because, as Du Bois notes on reconstruction, these immediate benefits to whiteness have never produced a durably better situation for those who are not within the elite ranks of a society. That is because there has never been, and there never will be, a "white socialism" that is akin to the interwar German national socialist promise, but rather a rotten version of capitalist social relations with the relative benefit of not being subject to the domination and oppression directed outwards (the exception, for those facing Nazi mobilization, being if you resist or are identified with any part of the left—two shortcuts to death and misery regardless of ascription, blood, or whatever else). Passing over the fact that these benefits are short sighted feeds too easily into the notion that ascriptive whiteness begets benefits wholesale. Such a view is not only incorrect, it also tends to facilitate the construction of a stable racial order that does not exist.

that settler-colonialism had bifurcated indigenous domination and white exploitation, only facilitates more demand for a social construction like whiteness that can cohere to the US social formation. Another way of putting it: whiteness has been a centrifugal force when it comes to the necessary act of building a political consensus, an essential social requirement under capitalist social relations. The diversity of fragmentary social, cultural and political detritus that have been leveraged to construct a national identity for European nations finds its American counterpart in the ascriptive mode of white identification.

In classic American style, constructing a cross-class white consensus is attended to through an exchange relation instead of the resonance of various historical ruins that may be reformed into nationalist sentiments. An exchange of benefits to whiteness for cross-class white political consent had been hardwired to the initial appearance of "whiteness" in social reality. The eventual replacement of a two-part combination system that included indentured servitude alongside chattel slavery with an exclusive design of chattel slavery embodies this exchange early on. The relegation of non-Africans from an indentured, slave-like condition opened up the possibility, however unlikely as it would turn out, that free white labor could ascend the class ladder, acquire property, and the like. But this narrowing process was not contingent but was itself an effective response to colonial instability via class struggle, a condition epitomized by the emergence of Bacon's Rebellion (Allen 2012b, 239). This is the fundamental contention of Theodore Allen's two-part book, which arose from an earlier but clarifying pamphlet aptly entitled *Class Struggle and*

the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race (Allen 2006). The development of whiteness has, according to Allen, a vital function early on: the production of an intermediate class layer, defined through ascription, that can manage and absorb class discontent from below (Allen 2012a, 52-53). The point is that the American condition of facilitating social control through social cohesion took on a quasi-exchange relation, granting some relative freedoms in exchange for relinquishing class solidarity. Let us not forget that the wage is a mediating exchange between subjects of distinctive class positions under capitalist social relations. This theoretical datum is replicated, in perverse form, in the production of the wages of whiteness.

What are the stakes in thinking of white identification through the lens of exchange and as distinct from nationality? Most important is the centrality of a sectional type of social reproduction for white identification. While national belonging could become generated through mass distribution of language and culture via the printing press and capitalist social relations (Anderson 2006, 37-82), white identification's function has always been to produce a division *within* national boundary lines. Language and cultural crossover can and has permeated individuals and communities understood as white without changing the social concept of whiteness. Unlike nationality, which on some level is residual and related to pre-capitalist formations and folkways, white identity has been sustained through a specific political and economic intervention that can be understood through the concept of white social reproduction. In distinction, white identification and its

specific form of social reproduction are eminently capitalist social forms, an invention of capitalist dynamics at the point of primitive accumulation, and a form that has been carried forward through a specific social reproductive process aimed at enabling stability for accumulation and elite empowerment. This fact has profound political implications. While a history of left nationalism persists in the historical record, we see no such analog with white identification. The political terrain of each is fundamentally distinct and uneven, and the possibility of a "left white identity" would mean the negation of its conditions of opportunity—the destruction of white social reproduction as such.

This exchange-based relation between distinctive class layers that generated the racial identifier known as white can be identified in other historic moments in US history through the exchange. Despite the lore of Southern nostalgics, the antebellum South contained within it roving class contradictions among whites. These contradictions were exacerbated by Black slavery, which compelling enclosed significant aspects of the labor market from free labor participation and made the struggle for higher wages through industrial action impossible. Under these conditions, labor organizing consisting of free white labor often threatened to withdraw their support for slavery as leverage for getting various concessions (Merritt 2017, 102). While "free" white workers, mainly understood as "mechanics" in this period, had relatively little political power, the threat of withdrawing support for the South's "peculiar institution" demonstrates the nature of the white cross-class social relations early on. Likewise, the New Deal coalition was predicated on an ascending

chain of assent, linking the Southern "Dixiecrats" into a political ensemble that enabled a relatively progressive consensus with the significant exception of an insulated Jim Crow regime. Once again, the conditions of political consensus rest on a specific cross-class white coalition constructed based on an exchange relation, abstractly conceived. Notably, the idea of an exchange-based set of social ties posits a consciousness predicated on what Albert Hirschman had described as the interests (Hirschman 2013). However, the elevation of the goods should not be surprising as their pursuit is fundamental to how the exchange relation works.

It is worth pausing to reflect on this position, namely that such subjects follow their interests. The idea of exciting subjects moves against the common contention that such subjects suffer from a relative lack of understanding of their interests (Frank 2005). The standard view, particularly in the US electoral situation, claims working-class whites vote against their interests. But interest is a constructed category, reflecting social conditions and politics. From a distance, an observer may note that collective association and action are in the interest of working-class people. But set under specific terms, like class disorganization and demobilization, going one's way and avoiding collective association and action may seem more rational. Interest is far from obvious, but it is contextual and relational.

Participation and affective investment in white social reproduction can be understood more simply than through an attempt to find a universal category of interest. Simply put, white social reproduction promises access to social goods and services that can allow people access to the imagined "good life." Subjects are

ultimately drawn toward material and social assurances that can enable them to live well. Living well does not always imply a universal egalitarianism, and there are plenty of examples of this desire resulting in the justification of inequality of even the most abject type. But this also means that the construction of "interest" in the collective mind is part of a hegemonic project with material and ideological aspects. White social reproduction has persisted as a central frame for the attempt to build a hegemonic political project in the US that is supportive of capitalist accumulation and its property and social relations.

This interpretation moves decisively against the hardboiled concept of false consciousness. There is, however, a tension between a consciousness that is false and active engagement in an exchange whose terms and conditions lead to cross-class collaboration. Irrationality is, after all, the nemesis of exchange relations. According to Marx and Engels, all forms of irrational sentimentalism are dispensed by their submersion into the "icy water of egotistical calculation" (Marx and Engels 2012, 37). Here Marx and Engels find agreement with the standard view of those who speak and think about similar things but hold the communists in low regard, economists. The difference between contemporary economics and Marxist political economy is, of course, to a large degree related to the Marxist tendency to historicize conditions, including certain aspects of what we can only be described as calculative rationality. While both contend that everyday market exchanges mobilize a specific affective and practical approach known as calculative rationality, the Marxist intervention claims that this rationality is but the rationale of a particular period. In other words, market

exchange occurs under specific conditions born out of relations of production configuration particular to the historical moment.

For this reason, a theory of ideology is necessary, as the conditions of possibility for calculating, hedging, betting, and assessing are themselves circumscribed by material conditions that compel subjects to speak and act in specific ways. Set in these terms, false consciousness can be understood as simply the interplay of circumstantial structures—ideological and material—that make a mark at the level of consciousness (Engels 1968). The rather unfortunate phrase for this such a process whose ends do not comply with a properly historical materialist conceptualization—false consciousness—is more hindrance than help here. What is, instead of necessary, is a material understanding of the reproduction of the white wages—a material process from which we can understand the development of specific modes of consciousness that, however unjust, contain a particular type of rationality.

It is helpful, to begin with, the framework of reproduction of the capitalist system at the infrastructural and ideological levels. Althusser is the thinker who took up the question of reproduction most thoroughly. Althusser was not oblique in asserting the need to understand capitalism's reproduction, or the reproduction of production conditions, as he put it (Althusser 2014, 47-52). Reproduction, here, is related not only to the hardwired elements of political economy but also to various ideological forms. It is these ideological forms that help to facilitate the necessary political consensus for governance and capital reproduction. Indeed, people's

necessary but everyday actions are what reproduce the conditions of capitalist production at the material level. The question, then, becomes centered on how ideological forms are generated and solidified, over and over again, into the broader population and, perhaps most centrally, within all factions of the working class. Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) helps to explain how this problem is resolved (Althusser 2001, 95-100). Althusser describes the ISAs as social structures relatively autonomous of the state but function as essential aspects of the state itself. This follows a somewhat decentered interpretation of the state, which is not simply the structures of direct government, but a sum of entities that work to ensure conditions suitable for accumulation, including legitimization of the process itself. The specific orientation of any given ISA has to be deciphered in its absolute specificity, meaning that beyond this generic description, it would be necessary to go through the particulars of any given ISA to arrive at its purpose and effects. However, Althusser pays special attention to the role of education, suggesting that the educational system is perhaps the clearest example of his theoretical concept. This is because the emergence of a state-regulated public and private educational system penetrates the consciousness of all persons in modern society, leaving residual effects on the consciousness of those who must embark through it. We can see, from this view, why there has always been some importance placed on control over an ISA by various political factions. The push around Critical Race Theory by those persons on the right and the desire to institutionalize the 1619 project are examples of political combat unfolding within an ISA. The result of fights like this can potentially hold

long-lasting effects on the composition of consciousness and political orientation. Each of these has a list of prerogatives that will enable the social formation to "go," as Althusser would put it. This implies a limit on what overall effect the ISA can have since allowing something to be set in motion means that it does not control the direction of the broader social formation but rather enables its movement at some higher or lower speed. In the final determination, though, the ideological state apparatuses ensure that subjects of capital willingly reproduce the relations of production without overt state coercion. Althusser distinguishes between the devices of ideology and those associated with the state's capacity to obtain consent through physical violence. So important is this distinction that Althusser argues that the demolition of the state's repressive apparatus is not enough to institute a fundamental transformation of the state and society (Althusser 2014, 90). Indeed, capitalist social relations are so powerful because of their capacity for negative and positive pressures that form compliance structures regardless of class position.

Does "whiteness" qualify as an ISA? Asserting this construction, whiteness-as-ISA gets the matter backward. Ascriptive identifications, it must be understood, come together through their elaboration *through* ideological state apparatuses, but they are not reducible to them. The social construction of whiteness, which started as a baseline effort at social control, has become increasingly enhanced, nuanced, and reassured through various ideological state apparatuses beginning in the early 20th century. This is, perhaps, one approach to reading a book like *Working Towards Whiteness*, another classic of historian David Roediger. He sets out two dissect the

emergence of "white ethnics" as a path toward various immigration populations becoming white (Roediger 2006). There, Roediger shows how formerly non-white immigration populations—Italians, for example—had found themselves in "inbetweenness." In the text, being "stuck" between whiteness and non-whiteness implies a kind of implicit litmus test for immigration subjects to prove themselves worthy of the benefits of whiteness at that time. Note that, once again, we arrive at a formula of exchange. But what facilitates an exchange arrangement that, for the most part, has an almost atmospheric presence is an arrangement of formations like ideological state apparatuses, which, in total, have facilitated this process. In-betweenness, or what is better described as "conditional whiteness," resulted from the elaboration of a schematic of white ethnicity, in which immigrant groups retain some semblance of national origin while also claiming association with the title of whiteness. And it was immigration bureaus, academic institutions, and civic associations—entities that we can understand through Althusser's ISA rubric—which had helped bring about this resolution (Roediger 2006, 15-16, 18, 57-92).

Some have taken Althusser's exposition of the materiality of ideology and its fundamental structure of support for the capitalist mode of production as a relic of bygone thought eclipsed by post-structuralist theories. These theorizations, and most notably Althusser's student, Foucault, attempt to provincialize the Marxist nexus of capital-state-ideology. Looking at Foucault's *oeuvre,* we can see his words move in this direction in their assertion that power relations and subject formation are: historically contingent (i.e., not consigned to a pattern of development of a mode of

production), connected to fully autonomous institutional forms (i.e., are not determined nor over-determined by the state and its class capture), and are decisively conditioned by *a priori* forms that arrange to understand in particular manners. Of course, Foucault's work is famous for its reluctance to discuss questions of transition and reproduction. It remains unclear, for example, why and the objective form that knowledge would take would transition from the classical state of similitude to the renaissance preference for representation. And it is furthermore unclear why contingencies that, if enacted, would bring further changes are forestalled, giving way to massive periods of homogeneous thought and discourse formation, such as the 200-year timeline Foucault gives to the age of representation. While these broader observations are not knock-down arguments for the topic before us, bringing them into our particular field of thinking about the wages of whiteness produces various irresolvable problems and inconsistencies. From a Foucauldian view, the ascendancy of whiteness would have to be described as a mode of biopolitics (McWhorter 2005). It would appear, at first, that understanding whiteness through a theory of biopolitical makes sense, given its inherent tendency, in the US at least, to act as the lead facilitator for a kind of "racial rationality." But Foucault's concept of biopower seems to suggest the use of *real* biological aspects of the human body:

> By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, a general system of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species (Foucault 2009, 1).

Here, Foucault describes his concept of biopolitics in compact terms. The biopolitical develops from an understandability of the human as a verifiable and categorizable object ("species"). The use of the human body, with its well-established physical and psychological weaknesses, is leveraged to establish compliance by the state. From this view, the production of surplus values under conditions of generalized commodity production is either an excuse for or a low congruence around the management of bodies through their manufacturing as national populations. In this register, the state is simply a kind of simulated aggregation of a litany of effects, something Foucault sums up as a "mobile regime of multiple governmentalities" (Foucault 2010, 77). As a concept, biopolitics does allow us to understand whiteness from a "population management" perspective, particularly in the early stages where whiteness was necessary to maintain social cohesion amid a weak colonial state. However, a lingering question hangs out of this interpretation: is whiteness-as-biopolitical management generated by the political strategy of the state, as Foucault seems to suggest? Or has it developed through a process of determination (or perhaps over-determination), in which capitalist social relations place demands on ruling factions to cohere the US social formation to negate class solidarity? The analytical importance of this question is classical for Foucault and Marx: are we talking about the development of class struggle animated by the capitalist mode of production, or is the category of power sufficient for explaining the emergence of contemporary approaches to social control?

Understanding Foucault's idea of biopolitics as a subordinate theory to the broader issue of capitalism and class struggle allows for understanding why class factions now battle for different forms of white social reproduction.[10] The Gramscian and Althusserian Marxist approaches for thinking about rule and domination arise from the contiguous concepts of hegemony and the requirement of a social formation cohesion. The social effects of capitalist accumulation—the denaturalization of hierarchy, the disenchantment of power, the economic and political division into two spheres—made social control through repressive means weak. Maintaining social control would require some level of produced consent that melds together a fractionalized social formation, and it is here where ideology and hegemony each come into play. We can contextualize whiteness as partially a biopolitical scheme, but only since this scheme is aimed at naturalizing inequality and facilitating a common-sense idea about how to achieve the so-called good life.

Furthermore, thinking of white social reproduction within this framework makes the concept understandable as a site of struggle. Today, this struggle has primarily taken place between different social coalitions that call for competing visions of white social reproduction, one centered around a racialized Fordism and the other around the financialization of whiteness. Each acts at the behest of different contending factions of capital: national private capital and multinational corporate capital. As we can see, either implies a substantially distinctive approach to thinking

10. This approach of bringing Foucault into Marxism follows Poulantzas's approach in his final work, *State, Power, Socialism* (2014).

about white social reproduction and racial formation. In containing Foucault's idea of the biopolitical within a Marxist frame and understanding it as an aspect of the need to manage discontent and produce social solidification without disturbing capitalist social relations, we can arrive at a more comprehensive and specific idea about what is at stake.

Another issue is the question of fascism and its relation to whiteness. While US history is marred by right reaction, the reduction of reactionary sentiments to an abstract concept of whiteness is revealed as parochial when bringing forward a comprehensive view of reactionary politics that includes its diverse historical and geographic expressions.

Interwar fascism saw fully industrial warfare used for mass destruction within the European frame and a racial regime that did not fit whiteness. The National Socialist concept of *Lebensraum*, roughly translated as "living space," presupposed vast and unbridgeable distinctions between subjects that, if interpreted from the US context of racialization, would all become homogenized into whiteness. Yet, as is well known, the "non-Germanic" peoples to Germany's east—Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, etc.—were consigned to a racial status well below the Germanic *Herrenvolk*. *Lebensraum* demanded that these lesser subjects would be eliminated, opening up a newfound expansion of space for the German Reich and its chosen people. The terrible bloodletting of the Holocaust sat comfortably next to plans that the Nazi state had planned but could not follow through with because of its military defeat. That the concept of whiteness does not fit into this moment is striking.

Still, the tendency to mistake conjunctural formations as universal ones from a historical trauma is not specific to whiteness but seems to reoccur. Like whiteness, the specter of fascism can sometimes appear as a solid formation outside of history and context. This mistake has brought some prominent scholars of fascism to interpret the fascist compulsion as a concept empty of history. Roger Griffen's interpretation, for example, follows a Weberian ideal-typical analysis and describes fascism as a "palingenetic ultranationalism" or a politics of national rebirth (Griffen 2018). Of course, Weber noted that the ideal type is always an impossibility and does not have an empirically-embodied being. For Weber, any ideal-typical conceptualization of fascism should be used as a tool or mechanism of classification.[11] So long as there is nationalism, there must also be palingenetic ultranationalism, or at least its possibility, which is to say that fascism is ever-present. Similarly, theorists link Frank Wilderson (2003) and even more famous writers, like Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017), that make similar claims about racial politics come into contact with thinkers of fascism like Griffen, at least in form rather than in content. Each deploys a specific rhetorical approach to the eternal recurrence of historical evil. Here, fascism is like whiteness in that either are always teeming at the moment, present, and ready to strike.

11. Nevertheless, Griffen's interpretation of fascism as palingenetic ultranationalism seems to get away from Weber's mechanical conceptual usage. More recently, Griffen has begun theorizing fascist reaction as a kind of "slime mold," an indication that the political DNA of the radical right is, in a strong sense, primordial (Griffen 2003). From ideal-typical conceptualization to ontological eternalization, this slippage is reminiscent of the discourse on whiteness and its politics of reaction.

This eternalization of the enemy is incorrect, but it also tends to preserve the broader contours of the moment and assert a set of normative claims about politics. For example, the rhetorical reanimation of fascism as an imminent enemy has preserved the social structure by disciplining left politics. Though different in content, the problem of whiteness presents itself in a similar form since its potential excesses justify supporting the status quo center-left. And it was for precisely this reason that Cornell West criticized Coates:

> "Coates and I come from a great tradition of the black freedom struggle. He represents the neoliberal wing that sounds militant about white supremacy but renders black fightback invisible. This wing reaps the benefits of the neoliberal establishment that rewards silences on issues such as Wall Street greed or Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and people." (West 2017).

For West, the idea of ontologically persistent anti-Blackness has the perverse effect of obfuscating struggles for justice. These fights are vital because they point towards social contestation and, therefore, the possibility of overcoming the terms that structure the current state of things.

Rather than an eternal concept of racial injustice, the story of an exchange between white benefits for white cross-class solidarity must be understood as arising from the determinate structures that continue to transform alongside changes in political economy. The contours and specification of "whiteness" had indeed changed and transformed amid ongoing changes to political economy: (1) the demand for management of a growing reserve army of labor in Europe and England, particularly alongside turbulent conditions of the reproduction of capitalist early development under conditions of settler colonialism in the Americas; (2) the solidification of the

American social formation, including an emergent elite class and a bifurcated, but integrated, labor regime that included chattel slavery and industrial wage labor; (3) the demolition of legal slavery and its replacement with a segregated labor market; (4) the overcoming of a legally-segregated labor market just as the postwar consensus and the industrial economy come into crisis; and finally (5) the emergence of a largely post-industrial labor market and the ascendency of the financial economy principally moved forward by asset inflation. We can begin to think about these transitions by first thinking about "whiteness" through the language of becoming rather than being. And we must do so while attending to the critical changes of our time.

Conceptualizing White Social Reproduction

We are sorely in need of a concept that gives us insight into white identity's becoming. Understanding white identity's becoming is not reducible to its origin. Like any racial ascriptive type, white identity arises from an ensemble of social relationships. All social relations are historical, which is to say that all social relationships have to be endlessly reconstituted if they are to retain their status as relevant "social facts" in the everyday. Whiteness's becoming is, therefore, more clearly stated through the term "reproduction," since what we are in need of understanding is not its historic origin but the process that has made whiteness relevant through the passing of time.

To this challenge, white social reproduction is a concept that allows us to successfully historicize whiteness and develop a contextual view of its construction. One thing that the concept does not do is to deliver a comprehensive historical record of whiteness. Thus far, the approach to understanding white identification has taken on a specific cadence that is concerned with a thick description that links origins to contemporary conditions (Allen 2012 a, 2012b; Harris 1993; Ignatiev 2003; Roediger 2006, 2007). These works have done well in demonstrating the contingent and historical origins of white racial ascription. An understanding of the origins of this formation is particularly important for moving against the tendency for all social relations to appear natural. But as the totality of Marx's work suggests with respect to capitalist social relations, eternalization may be established within popular and even scientific consciousness despite accepted knowledge that the origins of these social relationships do not continue into the horizon of time's past. For Marx, the most important aspect of historical understanding was how social relationships can continue after their initial inauguration. The discourse of primitive accumulation as a secret is, then, at least somewhat ironic considering that Marx's three volumes of capital were almost exclusively concerned with the circuitry of capital's ongoing reproduction after primitive accumulation. Clearly, racial ascription and capitalist social relations are distinctive. Even so, Marx's methodological approach is helpful for considering how we can understand white identification and avoid its eternalization in our political discourse. Though this chapter will deliver to the reader some indication of the transition of whiteness from the postwar period and into

neoliberalism, my concept is an abstract tool for building a historical analysis of this thing called whiteness. In understanding whiteness as something that must be reproduced, we are allowed to understand white ascription as a social object that is not necessarily beholden to its origin. Thus, a cornerstone of the concept of white social reproduction is the claim that white identification can become anything.

White social reproduction intentionally delinks the origin of white supremacy in the US from its ongoing repetition in social reality. For some readers, this frame will be identified as a flaw. The counter-argument that whiteness has continued since its inception as an anti-Black or at least an "anti-non-white" formation will be called to mind: If the specific attributes of whiteness are wide open, why has it continued to exhibit the same set of characteristics over a wide period of time? Though this may seem like a damning question, it is necessary to see that the availability of whiteness to mutate is always present. Characteristics of whiteness in distinctive historical moments can still have continuity; the availability to change cannot be confused with the option for this formation to remain the same. But this also requires that we face up to the difficult question of whether whiteness has, indeed, remained unchanged. Often enough, the debate around race revolves around the dichotomy between the total continuity of racial oppression or its irrelevance in contemporary politics.[12] But the fact remains that whiteness has persisted and it has changed, simultaneously. The concept of white social reproduction allows us to understand both of these aspects of

12. This bifurcation of positions exists both within the liberal-left and also between the liberal-left and conservatives. If anything, the mirroring of this dispute indicates a conceptual problem with how we think about racial formation and politics.

whiteness at the same time—for this important ascriptive type can remain politically relevant while also substantially changing in its content and form.

Nevertheless, an important aspect of white social reproduction is its relationship to wider economic structures. At the heart of the concept of white social reproduction is an understanding of a tendency to adjust white reproduction to shifts in capitalist accumulation. This relation is not static, because capitalist accumulation continues to evolve new regimes of accumulation. White social reproduction will shift as new regimes of capitalist accumulation emerge and take root. Of course, this concept is not concerned with social reproduction at the most macro-social level but is concerned with the sectional reproduction of those who are interpreted as white. Making this distinction requires an understanding of the political nature of white social reproduction because the construction of white identification implies the intention around eliciting cross-class collaboration. This approach is related to the idea of social reproduction as such. For social reproduction implies the myriad activities and processes entailed for groups of people to reproduce themselves at the most basic level. But all of these processes must be linked to the real economy—reproduction implies a certain level of access to socially necessary goods and services. White social reproduction follows this aspect, but is perhaps even more complacent with American capitalism than a generic interpretation of social reproduction may be. Since the inception of white identification in the US after the jolt of Bacon's Rebellion, the socio-economic conditions have solidified around particular forms of accumulation and patterns of distribution. The qualification of

social reproduction by white ascription tells a more political story, one which seeks to facilitate special access to mechanisms that can enable the good life for those who qualify. White social reproduction allows us to contour the specificity of whiteness and its entanglement with the political economy of one's time.

The concept of white social reproduction allows us to decipher the social terms and economic conditions that reproduce a politics around whiteness in any given historical moment. These terms and conditions are important because their disclosure describes to us the internal logic of hegemonic politics, or even counter-hegemonic politics, particularly in the US case. White identification has remained especially important in the US context, as the origin of the US is bereft of the usual ancient mysticisms that form the basis of nationalism elsewhere in the world. Nationalist mythologizing is often related to an imagined historical record that brings together a territory and culture into a comprehensive identity. While the basis of this identification is imagined, it makes real use of the materials of antiquity specific to any place. The US lacks this historical record, and its origin in settler colonialism has required a different kind of melding identification for cohering the social formation and maintaining the status quo. It is therefore no accident that whiteness functions differently than nationality. In distinction, the "glue" that maintains cohesion between and among those who are understood as white is highly transactional and materially linked to a vision of the "good life," a fact touched on by Du Bois's idea of a "wages of whiteness." But the nature of such a transaction—or, perhaps this more accurately stated as a *potential* transaction—is bonded to historical periods with particular forms

of accumulation and distribution. It is for this reason that whiteness can be specified through its specific mode of social reproduction. The bonding that holds together groups of people on the basis of whiteness can be understood through how these groups have been given access to a specific way of reproducing themselves, both materially and affectively.

The concept of white social reproduction is an alloyed concept that weaves together the material possibility of one's reproduction and the affective logic that allows one to constitute the self within the boundary lines of this material process. White social reproduction, therefore, is a determining structure that begins with the subject's material circumstance. Here, "determination" is used as Raymond Williams once described it—as a structure that does is not casual but a structure that imposes limits and pressures on the course of things (Williams 1978, 83-89). Understanding white social reproduction can allow us to further understand political consciousness around this ascription—be it a reactionary or more liberal type. Consciousness is determined inasmuch as the production of consciousness can develop within the structural constraints imposed upon it by its integration into a particular regime of capitalist economy. This is to say that there is the relative autonomy of subjects to develop certain forms of consciousness that are bookended by white social reproduction's economic circuitry. As will be argued later, this helps account for the change from a more reactionary consciousness in the postwar period to a more progressive consciousness in the neoliberal era.

At the level of political strategy, the concept enables us to produce a conjunctural analysis that is sensitive to racial formation in the US. White social reproduction is what enables the conditions of possibility for a cross-class political consensus to emerge that disempowers the working class in favor of a faction of society's higher orders. It does this work by producing and sustaining real divisions between those included within its social reproductive scope and those who are excluded from it. At the highest level of abstraction, this division plays on the age-old requirement that capitalist agents make good use of difference to avoid political consolidation around the lines of class. But difference does not automatically produce political cleavages. Indeed, plenty of differences persist without contributing to capitalist domination, and it is only certain forms of difference that have remained elemental for ensuring the reproduction of the conditions of capitalist production. In the US case, it is the *process* of white social reproduction rather than white identification as such that fulfills the most basic function of capitalist society—namely, the division of class on the basis of difference. While difference may be innocuous, white social reproduction takes the additional step of solidifying certain material differences—or, at least attempting to do so—that provoke political fissures and disable solidarities. In mobilizing white social reproduction as a conceptual frame, we can contour how racial formation operates to sustain and advance capitalist accumulation and its society.

It is important to conclude that the concept of white social reproduction does not accomplish any of the above on its own. The concept must be operationalized to

periodize whiteness and produce a conjunctural analysis. This means nothing short of remaining sensitive to social factors that can and often will change over time. For thinking about contemporary US right, understanding the broad transformation of white social reproduction from the postwar period and into neoliberalism is a necessary step.

From White Wages to Assets

Our discussion of white social reproduction must consider the various modes people use to access money. Money, or liquidity, is necessary for social reproduction under generalized commodity production, and workers must find ways to acquire it. Though we typically imagine money arriving through the exertion of labor power and its exchange, today's political economy has various financial mechanisms that can lead to liquidity access. Debt is perhaps the quintessential form most think of when imagining access to money through a non-labored route (Graeber 2014). Students will rely on debt to float them through college or while getting job training, and workers will often depend on credit cards or short-term payday loans to supplement their waged income. Indeed, as the purchasing power of wages has evermore depressed, debt has become increasingly important for making ends meet. But access to debt, especially credit card debt, is usually linked to wages, or at least to the possibility that a person can get access to wages decent enough to make minimum payments in perpetuity and to other assets held.

An essential distinction between wages and assets is that one can collateralize the latter but not the former. Under current economic conditions, workers are free to rent their labor power essentially, but they cannot sell it to another. If it were possible to collateralize one's labor, then the consequences of default would be a form of slavery, as the owner of the worker would be able to "use" it in whatever way they please. In distinction, assets are collateralizable. People regularly do this; the concept of a mortgage—the basic unit of the housing market—works because the home can back the loan as a form of collateral. But breaking into this market is difficult without significant asset holdings. In reverse, access to significantly valued assets allows their owner to get cheap debt, sometimes on demand. What is at stake, then, is access to appreciation value and access to cheap debt for further funding.

Looking deeply at the transformation of political economy and the new fount of financialized economic dynamism in the US, we must take the deterioration of wages and the rise of financialized assets seriously. Indeed wage deterioration and the slack in labor's demand are cardinal aspects of social reproduction writ large and have driven vast systemic inequality (Piketty 2014). Wage stagnation, including the overall lack of demand for labor, especially industrial work, is a fixture of the contemporary political landscape (Benanav 2020). Declines in the share of industrial labor have, in particular, certainly contributed to today's sluggish economic conditions. We must also come to grips with the simultaneous ascendancy of the financialized asset economy and how asset valuation has become an essential financial condition with centrifugal effects on class reproduction, capitalist accumulation, and the potential for

liberatory politics (Meister 2021). Specifically, the solidification of today's variegated class positions is increasingly dependent on access to intergenerational wealth wielded in the form of assets (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2019). Investments provide a range of strategic actions based on their inherent tendency to function as collateral and store-houses of values generated elsewhere in the capitalist system. The reproduction of white social reproduction today is centered on an asset-based scheme, and this scheme often presumes values collected in another, and likely more unjust, time. The transmission of values derived from the Jim Crow era is stored, augmented, and transmitted to present generations through financial mechanisms that monetize and leverage asset holdings. In other words, Du Bois's wages of whiteness now have a dual character. On the one hand is their old form, which suffers the double blow of aggregate wage stagnation and the slow elimination of racist job protectionism characteristic of the postwar era (Cowie 2012). On the other, the advance of the asset-based economic regime, in which financial instruments strategically release liquid values accumulated and stored within non-liquid assets.

Though the asset is indeed novel in terms of working-class social reproduction, it is essential to note that its logic does not signify a departure from the capitalist mode of production. Today's asset-based economic model falls under the formula for capitalist accumulation that Marx had discovered—M-C-M'. The commodity, which is between two moments of liquid money, always implies the existence of assets (Meister 2017). Commodities are produced not only by somebody but also by people and physical instruments, machines, and facilities. The latter

aspects, which are typically perceived as fixed capital, such as warehouses, devices, laboratories, or other physical means of production, are, in essence, assets and their persistence as a form of dead labor (Marx 1973 690-712). They contain a relational value relative to their production by work and their specific use in any given historical moment. Factory equipment's efficiency compared to other developed means of production, for example, endows them with a fluctuating valuation. The liquidation of such assets is also implied when the means of production are upgraded. Such facilitates sold off to other competitors in downstream markets or small-time upstarts. In these instances, we look at assets within the traditional Marxist account of capitalist accumulation, the time between two moments of liquidity or money. The shift towards an asset class characterized by real estate rather than by productive industrial capital is a shift that tells us more about how capitalist logic has subsumed the rest of sociality than about a fundamental transformation in the capitalist mode of production.

It makes sense that, in a moment characterized by an intense decrease in productive lines that can attract investment, more values become imbued into assets, potentially for lengthy durations. There are various debates about the causal relationship between processes of capitalist accumulation and the current conjuncture's ostensibly lack of labor demand. We can set aside these debates and note that general stagnation seems to have become an enduring fixture with the manufacturing economy. Even mainstream economists like Larry Summers have sounded the alarm bells of "secular stagnation." Though outside the purview of our

discussion, it also makes sense that large amounts of capital are invested into not yet profitable firms that are imagined to, one day, corner their respective markets—such as Uber, Tesla, or thousands of smaller start-up tech firms. Under these conditions, real estate has presented itself as a lucrative site for storing and accumulating values accumulated from any part of the system. Of course, this is not simply because real estate represents an enduring and even elemental form of object ownership—land—but because a specific arrangement of political forces has brought about a mode of political economy that privileges asset inflation. It is essential to understand this not merely as an element of the capitalist economy's management but as a part of the broader class struggle if sublimated into evermore middle-class aspects of social life.

The transformation of real estate into an ever-appreciating class of assets has a functional relationship to the class struggle, or at least is related to its historical possibility in the decade-long conjuncture of the 1970s. As wages stagnated, it became clear enough that the old solution of rising wages simultaneous to rising profits could no longer hold. We would once again lapse into the old dynamic of winners and losers. The possible re-emergence of open class struggle was antithetical to the discursive and material aspects of the New Deal, specifically to its cardinal politics of class compromise, which granted workers a higher share of riches while also growing capital's relative size. Notably, the postwar arrangement delivered capitalists' power over the process of production (Braverman 1998). Of course, this "golden age of capitalism" was the absolute exception to capitalist development and economic growth (Gordon 2016).

Nevertheless, straining economic contradictions eventually brought about a political impasse in the 1970s that imperiled the postwar consensus. Stagflation, widespread industrial actions, the energy crisis, and high unemployment all pushed the rationality that dominated postwar politics to the brink. With the possibility of simultaneous rising wages and profits taken off the table, the age-old question of economic distribution was back on the table. Politicians avoided the potentially dire situation of having to choose and justify economic winners and losers by redirecting outcomes through finance (Krippner 2012) and towards a mode of political economy that allowed rising home values to stand in for wage increases witnessed under postwar conditions (Adkins, Konings, and Cooper 2020). We can say that this scheme is the product of class struggle, if only from the vantage of avoidance by forces who never wanted to win the class struggle from the side of the working class. Though the New Deal and its lingering legacy were indeed progressive in the large scheme of things, it is false to understand the postwar arrangement as an affront to capitalist society or even capitalist accumulation (Mann 2012, 241-278). Keynesian in nature, the dominant political commitments that moved this view forward centered on saving capitalism. In the 1970s, such a commitment demanded a new method, and this method was to be found—intentionally or not—in financialization and asset inflation.

The Financialized Wages of Whiteness

Just as the New Deal was not fair for workers across the color-line, so too has financialized asset inflation had adverse effects on the racialized working class. In the case of the New Deal, it is obvious that its racist elements corresponded to political brokerage. Institutionalized racism was strengthened by the position of racist Southern Democrats, who demanded concessions around Black freedom to allow the new consensus to advance into being. For this reason, the postwar era remains an ambivalent one at best, with an ostensibly progressive orientation cast within the larger frame of anti-Black racism. Though all boats may have risen, white boats rose faster than others by design since wages were highly segmented. In distinction, the racial contours of contemporary financialized asset inflation are altogether more unclear than this overt racist history. Unlike the prolongation of Jim Crow, which cut through the New Deal's political compromise, today's racial divergence now occurs through asset appreciation and has ostensibly "color-blind" characteristics.

This distinction—between the wage-form and the asset-form—has severe consequences for Du Bois's theory around the wages of whiteness. Before discussing how these directly, it is worth reviewing Du Bois's original meditation on this issue:

> It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. The were given public deference and titles of contest because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule (Du Bois 1998, 701).

Du Bois puts forward his classic formulation of public and psychological wage of whiteness in this passage. It is worth noting that paid wages are not directly mentioned. Instead, various institutions and organizational forms that engender white workers access to higher wages and their sustained reproduction of life are decisive. In other words, *what Du Bois is talking about is a specifically white mode of social reproduction.* This is perhaps why access to jobs, training, and education came to be influential touchpoints of the Civil Rights Movement, for these entities are central to the social reproduction of the working class under a modern division of labor. Yet, the wage-form persists in the background even with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. These various avenues of white social reproduction eventually continued under conditions of industrial ascendancy and within a larger postwar boom that threw the racial cleavages within the US working class into sharp relief.

Notably, the concept of the wages of whiteness implies a materialist analysis of white chauvinism that is distinctive from those theories that presume an ontological racial order (Myers 2017; Wilderson 2003). Part of what Black Reconstruction accomplished was to move against the grain of typical historical narration by inserting Black agency into the Civil War. In particular, the concept of a Black general strike (Du Bois 1998, 55-83) ruptures the view that the Civil War was simply an anti-racist North pitted against a racist South, and sheds light onto the agency of Black workers abandoning their Southern posts to fight for the enemies of the plantation system. But moving history against the grain in this manner presents an immediate question concerning working-class solidarity, specifically inter-racial

solidarity, given the decisiveness of Black labor in the conflict. White chauvinism disables a class-based politics that Marx and the First International advocated during the Civil War (Marx and Engels 2016). Du Bois viewed this negligence as a political construction rather than a natural condition. The work of Black Reconstruction itself stands as a rejection of the ontological view of anti-Black racism; its attempt to demolish an entrapped historical narrative surrounding Black agency and the historical sequence of the American Civil War evidence so much. Du Bois, after all, begins his book with a note "to the reader" noting that readers who viewed African Americans as "an average and ordinary human being, who under given environment develops like other human beings" will find the work engaging and perhaps even compelling (Du Bois 1998). Then, the form of the text is an aspect of the political horizon, in which racism is not at all elemental.

Rather than an ontological condition of white subjects, Du Bois identifies this pattern of racial separation as an aspect of political management of the class struggle, or what has elsewhere been specified described as a social control mechanism:

> Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South. It failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest (Du Bois 1998, 700).

Thinking of white identification as a carefully planned and slowly evolved method requires that we think through the wages of whiteness in distinctively class terms but in a manner that understands racial thinking as an operationally positive force of

power. In his work, Wages of Whiteness (2007), David Roediger advances such a theory. White consciousness becomes circumscribed by a specifically ideological view of racial order that maps onto conceptions of freedom and liberty. The consciousness of the white worker, according to Roediger, was conditioned by a dichotomous view of white productive labor versus Black non-productive labor. Economic anxiety is displaced onto the Black subject, such that freedom and productivity are fused with racial undertones defined by white "free labor." In other words, Black slavery becomes the "touchstone by which freedom is measured," and the desire for freedom becomes intertwined with the need to disassociate white labor from Black slavery (Roediger 2007, 20-21). Thus the subjectivity of the white worker took on an accelerated divergence from its Black counterpart throughout the nineteenth century, with a growing sense of distinction and difference promulgated through a strong psychic urge to manage the anxiety of a mixed economy of waged and enslaved labor. Though this psychoanalytic frame is indeed helpful, it appears unclear how this condition relates to class relations unless we are willing to admit this psychic status as something naturally occurring.

Viewing the matter through Du Bois, the advent of white identification does seem to have the trappings of a social control mechanism, one that had increasingly captured the consciousness of its intended subjects. As Theodore Allen demonstrates, this process of difference-making was pioneered with British colonialism over Ireland, well before the process of settler colonialism fully extended across the Atlantic. Allen describes Bacons Rebellion as a kind of adverse Event that

had compelled settlers to accelerate Black slavery and phase out white indentured servitude (Allen 17). Specifically necessary was constructing an “intermediate stratum” of persons who could mediate, and thus temper, the class conflicts latent within the political economy of colonialism (Allen 2012, 96). Generating racial cleavages between white and Black workers seems to fulfill this requirement, yet this still appears to move against the other compelling theory of a distinctively white psychic condition elucidated by Roediger. We have arrived at a critical problem for the literature of whiteness, and like most with most philosophical issues, also a central dispute (Ignatiev 2003). Is the condition of white chauvinism a product of top-down power-making, a quest for fragmenting the working class, a bid for constructing cross-class solidarity as a stopgap measure against class struggle? Or, is the problem a predominantly self-made one, with white workers actively taking on the subjectivity of "whiteness" and its various reactionary positions implied within it?

Though it appears that we are at an impasse, we can think of Du Bois's implied concept of a distinctively white social reproduction as a way to reconcile these two distinct interpretations of the white problem. White social reproduction provides a system of self-realization that allows one to move through the world and potentially excel within the world, too. Given the intensive naturalization of social reproductive systems under capitalist social relations, it makes sense that such a system appears natural and invisible. In the case of the postwar moment, white workers had access to better job titles, higher wages and were typically first hired and last fired. Add to this the marginalization of Black students and job trainees, and it

becomes evident that white social reproduction lifted white workers above Black workers in practically every sense. Yet, this form of white social reproduction did not necessarily grant handouts to white workers. This system still used capitalist exploitation and perhaps even domination, as it was, after all, implanted into the machinery of capitalist accumulation. Therefore, white social reproduction had all the trappings of what Roediger would earlier identify as a kind of expansive productivism, and the attendant ideology of white social reproduction would appear to identify itself through this term. In setting up a separate system of social reproduction, complete with its own rules and normative expectations, it makes sense that a psychic condition might take hold that would justify its specific affective tendencies. But this does not mean that those within it decisively chose the system, and the history of the New Deal and its compromise with racist Southern Democrats seem to evidence this much. The "social and psychological wage," interpreted through the lens of social reproduction, allows space for perceiving the problem as both class struggle from above alongside its fetishization from below.

Although Du Bois's interpretation sheds light on the political conditions of these processes and their expression in racial terms, we must continue to trace these conditions under current conditions of financialized capitalism. The advance of neoliberal capitalism signals two changes since the economic and political organization of the postwar era. The first is the success of the Civil Rights Movement in demolishing the old Jim Crow laws that buttressed white social reproduction through the wage-form. Second is the generalization of wage stagnation and slack in

demand for labor. Each has changed the class landscape and has engendered particular challenges for deciphering how racial and class cleavages interact.

Some translation from Du Bois into our time is needed. For one thing, homeownership—the primary asset held by working-class people—has become a central aspect to the reproduction of the working class more broadly. With the purchasing power of wages in sharp decline, accessing values imbued within the home has become an essential aspect of liquidity access. Today's financialization treats assets as strategic storehouses of values. For example, an asset owner may leverage their home to access cheap credit terms for a child's starter home. Values can also be extracted from an asset using financial instruments that refinance the asset, typically based on its elevated value since the time of purchase. In other words, if we have access to assets, then we also have access to financial instruments that can "work" on these assets and thus derive monetary benefits from them.

We are talking about a neoliberal dictum that one will manage their asset property and use these strategic disbursals and leverages to move forward their quality of life and perhaps the quality of their family's life. Here, financial instruments become a bridge between economic sustainability and the values accumulated into non-liquid objects like the home or even a car. Under this rubric, life becomes less about the ability to alienate one's labor within a production process than one's management of a portfolio that can enable the transmission of values through intergenerational time and space. Of course, given the flattened economic conditions of most working-class people, wages and assets are often bundled

together. More often than not, wages and assets are two mechanisms that one can use simultaneously to navigate the postindustrial economic terrain. Nevertheless, aggregate stagnation in wages implies an uneven, dual logic of social reproduction. Absent social services that provide durable goods and services outright, what is necessary today is access to liquidity. An appreciating asset, like the home, can often offer more liquidity quickly than through the wage.

Unlike wages, which are derived from abstract labor and generated by any laboring body, assets are the product of already-amassed wealth. The question before us is how and when the initial funding for such asset wealth was obtained. What makes today's distinctively white social reproduction is not some ontological fact. Today's white social reproduction arises from the correspondence between values accumulated amid a period of both economic dynamism and racial segregation and their eventual transmutation into asset forms capable of intergenerational transmission. In fact, in looking at white versus Black asset holdings, intergenerational wealth transfers are decisive in explaining the racial gap. Even when controlled for income and neighborhood, the wealth gap remained three-quarters apart (Blau and Graham 1989, 1). The point here is that wages on their own cannot directly explain the divergence in asset holdings.

Such divergences are a function of assets and how they operate through time. Specifically, we must think through the intersection of two tendencies. First, how assets accumulate values, and secondly, the historical trajectory in which white wealth was accumulated. Labor power has an ontological basis in the conjunction of

thought and bodily movement. Though skilled labor requires training, this training is always a latent potentiality for humans who have the intellectual and tactile ability to work. Labor power is a mode that can allow workers to obtain cash, providing there is a demand for labor within a capitalist economy. In distinction, the asset-form requires liquidity for purchase. This liquid cash is variable, but workers rarely expend their labor power in direct exchange for a house or any other type of property in modern economies. Labor power is exchanged for cash, which can, in turn, be used to acquire assets, providing that they have enough money on hand to do so. Barring extraordinary situations, holding significant assets amid floundering levels of waged purchasing power means that the values necessary for asset acquisition must come from outside of the wage. Or, in the case of the financialized wages of whiteness, original values were derived from a period in which wages were not only higher for whites but relatively effervescent in their purchasing power.

From this vantage point, it seems clear enough that most white assets have their origins from a racially segregated and segmented past. Values originating from these moments and into the present exist for specific reasons, namely due to the twin phenomena of the postwar economic boom and a highly segregated workforce, with higher wages for working-class whites. As wages have declined, compounding values from a past political sequence becomes critical for preserving and augmenting the broader asset economy.

Trends in housing acquisition—the primary way working-class people lean on the asset economy—have compounded this dynamic. It was not until the

postwar era was coming to a close after 1960 that Black workers began to achieve homeownership at a rate equal to or faster than whites (Collins & Margo 2001, 71). This change is an aspect of the slow transformation of society by the Civil Rights Movement. White accumulations, primarily during capitalism's most dynamic period, had already amassed substantial reserves before the economic regime faltered in the late 1960s. In other words, white asset acquisitions took place well before the postwar boom began to falter. By the time the 1960s were over, the full implications of the crisis of profitability had come to make itself felt.

Unlike the previous period's politics of overt racial chauvinism, today's form of financialized white social reproduction enables values accumulated in an unjust past to compound in the present without any political barriers constructed around racial categories. What this helps to reproduce is the psychic aspect of whiteness that Du Bois wrote about. Notably, white social reproduction in the postwar period required concrete labor—and, significantly, various forms of duplication, like education or union membership—to be divided along the color line. This condition enabled a social safety net for white workers and ensured that whites' premium wages would also be reserved. Though discrimination certainly exists today, these barriers do not persist in the same rigorous form that they once had. And they do not have to, for the financialized mode of white social reproduction enables many white families to compound values acquired in a more lucrative past. Thus today's

arrangement of financialized white social reproduction enables the benefits of whiteness to continue to accrue, but without the downside of straightforward racism.[13]

Racial Formation and Capitalist Reproduction

So far, we have focused on the fact that values accumulated in a period of serious structural racial injustice now become compounded through financial means, resulting in the financialization of the wages of whiteness. But is the problem simply about these values that were produced in an unjust past? Are the mechanisms that compound and therefore reproduce these values from an unjust past into the present distinctive from the original accumulations, making the former beyond critique? In other words, can we make a political distinction between an original *accumulation* and its *means* of reproduction? A position that views the accumulation of past injustices as a political problem and interprets the process that reproduces them as neutral is rarely defended outright. This perceived arrangement has been presumed and sometimes even asserted in the literature on historical injustice. This political bifurcation tends to manifest in popular discussions about racial injustice in the US, with the liberal emphasis on equality of access to upstart opportunities. Yet, by

13. So far we have discussed the asset-form in a very circumscribed manner, namely homeownership. But another form of asset ownership exists: a petty-bourgeois faction, colloquially perceived as the small business owner, indeed the locus classicus reactionary subject. The small business owner is altogether unlike the homeowner in that the latter typically uses asset wealth a financial instrument that can strategically grant liquidity access in addition to wages from labor. In distinction, the small business owner faces the asset economy rather squarely, as the entire business is a de facto aggregation of business assets that can be transformed into cash if the owner pleases. Here, wages are not an appropriate category for thinking about social reproduction, as self-exploitation figures as a subordinate activity for the business asset. Financial instruments are widened in this case, as various aspects of the business can potentially become leveraged for in-kind payments or for access to credit lines.

understanding whiteness through the concept of white social reproduction, the importance of critical analysis is placed on the processes of reproduction. The implied claim is that the central political problem that must be dealt with is not the original injustice but its reproduction through time and space. But this implied move ought to be made explicitly and deliberately.

The case for focusing on reproduction rather than origin has three aspects. There is a structural, a political, and an empirical basis for focusing on reproduction over origins. To be sure, all three can be understood together as a comprehensive whole. Still, it is helpful to carefully specify each and draw out these arguments as clearly as possible because so much is at stake in thinking about the question of a focus on reproduction versus origin.

A focus on past injustice has elicited a specific trendline for contemporary politics, one that has chronically disabled political practice from finding terrain to stand on in the now. As has been suggested in the previous review of whiteness, a theory of racial injustice delinked from how this injustice is translated into a systematic trend has the effect of facilitating a kind of political wasteland between moral condemnation and practical action. Behind this paradoxical, incensed, and pessimistic view is a misidentification of how racial oppression and class rule have intersected. This type of intersection does not follow the theory of intersectionality, which is about exposing confluences of oppressions and bringing them into an understandable and representable alloyed experience. Instead, the intersection of these two aspects has been an essential dynamic for capitalist rule through time.

It has been argued thus far that a reproduction process not only retains and exacerbates the dynamics of past injustice. As a distinctively capitalist formation, white social reproduction brings together unjust accumulations of the past into a system that can provide the possibility of intergenerational transmission and intensification. The white social reproduction concept allows us to contextualize this process and understand its becoming as responding to a changing political and economic landscape. The concept also allows an understanding of how the "psychic" aspect of whiteness is conditioned and reproduced. It is conditioned in and through a particular political economy that allows white subjects access to an imagined "good life." And it is reproduced in the sense that access to this good life is linked to crude economic facts whose origin lies in a particular regime of capitalist accumulation.

What is essential in this theorization is not the content of the original injustices but how these initial injustices become systematically inscribed into a social process that extends well beyond their inauguration. "Inscription" is a beneficial term here. Discursively, the issue of "whiteness" or "white identification" has been set into historical motion, constructed into existence through social events and social forces. At some point in time, the artificial generation of white identity is a kind of historical inscription that has given birth to distinctive political trajectories. A historical legacy and the imputation of this legacy into contemporary political registers is where whiteness is at its most "real." Its use represents an attempt to wield a possible trajectory that arises from whiteness itself. Yet this ascriptive identity has an objective social function because of its reproduction through time. This means that

the form of white identification precedes the content, and its structure is rooted directly in a process of reproduction.

The first is a structural argument. Observing capitalist accumulation from a macro point of view, it is evident that capitalist circuitry does not ensure that any specific individual or group can maintain their accumulations in perpetuity. Ruthless competition between lines of capital and even between firms within any particular line of investment and production has the effect of periodic economic bloodletting. The most competitive firms overtake the less competitive, liquidating or subordinating the latter over time. Competition for survival under such market conditions forces capitalists to take an active approach to manage their investments. It's against these same headwinds that individuals at the lower tiers of class society must also navigate. Much can be at stake for any specific individual, but perhaps there is no more embattled subject than the one who occupies the mid-tiers of the class structure. While the bourgeoisie may be able to see through turbulence by accepting some resource attrition, those in the middle are always on the brink of falling down. At stake is the value of investments and social and political position.

This rather cutthroat aspect of capitalist accumulation and its effects is derived from a historically particular arrangement of social relations that mobilize sharp divisions between economic and political spheres.

This division between the economic and the political is formative to capitalist social relations. The transition from a feudal order to a capitalist one required the liquidation of their organic integration; elites of the previous mode of production used

a naturalized economic-political bond that allowed a level of control over output and circulation through political means. The emergence of a new merchant class with excess economic power and a dearth of political clout foretold a new ideological wedge between political and economic aspects of society. Such a wedge imagined that a sharp division between what is now considered two distinct spheres of human activity was generated and justified based on apparent differences between them. Marx's intervention in classical political economy represents a denaturalization of the division between the two by demonstrating that the capacity to extract surplus-value en mass successfully was linked to the hegemony of the bourgeois class.

This is to say that the nature of the division between the political and the economic is more complex and is manufactured through class power. Political domination of the capitalist class arose from the formal evacuation of the political from the financial, but this did not mean that links between the two were severed. Rather, this division has allowed for the emergence of formal political freedom (as typically described in the tradition of liberalism) to co-exist amid substantive political unfreedom. Therefore, capitalist politics is a kind of game whereby formal freedom is posited amid the creation of a political reality that moves against any substantive universal freedom. To be more specific: capitalist society has done away with assurances for accumulation (which existed to some degree for landed property in the previous mode of production). Thus, class power must deploy a political strategy to defend and legitimate itself. What's described here is a structural situation that

compels those with excess accumulations to pursue a political strategy that can preserve their fortunes.

An exclusive focus on the origins of racial injustice in the US turns away from this political situation and neglects the strategic implications that follow from it. In neglecting the question of class reproduction, which in the US has been achieved through an evolving model of white social reproduction, we also neglect the consequences of past injustice. The implications that have flowed from original injustices represent the crystallization of that history's legacy in the present.

It is evident that these structural considerations eventually move the analysis towards political considerations. In other words, these structural aspects of class reproduction through the elaboration of a particular racial formation have had enduring political effects. These political effects are the second reason we must focus on reproduction over origin.

Under capitalist social relations, economic entrepreneurialism persists alongside political entrepreneurialism—for the ability to hold on to one's accumulations can be defended only through a political strategy that disables class struggle from below and constructs a social situation that can pay the dividends of political legitimacy. Class power is not simply abstractly expressed through ideology as if ideology is merely a propaganda tool. No, class power is told through the generation of a political consensus that must be built. Or, as Stuart Hall would have it, class power arises from a constructed political majority. Inequalities achieved through past injustices require consistent work to maintain their legitimacy and ward off

justice-seeking subjects from disputing them. If the history of capitalism demonstrates anything, there is nothing natural about patterns of ownership. And this is all the more reason for a political project that can produce a sense of legitimacy around rule and property.

As argued earlier, the solidification of legitimacy in the US has hinged on a historically-specific deployment of white social reproduction. Historically, legitimization and naturalization have been accomplished by deploying a specific mode of white social reproduction. While the configuration of white social reproduction may change according to political and economic conditions, its abstract logic remains consistent: a cross-class coalition is generated and sustained by administering sectional access to essential social reproductive capacities that can allow some people to live well. The most important political effect of this construction is the erosion of possibilities of proletarian solidarity, abstractly based on difference and contextually based on whiteness. This prerequisite to rule in capitalist societies can be observed elsewhere through the lens of distinction, with cross-class political coalitions constructed in and through the approaches that put difference to use. It is a grave mistake to extrapolate whiteness as a general dimension of global capitalism, even though this racial ascription has been necessary for cohering to political consensus in the US. Nevertheless, an investigation of US politics demonstrates the enduring use of white identification by deploying a particular mode of sectional social reproduction. And it is, for this reason, we must take white social reproduction seriously: the construction of socially important differences based on

white identification has been the primary method of class reproduction in the wake of important historical injustices in American history.

Taking white social reproduction seriously also means observing the political contests that now stalk US politics today. Here we arrive at empirical reasons for taking reproduction seriously.

Today's observable political contestation has occurred around the reproduction of white identification and is not centered on any specific values. The liberal center asserts an ostensibly progressive financialized mode of white social reproduction, and forces on the right present a racialized mode of Fordism. Each has a specific aspiration around white social reproduction. Each entertains a distinctive way for white social reproduction to occur within a specific political economy—narrations of the original injustices associated with the American nation-state and subsumed within each reproductive paradigm. Importantly, an exclusive focus on historical injustice has already been incorporated into the financialized matrix. It has become common to narrate historic injustices in the public sphere while also upholding a financialized mode of white social reproduction, however unstable. Based on these observations, a political advance that can produce a third option amid the two currently viable options must attend to the question of social reproduction and provide a vision that demolishes its sectionalization through the reproduction of a racial formation. Moving beyond a sectional intervention that centers on white identification may mean putting forward another sectional mode of social reproduction based on class. New emancipatory possibilities may be pursued in

reorienting social reproduction to synchronize class division with a political organization.

Today's political contestation occurs through a mode of social reproduction that is not at all organically linked to the past. In fact, what links those who have ascribed the identification of white and histories of white chauvinistic injustice is nothing but the consecration of white social reproduction, which is set into motion at the behest of leading or hegemonic elite class factions. If there is a mechanism that links contemporary whiteness in general and unjust history related to the history of whiteness, it is the political construction known as white social reproduction. To argue otherwise is to veer toward ontologizing this specific mode of difference and thus conjure an essentialization that mirrors that of the right.

Conclusion: Politics Amid Financialized Whiteness

We have two simultaneous tendencies in today's conjuncture, and each appears to play a role in advance of a new set of reactionary politicizations. First is the advent of the stagnating wages of whiteness (Narayan 2017; Pal Singh and Linh Tu 2017). There, the bargaining power of white identification no longer holds its same weight; the potentiality of utilizing one's white identity for privileged access to better-waged positions within a factory setting has more or less evaporated. Second is the augmentation of a financialized asset economy, often fueled by values derived from an unjust past. With wages continuing to decline since the 1970s, it makes sense that

intergenerational transfers, gifts, and interest-free loans have become critical mechanisms for white social reproduction in our era. Unlike the old wages of whiteness, which required the policing of the color-line inside and outside of labor, financialized transmissions appear color-blind and seem divorced from the legacy of racial oppression in the United States. But this appearance does not tell the entire story, as the financialized wages of white are composed by a particular political economy that shapes white consciousness in a particular manner.

Politics do not fall from the sky, and these dual aspects of white social reproduction have most certainly impacted contemporary political shifts. On the one hand is the tendency of progressive neoliberalism, which is often concerned with promoting instances of qualified upward mobility within the upper-middle and even capitalist class (Fraser 2019). This criticism of neoliberal rationality is that it portrays itself as the liberatory tendency today, with discursive concern paid to those who are historically exploited and oppressed. But this view leans on the asset economy since it does not present a new political horizon for dealing with aggregate wage stagnation but instead has a status-quo orientation. The divergence in asset wealth that buttresses status-quo class reproduction today—especially for those who constitute the higher income brackets—often depends on a specific wealth transfer derived from a segregated postwar past into our present. Therefore, it has become perfectly possible to witness the occupants of multi-million-dollar homes placing yard signage on their properties that boldly proclaim Black Lives Matter or other solidaristic slogans. This apparent progressivism is feasible because values that move through the circuitry of

capitalism are rendered into a homogeneous form; the material requirement for racism is no longer what it used to be. The values acquired by past injustices compound and are intermixed with dollars earned by other means. This intermixture makes it unnecessary to distinguish between values accumulated in what period and under what conditions. A dollar gained from an Uber stint is undifferentiated from a dollar acquired within a racist factory setting of the 1950s. As already mentioned, what is observable is the spread between white and Black wealth today and the temporal pattern around which historic wealth was acquired for each. Here, the claim that racism is no longer tolerated does its heaviest lifting. It calls forth a vision of historical understanding in which the past is no longer materially connected to the present, meaning values extracted from the worst racist excesses are no longer relevant today. Evil has been put to rest, save those others who still entertain a deplorable view of racial equality in the now.

This brings us to the second primary tendency in American politics, which had developed around the image of Trump. In this view, a non-synchronous perspective is asserted, which harkens back to the days of racialized Fordism. Some have alternatively described this mentality as a desire for the synchronous (Toscano 2017), meaning a desire to become in sync with the dynamics of industrial capitalism, which represents the real of capitalist modernity. This view underestimates the nature of capitalist finance's new spirit and circuitry. Regardless of any preference for today's financialized capitalism, it is indeed the most advanced form of capitalist accumulation in our time. It does not seem to have been a mere anomaly from the

older, productivist form that faded in the 1970s. A nostalgic longing for a past that cannot be renewed under today's conditions is a form of consciousness that is not in synch with today's reality. Perhaps slightly like what Ernst Bloc once detected with proponents of interwar fascism who encountered residual non-capitalist lifeforms (Bloch 1977). The desire for racialized Fordism is, to some degree, a willingness for actually-existing Fordism in the recent American past. Indeed, this presents an additional problem for the American left, which has recently attempted to resuscitate the New Deal's legacy. A kind of revisionist liberal triumphalism partially mars this legacy.

This new financialized white social reproduction arrangement is not necessarily a stable one. Getting at this instability requires clarifying the distinction between the Fordist and financial wages: the latter's generic welfare-state structure insured against "falling." In contrast, the former financial mode has no such guarantee. Notably, the policing of concrete labor to ensure that white workers were first hired and last fired and that certain positions would be held in reserve for them constituted a kind of social safety net against immiseration. While workers may have tried their hand at social climbing, but failure to climb did not automatically mean their falling into the bottom rungs of society. Since concrete labor was subject to a distinctively political division based on racial ascription, one would presume that space would be made for those who fell onto hard times, as long as they were white. Thus, there existed a vague, if uneven, white guarantee that one's economic position could only deteriorate to a point.

Such a pattern does not hold under conditions of financialized white social reproduction. Values transmitted to kin through financial mechanisms are not insured, and investment errors can quickly deplete these values.

This is to say that the financialized wages of whiteness have become subject to the strict discipline of personal responsibility. Though new financial instruments have been constructed that enable strategic access and management to values latent within the asset, their utilization can backfire if misused. There is no certainty that their intergenerational transmission will continue, nor that their relative values will continue to compound. Even under conditions of generalized asset inflation, assets can become over-leveraged and set into financial strain severe enough to require their liquidation. These conditions of precarity are an aspect of the new, cross-class bargain that has allowed them to move throughout the system without scrutiny.

Here, we arrive at a question concerning the nature of the wages of whiteness for those who no longer have intergenerational access to asset values. What is to be made of this condition? Does this proletarianization mean an end for a dual system of specifically white social reproduction and a broader social reproduction for non-white subjects? This interpretation may ring true for those who no longer have access to such wealth. It seems as though whiteness has comported to the logic of the financial option. In finance, an option allows its holder to sell an underlying asset either at a set price or on a set date. The financialization of whiteness mimics this logic, as those who have lost inheritances to bad market fortune appear to have already sold their option to whiteness. Their claim is no longer valid, and collections based on their

ascription have been technically exhausted. Of course, this is in sharp contrast with the prior logic of white identity. White ascription meant one's de facto eligibility to an ensemble of white social reproductive provision and de jure eligibility to social welfare provision.

The instability of the financialized wages of whiteness is, by definition, unstable. It makes sense that such a scheme has been hatched in a time of extreme wealth disparity. Today's wealth divergence is not simply between an affluent, primarily white middle class and a racialized working poor. It is mainly subject to the intense decomposition of income parity akin to another gilded age. Within this scheme is the new arrangement of financialized wages of whiteness, as bad investment decisions are invariably good opportunities for later institutions for asset acquisition. Given the demolition of social welfare provisions, this new arrangement of achieving white consensus is also considerably cheaper and is a market-friendly intervention compared to its past iteration.

All of this does come with a glimpse of potential. With an unstable white social reproductive schematic, young working-class whites will likely have less affinity to it. The gravitational pull of the old regime of white social reproduction found its power because it was operationally functional and allowed for white affluence across a broad class spectrum. This trend is no longer the case, and it appears possible for a new, more liberatory politics to spring forward at this moment. The broad popularity of the George Floyd movement seems to indicate this much.

CHAPTER 3:

REACTIONARY MASCULINITIES: INCEL SUBJECTS AND INDIFFERENCE

Like today's masculine reactionaries, the men's rights activists that split from the 1970s men's liberation movement claimed a politics of victimhood. Their position mirrored the second-wave feminist position, as represented by Betty Friedman's concept of the "feminine mystique." (Friedan 2001). Here, feminine normativity harmed women by setting limits and expectations on their social and political lives. The early men's rights activists made a similar argument, claiming that men were harmed through social expectations inherent to dominant masculinity (Farrell 1993). Both early formations had a focus on sex roles, a concept that includes gender normativities and the social expectations thereof. For the men's rights activists of the late 1970s, this anti-normativity tack increasingly veered towards anti-feminist rhetoric, as it positioned the oppression of men via masculinity as ostensibly more fundamental, or at least entirely equivalent to, women.

Today's men's rights movement is still largely centered on these fundamental principles. For example, an ongoing preoccupation of today's movement has been with how divorce and child custody are handled by the legal system (Dragiewicz 2008; Menzies 2007). With the development of the so-called "manosphere," (Economist 2016) however, many tropes developed by the early

men's rights movement have become reinvigorated. Moving beyond legal issues about custody and marriage, this movement is now increasingly focused on what is sometimes described as "gynocentrism"—an imagined social tendency that sees society as centered around the issues, needs, and desires of women. Adjacent to all of this the figure of the incel, a subject that at first appears familiar but is a form of reactionary masculinity turned against itself. The incel appears familiar because the incel is decisively related to the notoriously resentful "nerd" form of masculinity (Kendall 2000) witnessed in videogame culture, and around online events like Gamergate (Hathaway 2014). Nerd subjectivity follows a well-trod trendline in masculinity that is recognizable in the classic jock versus bookish dichotomy. This dimension is not what defines the incel subject. Rather, the incel is a subjectivity that makes disparaging claims about itself—namely, that the incel suffers from a corporeal defect of the evolutionary type. In other words, today's incel subjects argue that contemporary sexual relations take place under a fixed, hierarchical sexual regime in which incels place themselves at the bottom. This makes incel subjectivity seemingly incoherent. Incel subjects claim to be a victim while simultaneously making an "objective" claim that they are of inferior genetic stock.

Close inspection of these aspects of incel subjectivity demonstrates something new within today's right-wing masculinity. Traditional forms of reactionary politics have sought to naturalize certain identarian characteristics so can opportunistically justify inequality, discrimination, and extermination. It is odd, then, that incel subjects have done the opposite: in arguing that a natural hierarchy of

sexual desirability exists, incel subjects produce an inegalitarian schema that places incels at the very bottom. Rather than a purely irrational move, this schematic allows incel subjects to reject normative demands of self-making and self-care that have become dominant under neoliberal social relations.

I argue that incel subjects have produced a circuitry of self-victimization that ambivalently moves between the desire to claim victimization and a dominant form of masculinity that denies them this status and instead demands that incel subjects engage in a regime of self-care and betterment. Against the backdrop of demands for self-care, incel subjects have produced an indifferent structure of feeling. As placing themselves at the bottom of a sexual hierarchy demonstrates, incel subjects now indulge in an affect of indifference towards the self and the other alike.

This chapter lays out the logic of incel subjectivity and thought. The first section starts with a theoretical detour and critical discussion of the dominant approach toward masculinity. Put forward by thinkers like R. W. Connell, today's primary approach to masculinity revolves around a theory of "hegemonic masculinities." This concept interrogates masculine forms through the language of Gramsci; it argues that masculinity is a field of struggle consisting of dominant and subordinate types. While this framework is helpful, it contains serious errors that arise from the analogous use of Gramsci's theory of class hegemony. I suggest the use of a new term, "masculine ensemble," which can demonstrate the complexity of multiple masculinities while also relating the dominant form of masculinity to a wider condition of class hegemony. The second section of this chapter moves from theory to

conjuncture. There I lay out the masculine ensemble and its dominant pole and argue that this dominant mode of masculinity has produced a normative approach to masculinity that is compatible with the rationality and structure of today's neoliberal political economy. I turn towards incel subjectivity in the third and fourth sections of the chapter. First, I lay out how incels have produced an idea of biological determinism and how their approach moves against neoliberal masculinity. I then connect this aspect of incel thinking to an emergent indifferent affect generated by incel subjects. Here, indifference is both a particular response to neoliberal masculine normativities and a reactionary construction that has dangerous uses beyond the masculine ensemble. The chapter ends with a brief discussion on the medium through which all incel thinking has been produced: the internet. Web 2.0 communications have been elemental for the development and radicalization of incel subjects, and the particular manner in which their socialization has taken place is important.

Despite the importance of the medium, incel subjectivity is, at its core, responding to a certain historical situation. The subjectivity of the incel does not and cannot exist tranquilly alongside, let alone within, the dominant modes of masculinity that are directly conditioned by processes and patterns of marketization. Although an assault on the idea of masculine power as such, the incel nevertheless represents a significant challenge to the determined relation between post-Fordist social marketization and performances of masculine subjectivity. It is, therefore, necessary to begin with a theoretical discussion so that the problem of incel subjects can be appropriately framed.

Dominant Masculinities Amid Capitalist Hegemony

A proper understanding of contemporary masculinity requires that we first clarify the theoretical approach. Questions about how masculinity is composed must be addressed, including the lingering question of how the question of gender and sex figure into the wider social totality. Is masculinity an autonomous force, or is it linked to capitalist social relations? And if so, how? Any approach to these questions will change how we approach the issue of masculinity in general. It follows that an assumed theoretical position will also contour an understanding of incel subjectivity and its emergence. Thus, before diving into a discussion about incel subjectivity and masculinity of the contemporary right, a theoretical detour is necessary.

Any adequate theoretical framework must be able to navigate two aspects of contemporary reactionary masculinities. Both are apparent when looking at the incel phenomenon.

For starters, we need a theoretical approach that can understand masculinity. It is evident that masculinity has never been singular but has always been plural. What we are dealing with is not masculinity, but an arrangement of masculinities that hold a complex web of relations between them. Of course, this ensemble of masculine forms is somehow related to a wider social world. Social processes and facts tend to shape masculinities; dominant and subordinate forms of masculine practice, aesthetics, and expression can be understood in their relationship to the wider social

reality. This means that, in addition to the question of a heterogeneous understanding of masculinity, an adequate theory will also contextualize these masculinities as a part of a comprehensive social totality.

These two rather abstract truisms can be concretized by the object of this chapter's study, incel subjectivity. Looking at incel subjects, two points must be made in regards to the question of heterogeneous forms of masculinity.

First, incel subjectivity appears to be distinctive from other, mainstream forms of masculine performance. For one thing, incel subjects were not hailed by an outside social force; incel subjects inaugurated their own interpretation and their presentation. The making of incel subjectivity has been facilitated by emergent forms of internet communication that have allowed emergent communities to form and sustain themselves. The idea of the incel was not produced by way of the institutional power of medicine or psychiatry, nor through a normative process that would see a social dominant encoding meaning onto social deviants. Rather, incel subjects have produced their discourse and they have codified a set of subcultural norms that run against the dominant mode of masculine rationality.

Second, the self-making of the incel subject has been met with considerable resistance from subjects who are enveloped within dominant forms of masculine performance and rationality. At a basic level, this resistance makes sense since incel subjectivity tends to portray the masculine subject as a passive and resigned victim. Though self-victimization is indeed compatible with reactionary or even relatively progressive forms of masculinity, a passive and resigned victim militates against the

deeply embedded ethos of male autonomy and action. In other words, underwriting the resistance to incel discourse and identity is the dominant masculine presumption that one will not give up and proclaim their passive victimization. Incel subjectivity resists any understanding of moving beyond victimization, by claiming that the threshold of the incel's victimization is a naturally occurring and thus a totalizing experience.

At a minimum, in regards to the question of an understanding of plural masculinities, a theory of masculinity must be able to speak to these two aspects: self-generation of an identity that is unable or unwilling to move beyond its own victimization, and the resistance that this identity has elicited from dominant masculine identities.

A second requirement for a successful theoretical approach is related to the question of masculinity and its relationship to the wider social structure. The construction of incel subjectivity and ideology has arisen in a very specific historical context. Why incel subjectivity and its specific compulsions and thoughts were not produced in another period is difficult if not impossible to theorize without a periodizing approach. The production of the new in specific historic moments is telling because what has changed throughout relatively recent history is not the capacity to imagine new masculine ideals. What has changed throughout recent human history are material circumstances, and these material circumstances have allowed subjects to innovate new ideas that, at least on some level, resonate with

social experience. Once again, this abstract sketch is made all the clearer by looking at incel subjectivity and its place in a wider masculine ensemble.

The relationship between subordinate incel rationality and dominant masculine rationality tends to map onto wider ideas of self-making and self-marketization that are understood as part of the neoliberal present. The dominant masculine approach of unmediated self-autonomy is currently processed through the neoliberal norms of marketization, as one works to advance one's position. Importantly, a masculine approach to self-autonomy could foreseeably include opposite or counteracting tendencies. There is no reason that rugged autonomy must become transcribed through practices that make the self more marketable, be it in the realm of sexual desire or otherwise. But these practices are buttressed by a social reality that corresponds to the wholesale commodification of labor power and the demolition of alternative forms that move away from market-based social reproduction. These dominant formations of masculine performance are therefore over-determined by the social structure of contemporary capitalism, and they represent structural constraints arising from the status of class struggle and class power in our time. Incel subjectivity and ideology can be read as a move against this ethos of marketized self-making from the right. This dynamic of contestation requires a theory that can understand how over-determining pressures emanating from outside of gender relations impart barriers and opportunities for subjects inscribed by masculine forms.

All of these reasons point toward the need for an understanding of masculinities (and the desires attached to them) as materially determined by the social structure of which they are a part (Floyd 2009). A theory of masculinities that is entirely autonomous of wider social formations brings about a lack of clarity around the relationship of incel subjects and contemporary political economy and its social relations. In other words, a theorization of masculinity within capitalist social relations is necessary.

Class Relations, Hegemony, and Masculinities

An adequate theory for understanding rightward dissident masculine formations will allow for these forms to be understood within the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Concerning masculinity and in particular incel subjectivity, two points stand out. On the one hand, incel subjects seem to militate against a model of masculinity that orders sexual relations in market-like conditions. We require an approach that can speak to this dimension of contestation. On the other hand, the ideological work that incel subjects conduct moves alongside and sometimes with other reactionary formations outside of the field of masculinity, like the demand for a return to the single-earner family wage. This directionality with other reactionary politics, and the political synergy that this co-directionality produces, demands a theory that does not hermeneutically seal masculinities from wider social forces and

pressures. In short, what is needed is a theory that can integrate a discussion of masculinities and capitalist accumulation and its social relations.

Work on a theory of "hegemonic masculinities" is a helpful starting place, even if this approach has serious problems that need to be worked through first. Specifically, R. W. Connell's writing has inspired a wider literature on masculinity through a Gramscian framework (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell 1998; Messerschmidt 2010; Yang 2020). At its best, this body of work allows thinkers of masculinity a set of conceptual tools for understanding masculinity as a contested space with important internal distinctions and contests. Empowered masculine types—which in this case would reflect dominant neoliberal masculinities—persist at the center of a hegemonic masculine field and relate to other non-dominant masculine types. Dominant and non-dominant masculinities are thereby computed within a wider social ensemble of masculinities. "Hegemonic masculinities" therefore allows analytical navigation of heterogeneous masculine subjectivities and practices.

Following Gramsci's theory, Connell and Messerschmidt argue that a constellation of masculine types are conjoined together and form what Connell describes as "hegemonic masculinities"(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In casting masculinity through a Gramscian lens, Connell and Messerschmidt arrive at an understanding of masculinity as a formation conditioned by internal competition. Emergent masculine types may all persist within an ensemble of masculinity. But this does not mean that these masculine formations co-exist peaceably; rather, masculine formations may contradict one another, and can even become locked into conflictual

contradiction. The emergence of a trans movement that may claim for itself certain aspects of a redefined mode of masculinity is one example of contestation within a "masculine bloc." As we can see, the Gramscian framing delivers us a discourse for understanding the dimensions of masculinity and its various corners.

However helpful Connell's work is for theorizing a field of asymmetrical masculine types, major problems arise with the deployment through Gramsci's theory. Connell's analogical maneuver brings Gramsci's theorization of a capitalist social formation into a masculine framework. This analogical approach has the effect of producing masculinities into a compartmentalized domain with its own structural rules and political wagers. The unintentional effect of doing so is idealization: because masculinity is its sphere, and since there is no justification for masculine essentialization, the conditions of possibility for struggle and contest within masculinity are without structural limits. Thus, in the final determination, the possibility of liberation within masculinities (setting aside the question of transcendence for a moment) is without fetters on issues that move well beyond the masculine frame, such as capitalist regimes of accumulation, class struggle, and balance of forces between classes, or even concomitant interactions with racial formations. Again, this effect is unintentional—Connell's attempt to delink gender theorization from idealism by focusing on political contestation and material practices is a helpful starting place. But the analogical confluence of gender and class analysis leads to problems that have undermined the materialist goal. If left unaddressed, these problems threaten to unravel our understanding of masculinity under capitalism.

At the center of this issue is a misuse of the Gramscian theoretical project. From the perspective of Gramsci's writing, "hegemony" is thought to be won through political and cultural arrangements that are wielded by specific coalitions of social classes composed of dominant and subordinate class fractions. A major innovation of Gramsci's Marxist approach is his interpretation of the lived "common sense" experience of class life, which for him is not at all evident. Rather, experience in class societies is over-determined by historically particular regimes of production and circulation that are shaped by particular modes of class struggle that can develop from it. Here, hegemony is definitionally predicated on the idea that while the class struggle is an unavoidable part of capitalist life, how it becomes expressed, performed, and understood will vary. How class struggle is encoded with values and which practices class struggle will take on is, for Gramsci, very closely related to the conquest of civil society. Here, how working-class people are integrated into civic formations—parties, unions, political organizations, non-political organizations, and the like—is a key factor. Organizational forms within civil society allow for particular ideas to become transmitted and set into regular practice. This idea brings what Marx had early on described as "practical consciousness," a compact idea that reflects the dialectic of everyday practicable activity and the generation of held political ideas (Marx and Engels 1843). Ultimately, Gramsci's attempt to produce a more rigorous theorization of Marxism helps understand a social formation as a whole. Any analogical reproduction of this theory for masculinity, in particular, will exhibit immediate problems. What's needed is a theory of masculinity that can exist

within the Gramscian theoretical framework, one that can correspond to the project of hegemonic politics and which is constrained by social and economic processes that are exogenous to masculinities.

Looking at recent history, the stakes of this theoretical demand become clear. Take, for example, the Keynesian postwar welfare state, which inscribed gendered relations into a particular political economy by guaranteeing a family wage *through* men. How this wage was distributed crystalized the nuclear family into a reified social fact and was decisive for solidifying a set of gendered expectations for men and women that spanned across the US social formation. As Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) has demonstrated, this produced a growing resistance among men (of the actual or an aspirational non-normative type) who sought an exit from the everyday practices and normative expectations imposed by this arrangement. But men's capacity to break away from this particular role was always hemmed in and limited by a complex set of problems composed of women, child-rearing, the conditions of labor, and the balance of class forces. In other words, the pitfalls and possibilities of contested masculinities were immediately determined by factors outside of masculinity as such; these problems were to be found within the wider matrix of gender relations that were mediated by the status of class struggle and Fordism. This dynamic is brilliantly brought to light in Johanna Brenner's book, *Women and the Politics of Class* (Brenner 2000). There, Brenner argues that the issue of women's liberation—even in the earliest days of the workers' movement—was fettered by the issue of rearing children and the relative inability of the workers' movement to make demands of

capital for social services that could allow women equal access to labor.[14] If concessions from capital that would produce relatively equal access to labor markets for women could not be won by labor, then the best labor could do was to demand an adequate "family wage" that would help support the economic "dependents" of men. As we can see, the possibilities of contestation within a masculine ensemble were limited at this time by an unequal relation power between labor and capital.

However, if we investigate this same situation using the "hegemonic masculinities" model it becomes difficult to understand how and why the attempt for masculine deviations to prevail outside of a purely discursive and ideological frame. Absent determining structures that shape and limit possibilities within the ensemble of masculine relations, it would seem that the only barrier to men's success in throwing off the yoke of the normative Fordist wage was consciousness. To take matters a step further, if we understand that the male breadwinner wage was actually *bad* for men in the sense that it imposed social expectations and responsibilities onto men that they may have not desired, then we are left open to adopting a theory of false consciousness. Or, even worse, the normative assertion that men's desire ultimately is about the subordination of women, a turn towards essentialization that runs against examples of gender-integrated struggles in sectors where women had accommodations for caring for children.

14. This understanding helps to account for the persistence of women's lower pay today, as social services that can support childbirth and rearing are still threadbare. This makes women especially vulnerable to capitalist exploitation and exclusion within the labor market.

Here, we have arrived at the heart of the conceptual problem. Gramsci's theory of hegemony is not adequate for theorizing gender relations. Gender relations cut through social classes vertically and with great variation. Particular arrangements of gender performance refracted through the economic imperatives and relative power of each class stratum. The dominant concept of "hegemonic masculinities" is helpful in understanding "masculinity" but the theory's analogically-derived components give rise to ambiguities around the relationship between now-plural masculinities and the wider social formation. Importantly, however, this "hegemonic" formation is not ontologically sealed. No social construction is entirely autonomous from prevailing material conditions. Insofar as there is a "hegemonic masculine bloc," this ensemble will relate to the wider social formation, be it a dynamic of compliance or resistance (Willis 2017). And when we look at gender relations less abstractly, these ambiguities turn into distortions with vast political implications.

Nevertheless, aspects of Connell's theory of "hegemonic masculinities" can remain helpful if we make serious theoretical alterations that better meld it into Gramsci's focus on the relations of social classes. Since there is a hegemonic class formation, we might also say that there is a spread of masculinity that represents and reproduces this particular arrangement of class power. This masculine arrangement can be described as contributing toward hegemony, but it cannot be understood as hegemonic as such. In other words, the creation of a hegemonic politics will in most instances put into play a certain arrangement of masculine rationality and practice that works alongside other forms of "common sense" understanding.

Perhaps masculinity is, from this point of view, can be an important element within Gramscian hegemony. Concerning the past Fordist hegemonic project that sought to stabilize capitalist social formations against socialist insurgencies, masculinity helped to congeal otherwise disparate inter-class factions into a socially-constructed whole that *felt* apparent or natural to those affected. It did this by acting as a horizontal conveyor belt that elicited stable class configurations between subjects of the same or similar classes. Hindsight allows us to see quite clearly that the Fordist family wage helped to settle class configurations of the postwar era by imbuing bootstrap-style breadwinner fantasies into masculine performance, and by normatively hemming women into domestic non-waged roles. The making of a gendered social order assisted, but is not by itself sufficient, in producing the horizontal stabilization of class. Masculinity here functions orthogonal to the historic role of whiteness, for example, which has been used as a cross-class, "vertical," social control mechanism (Allen 2012).

From Masculine Hegemony to Masculine Ensemble

With this in mind, we can adjust Connell's depiction of "hegemonic masculinities" to specify its place within capitalist class society. Namely, hegemonic masculinity is put to use to elicit stabilization within classes, and to meld together subordinate classes in a manner that makes them function as organisms of accumulation. What allows masculinity to contribute to hegemonic politics is, then, its correspondence to larger

aggregations of capitalist economic power. Any articulation of gender relations is, therefore, derivative of a wider political wager about the organization of society. As stated, however, gendered contestation becomes part of a political objective rather than a structuralist function. Rather than a "masculine bloc," what we are talking about is the attempted construction of a hegemonic bloc, which always implies a specific mode of gender relations of which masculinity has historically played an important part. I, therefore, propose that the discourse of discrete "blocs" must be swapped with the concept of a masculine ensemble. Unlike a "bloc" the masculine ensemble is defined by its contestation within and coordination without; like a musical ensemble factions of the masculine ensemble attempt to coordinate elsewhere, to a beat that has aspirations to reverberate throughout the entire social formation, in coordination with other aspects of the social formation, including racial formation and, most importantly, political economy. In other words, factions of the masculine ensemble may attempt to harmonize themselves with political aspects outside of masculinities to win certain political objectives and transform the entire social formation.

This amendment strengthens the concept of "hegemonic masculinities" by overcoming the perception that a gendered hegemony can exist autonomous from the structural forces of capital and their codification into the state. In thinking of masculinity as autonomous, the internal cleavages within masculinity become difficult to detail. Why specific types of masculinity are powerful and others subordinate in particular historical moments become entirely contingent on wider

questions of class struggle and the balance of power between classes. Any given moment will have a potentially different masculine ensemble, with coalitions composed of particular class fractions attempting to solidify their conception of masculine performance into dominance. In renovating Connell's theory, we can demonstrate why particular types of masculinity are hegemonic by elucidating their relationship to a wider system of class hegemony. And, in linking hegemonic masculine types to the social formation in which they exist, we can begin to properly disambiguate them from non-hegemonic masculinities and understand these non-hegemonic forms as part of a wider push for transformation or transition—be it from the left or right.

Going back to Gramsci, we see that the power of any hegemonic bloc is conditioned by its ability to integrate into the social classes by redistributing power between particular class fractions within practically every social class (Gramsci 1985, 207-276). Gramsci's strategic thinking was, after all, partially inspired by his reading of Niccolo Machiavelli (Gramsci 1985, 118, 125, 129, 134, 141, 247), who argued that the prince's rule was always dependent on his quick integration into the principality (Machiavelli 1998, 55). Likewise, the establishment of hegemony requires a dialectical relationship between the social pattern of a hegemonic bloc and an arrangement of ideological constructs that, for Gramsci, solidify a "common sense" (Gramsci 1985, 442). As hegemony is solidified, class factions that cannot integrate themselves into the specific social patterns of that social formation will

likely be subordinated by others with the ability and willingness to do so.[15] Regardless of if a social formation is "neoliberal" or "social democratic," there are internal class cleavages that persist between empowered and subdued class factions (Poulantzas 1978). To mistake these internal class fights, to paper over them based on an apolitical view is, as Poulantzas argued, economistic and misunderstands how intra- and inter-class competition plays a decisive role in establishing a particular mode of hegemony (Poulantzas 1982).

Looking at today's masculine ensemble, dominant and non-dominant forms of masculine practice are each discernable. Each attempt to harmonize with other articulations within the social formation, like certain racial configurations, that are being generated by particular class coalitions. The dominant faction within today's masculine ensemble (which is composed of liberal subjects who prioritize self-advancement and making) is related to a class coalition composed of multi-national capital, national tech capital, the professional-managerial class, and specific fractions of the working class, especially those ascriptively perceived as Black and brown. Here, the dominant type of masculinity tends that resonates with this wider political wager of this class coalition is conditioned by the prerogatives of the professional-managerial class—the specific class fraction that has set the tone of this coalition's cultural politics to date. The "classic" masculine ethos of self-autonomy is made to intersect with normative demands for self-care in a way that mimics market

15. For example, it seems evident to me that contemporary labor unions have yet to find a way to do this in our society.

imperatives. The practice of masculinity is linked to a desire for progress of the mind and the body, for example, learning to code, instituting a gym routine, learning to dress well, and the like. Though disparate activities, they share the idea that masculine subjects can improve their social standing and sexual attractiveness through engaging in these improvements. Here the concept of "human capital" drifts into the sphere of gender relations, producing a certain idea of masculinity that is in different moments presumed, performed, or demanded. As we shall see in the following sections, incel subjects represent a non-dominant mode of masculinity that is positioned against dominant stains within the masculine ensemble. Positioned against the idea of self-making is the assertion that the incel subject is naturally inferior and thus immune to improvement. Here the mode of human capital is disproven by demonstrating one's defectiveness—if a subject is naturally inferior then the benefits of participating in the competition are nil.

How do dominant modes of masculinity relate to challenges within the masculine ensemble? In terms of the incel, we can understand them as an ascendant masculine group within the masculine ensemble, but who are positioned against a dominant mode of neoliberal masculinity. The response to incel subjectivity has followed an oscillatory pattern of compassionate recuperation and intensive repression. Demetriou's criticism of Connell helps us think through this relationship. His work smartly contests the idea that hegemonic masculinity is a homogeneous category and instead posits that it is a product of power-brokering and maneuvering between and among various adverse masculine modes:

> For Gramsci internal hegemony culminates in the formation of a historic bloc, which is achieved through the leadership of the fundamental class. This does not mean, however, that the elements of the "kindred groups" are totally subordinated or eliminated. In fact, some of these elements, particularly those that are consistent with the project of domination, are appropriated and they become essential constitutive elements of the historic bloc. This process of appropriation could be called "dialectical pragmatism" in that the fundamental class is in constant, mutual dialectical interaction with the allied groups and appropriates what appears pragmatically useful and constructive for the project of domination at a particular historical moment (Demetriou 2001).

While Gramsci's focus on class composition is fundamentally distinctive from how masculinity moves vertically through all class layers, the idea of "dialectical pragmatism" may be adopted for our concept of a masculine ensemble. In bringing this theory out of Connells, dialectical pragmatism is made more coherent in that the relation between seemingly distinctive masculinities can find solidarity through their shared hegemonic political project. In other words, distinctive masculinities can be arranged about a mediating class coalition. Thus seemingly distinctive modes of masculinity can be incorporated into the ensemble, but their incorporation must have something to do with a mediating term outside of masculinity, typically set by the larger hegemonic project of which each is a part.

Of course, not all masculine tendencies will benefit from existing within an already-existing class coalition, as is the case of incel subjects. Non-dominant masculinities must be dealt with by dominant types. Here, a masculine tendency that is non-dominant can become "incorporated" or recuperated under the political logic of the dominant masculine mode—a process that Demetriou calls "hybridization" (Demetriou 2001, 346-346). Another way of interpreting Demetriou's idea is through the language of accommodation, a term that in this context has a dual meaning. Non-dominant modes of masculinity within the masculine ensemble may be

accommodated by the dominant type to dull antagonism and to further concretize the wider hegemonic project. But non-dominant masculinities, like incel subjects, may also choose to accommodate themselves to the norm, by conceding aspects of their performance or on some demands made. Thus far a process of accommodation has not occurred concerning incel subjects, but the possibility of either is always present. The unwillingness or inability to accommodate represents either the strength of the challenge or the weakness of the hegemonic project of which the dominant masculinity is a part.

Considering today's masculine forms as a heterogeneous ensemble is a necessary starting point for perceiving the myriad of masculine viewpoints, be they incels or others. Indeed, there is a particular ideological footprint generated by all masculine types; each has a specific perception of the social world that is reiterated in online forms, and in the embodied world, too. Still, a standpoint theory of the type initiated by Nancy Hartsock that shows how subjects produce their epistemologies relative to their position with the social totality (Hartsock 1985) remains partial, given our amendment of a "masculine bloc" into a masculine ensemble. All epistemological inputs are relayed through their conjunctural situation. The standpoint of the incel subject is not an exception to this rule. Understanding incel subjects require their subjective condition to be thought of alongside their placement in an objective social situation. No subjects hold sovereignty over the total social structure, meaning that they do not simply build their subjective perspectives. Rather, such views and cultural constructions are subject to change by inherited historical shifts, including broad

political changes, and economic transformations (Clark et al. 2006). Articulating what incel subjectivity is therefore required some historical periodization.

Neoliberal Masculinities and the Birth of the Incel

Understanding incel subjectivity requires a conjunctural view of how masculinity has shifted amid contemporary capitalism. The neoliberal restructuring of the past 50 years has fundamentally changed how masculinity functions. In terse terms, “Neoliberalism" describes the worldwide transformation of political economy and politics that accelerated after the 1960s. Welfare state economies were rolled back, marketization was heralded, labor was beaten back, and financial capital ascended. Preceding these changes were serious economic troubles around profitability, inflation, and wage growth. As these problems began to set in, the Keynesian welfare model was called into question. While this transformation is ordinarily described through the language of macroeconomics and labor-capital relations (Harvey 2011) this view is nevertheless partial. With the transformation of political economy also came changes in everyday sociality and common sense (Brown 2015; Cowie 2012; Peck 2012). Of course, these latter changes altered the dynamics of masculinity, which, as we have discussed above, was an important mechanism for the stabilization of a particular arrangement of class forces during the postwar era.

The birth of incel subjectivity has its roots in the economic and social transformations that began in the 1970s. More specifically, gender relations were

significantly changed during the neoliberal transformation. The successful dissolution of the Keynesian welfare coalition destabilized and largely dissolved the dominant masculine breadwinner type within the larger masculine ensemble. This dissolution was related to changing political fortunes. The postwar period's liberal-labor coalition, with its very anguished capital-labor compact, had synchronized with a model of masculinity oriented around a workerist-cum-paternalist subjectivity. The dissolution of the liberal-labor coalition threw this alloyed mode of masculinity into crisis. Installed in its place was a new dominant type that reflected a new economic consensus that centered on an entrepreneurial style of self-making. At the start of the neoliberal revolution this new "entrepreneurial man" took on a conservative, family-first form; over time the dynamics of marketization took their systemic course and the model of masculinity departed from the family form and elevated the individual. As we shall see, incel subjectivity represents an aggravation with the consequences of this historical sequence. The move from a Fordist family wage into the individualized entrepreneurial man has implied a transition of sexual relations into a market-like competitive form. This all helps to make sense of the primary discourse that underlies the incel subject's toxic rhetoric: that the incel cannot compete on equal terms with other men. Thrown into dispute is the idea that market-like sexual conditions are possible.

Periodizing the Postwar Masculine Ensemble

It is important to remember that a set of gender constructions were hard-wired into the postwar Fordist welfare state model. The Keynesian division of labor had within it a gendered order that cascaded through practically all class layers, refracting itself through the economic imperatives of every layer. For a majority, the postwar welfare state relied on the nuclear family, with women accessing money through the waged man. This is to say that women were often compelled to enter into marital relations with a working man to get access to the welfare state's primary benefit: the Fordist family wage. From this point of view, men's economic integration into waged productive labor hinged on the normative expectation that women would perform unpaid but necessary domestic labor. The historical reality of this arrangement departs significantly from the right-wing rhetoric on the "eternal family" because this social arrangement was historically singular. Like the period's compact between labor and capital and also its unprecedented levels of economic growth, the Fordist family wage was a historical exception. The making of a rigidified capitalist economy drew sharp divisions between "productive" and "reproductive" work that hitherto did not exist (Brenner 2000, 11-49). The political economy of the postwar moment, then, took up a particular form of familial relations—in truth, gender relations—that enabled the reproduction of an exploitable working class. The gendered order of the waged man and the unwaged women were not mere normativities, but deeply material social relations essential for the reproduction of postwar capitalism.

Neoliberal restructuring pulverized the welfare state's family wage and fundamentally altered gender relations in the process. The family wage was not an

insulated aspect emanating from the masculine ensemble. While the postwar masculine ensemble put forward a type of dominant masculinity centered on the male breadwinner, the conditions of possibility for this type relied on a system that could enable the male worker's access to values through the wage. The dominant masculine type was therefore interdependent with a complex Fordist political economy that was constructed through past iterations of class struggle. When this political economy was thrown into dispute and ultimately overcome, the capacity for this model of masculinity to remain dominant was diminished, and contestable space was opened for something new to emerge.

The welfare state's guarantee for men's labor was an important thread in the over-determination of how masculinity functioned. Popular conceptions of manliness were shaped by class dynamics that prevailed in this period. Take, for example, the dignified position of productive labor centered in manufacturing, or the paternalistic orientation of masculinity as a "provider" position. Masculine performances of this kind were not simply reflections of some material base, but ideological features that allow for class reproduction in a historical period centered on the productivist and extractionist industries. From the point of view of capital, this productivist conception of masculinity helped to balance welfare state claims, as unemployment was considered a non-normative situation for men. The transformations of political economy, which always have included intrusions by and of the state, brought about significant alterations to relations of gender that were already conditioned by New Deal Keynesianism. No longer determined by the Keynesian provision of guaranteed

employment, neoliberal capital has recast masculinity in the mold of "entrepreneurial" values. Here, the collective vision of dignified productivist masculinity—a tendency described as "breadwinner liberalism" elsewhere (Self 2012)—is replaced with the ideals of individual self-making and self-management. The Fordist welfare state's labor guarantee was swapped for seemingly flexible, apparently open-ended market "opportunities." It is, in a sense, impossible for the destruction of the family wage, and its subsequent replacement with less secure forms of employment, to not upend gender relations.

The decline of the welfare state's provision of male employment is related to a new hegemonic situation. The postwar consensus was centered on the ability to have high wages and ever-augmenting profits. The emergence of stagflation—simultaneous inflation of consumer prices and stagnation in corporate profitability—threw the consensus reached between class forces in the 1940s into crisis (Gindin and Panitch 2012). Restoration of profitability took place through the deterioration of practically all allocations of labor stability, not to mention changes in social provision. Important for our purposes is how this transformation meant the undoing of men's easy, and for some men guaranteed, access to high-wage employment. Of course, the relative condition of working-class men was also dependent on other factors—race and geography—but the trendline had uneven but still aggregate effects. Access to an effervescent industrial economy became imperiled and resulting in the destruction of indemnification from precarity previously afforded by the postwar political situation.

It is worth dwelling, for a moment, on the strange simultaneity of the postwar consensus's twilight and the emergence of a feminist movement that demanded direct access to the wage. For some on the right, these two share causation rather than correlation. Anti-feminist right-wing partisans sometimes claim that the excesses in the form of feminist demands for equality of labor are what brought about a decline in living standards. This claim hinges on the assumption that women-led single-earner households were for some reason not possible. Without retreating to a position of essentialization, this is a difficult position to maintain. The 1970's feminist movement could rather be interpreted as winning some successes within the confines of a capitalist economy in crisis. Unable to challenge capitalism as such, the movement's demand for access to a direct wage did not imply that this wage would be bountiful. What was won was some gains towards relative equality under capitalist conditions. From the perspective of capital, what this has amounted to is social reproduction on the cheap.

The unwillingness or inability of organized labor to counter all of these interconnected trends implied a quick deterioration of postwar arrangements whose reified appearance evaporated under the duress of emergent contestation. Absent mass structures that could be used to address and successfully fight against neoliberal restructuring—and which would presumably change masculinity in yet another way in the process—a new social codification of masculinity has sedimented.

Now absent a rigid system of labor protectionism, men's ability to successfully traverse a competitive socio-economic terrain has risen in social

importance. This is to say that activity *outside* of work has become just as important as an activity within work. The precariousness of work in today's labor markets has made perseverance, typically codified as on-the-job grit or resilience, just as important for social practices outside of formal employment. Behavior off the job is what lands the job, after all, particularly since apprenticeship practices have been largely shifted into the jurisdiction of the private individual. This signals a striking change to the division of outside/inside that persisted with the Fordist family wage.

Ironically, the condition of indirect access to the wage, which previously mediated women's integration into postwar political economy, has become partially generalized. On the one hand, access to the wage still takes place through labor power expended within the worksite. On the other, a constant calibration and maintenance of one's labor power are increasingly staged in spaces external to the worksite. The current arrangement of political economy represents the collapse of the formerly bifurcated Fordist division of reproductive and waged labor into one another. But to describe this transformation as a mere collapse obfuscates how their integration has produced a new dynamic. The dissolution of labor as a male-provisioned aspect of political economy has brought about changes in life outside of labor for men. Unprovisioned and uncertain, "non-productive" activities that men engage in outside of the sphere of labor have become increasingly oriented around a set of practices that can help to shore up uncertainty around access to labor. This is to say that the set of normative procedures, cultural markers, and their attendant social practices have all become fundamentally changed through transformations of political economy.

The changing landscape of masculine self-activity has implications that go beyond labor market practices and permeate the realm of social life more broadly. Today's norms of self-care—improvement of dress, enhancement of one's social aptitude, access to prestige professions, and other kinds of self-betterment like personal fitness—have become increasingly important for men to navigate the neoliberal gender landscape (Crawley 2014; Johansson 1996). To work on the self is also to care for the self, as Foucault had it, with the "ethical" project of self-making and self-reproduction increasingly blurred together (Foucault 1990). Of course, Foucault's conception of self-care was constructed without knowledge of the dissolution of the postwar consensus and its welfare state—a sea change that has codified self-care into sociality in a manner that Foucault could not have perceived. Indeed, very broad social changes accompany this seemingly ideational or merely cultural change. Consider, for example, the entry of the US working class into the previously guarded institutions of higher education that now award formal credentials at historically high rates. Or, the relative deskilling of skilled blue-collar and of many professional-managerial positions, which have resulted in considerable labor shifts. Many of the institutional barriers between the professional-managerial class (Walker 1979) and the working class have been battered down. Absent substantive barriers separating these two classes, there has been an increase in the importance of relative cultural markers that establish one's *eligibility* for professional upward mobility (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 2013; Jameson 1984). The self has become the site of significant "investments," in the sense that a person's willingness and ability to

alienate their labor and render their energies into abstract labor time is often no longer sufficient. The burden of proof is on the subjects themselves, and this burden of proof is mediated by a gender arrangement that comports the realities of a hegemonic class situation alongside a particular regime of political economy. It is in this way that economic restructuring has transformed masculinity—and sexuality in general—into something that operates more like a market.

Today's patterns of masculine sociality follow this general trend. Since there is a hegemonic condition of class forces, expressions of masculinity that comport to this constellation mediate and regulate sexual conduct. In other words, today's dominant masculine performances make use of neoliberal normativities, such as self-care, responsibilization, and personal branding (Pyysiäinen, Halpin, and Guilfoyle 2017). These normative performances and ideals are not imminent to the masculine ensemble but are part of a hegemonic project that seeks to induct the masculine subject into a stance that harmonizes with the demands of today's political economy. These general features arise from an arrangement of historically specific material conditions that are still unfolding. But some changes have become increasingly clear.

As Fordist capital has faded away, a new regime of production rooted in financialized capital has arisen (Krippner 2012; Meister 2017). This broad shift in political economy has had considerable effects on sociality, directly and indirectly (Carruthers and Stinchcombe 1999). While it has yet to be entirely understood, the slow death of American civic life is, perhaps, one important marker in this historical trajectory (Putnam 2001). Whereas industrial capital had tended to aggregate

individuals into collective socialities, the financial-postindustrial economic mode has had the effect of atomization and civic dissolution. With this alteration has come a secondary one, the dissolution of the Fordist family wage. Melinda Cooper powerfully argues that the Fordist family wage had been a central programmatic component for the constellation of hegemonic forces in the postwar period (Cooper 2017). The dissolution of the Fordist family wage has advanced a new dynamic of familial relations that are premised on asset inflation as opposed to the wage-form (Cooper 2017, 119-166). The family is thus an important economic category, and alterations to the economic order and the family cannot be understood apart. The rearrangement of familial and economic relations has fundamentally shifted social power and in doing it has engendered new social relations that replicate the private, family form (Cooper 2017, 215-258). This has brought forth a dynamic whereby institutions are expected to respond to demonstrable claims of negative harm and provide protection to subjects in distress. Positive claims, however, have become institutionally absolved and put to the subjects themselves. These key structural conditions mediate how hegemonic masculinity is operative.

Claims generated by dominant masculinity are often framed through a neoliberal lens (Neale and Lindisfarne 2016). An example of this is gym culture and personal fitness, which is always about making the self "better" and expressing power through this very process. This aspect of neoliberal thinking is partially evidenced in the response to the emergence of the incel subject. A common refrain from non-incel men is that the incel needs to try harder, work on the self, become personable, less

awkward, or establish a gym routine (Zizzy00 2019). We can understand this as an attempt to call incels back into today's dominant masculinity that is mediated by neoliberal reason. It is a strategy of seduction, one that promises transcendence from an apparent social problem through the deployment of personalized self-betterment. Incel subjects who resist and ultimately reject this line of thinking are often disciplined through ridicule. The emergence of online forums like Reddit's r/IncelTears is predicated on the idea that obstinacy against self-betterment by Incels should be regulated through open derision and shame.[16] The site's tagline tells us so much: "IncelTears: Because hating women will get you laid." All of this shows how the status of hegemonic masculinity is mediated by neoliberal rationality, but we are still without an adequate view of the incel phenomenon itself.

The Paradox of Biological Determinism

To clarify how incel subjectivity exists within the masculine ensemble but is set against a dominant masculine form that arose from the neoliberal conjuncture, we must pull apart the incel subject to see how its construction works within its wider social context. The intense misogyny of incel discourse is, of course, a significant feature. However, taking stock of incel ire (which has mostly taken a discursive form, but has in certain instances also manifested as violent outbursts) and drawing

16. As of 2022, this sub-Reddit, entitled "IncelTears: Because Hating Women Will Always Get You Laid," has been removed by Reddit moderators.

conclusions based on their surface resentments represents an enduring methodological problem for understanding radical right phenomena. First, homogenizing the specificity of incel discourse into a generic analytic of hated brings us to miss the internal divisions and differences within the far right. From this view, incel discourse becomes just another iteration of the masculine desire to control women. While this may be true, it is also true that incels represent a real departure from dominant forms of masculinity that is important to elucidate. This brings us to a second, more obvious problem. Characterizing incels through their negative utterances towards women renders their hateful discourse into cause and consequence. Circular argumentation of this sort is easily taken for granted and often reduces complex social processes and contradictions into seductively simplistic formulations. In this view, large historical shifts behind the appearance of this new reactionary subjectivity are made opaque.

That incel communications tend to discursively construct women into objects is unsurprising, but viewing this aspect is a highly partial view. This dimension draws from a rather common understanding of misogyny. Here, a particular gendered order is upheld through the objectification of women into caricatures who are thought to hold a particular kind of agency and ability that is of lesser value in a gendered hierarchy. It has been argued that such a process is haphazardly accomplished through an adaptation of emotional barriers that sit uncomfortably alongside, and indeed because of, an underlying desire for intimate connection (Van Valkenburgh 2018). We can frame this perspective in theoretical language. From this perspective,

in the discourse of the incel, desire is not the desire for any particular woman, but a desire for women's desire of the subjects. This is a classic Lacanian formulation—the desire for desire of the other (Lacan 1998)—a dynamic decipherable as the desire for recognition. The idea of classic misogyny can be understood through this denial of recognition (an unmet desire for the other's desire), in that the lack of desire is projected outwards as a defect of women. Here we have a kind of Nietzschean reversal of values in which negative values are manufactured out of *ressentiment* (Nietzsche 2011). Women's rejection of men's desires is interpreted as a fault of women rather than as a product of male failure.

The problem with interpreting incel subjects exclusively through the lens of misogyny is that incels identify rather straightforwardly through their own sexual failure. The primary substance of the "involuntary celibacy" label is that the incel is an inferior male subject and is unable to sexually compete with "superior" masculine subjects. Incel subjects contend that their sexless condition is a *real condition of inferiority that is recognized as inferior* at the genetic level. Thus an interpretation that relies exclusively on an analysis of the "desire for recognition" is rendered incoherent, and misses what is new about the emergence of this strange subjectivity.

Naturally Victimized

The specificity of incel discourse lies in their obsession with the "psychic drives." At the core of incel identification and thought is the idea of a biological and evolutionary

determinism around sexual desire. Simply put, some men have the innate capacity to attract women while other men do not. It is within the latter group that incel subjects place themselves. The incel interprets today's world of sexual relations as a terrain of competition. And, because of the incel's apparently inferior genetics, this competitive terrain has stilted resulting in disadvantage. This interpretation is not pure self-hatred. Rather, this interpretation of the sexually-disadvantaged incel subject within a terrain of sexual competition functions as a criticism of dominant masculinities that harmonize with the ethos of neoliberal capitalism. Since incel subjects are naturally inferior, the normative demand for self-betterment is nullified. Thus, born from incel subjectivity is a rejection of the idea of competitive sexual relations and the normative regime of self-making that is so central to neoliberal sociality.

Incel subject's concern with the sexual drives is more narrow than "the passions," a concept that has a place in the history of political thought and development. As Albert O. Hirschman noted, the passions had been replaced by the interests as the most heralded emotional type (Hirschman 2013). While the passions animated the heroic mode that was largely celebrated in precapitalist society, the emergence of a capitalist economy brought about a new focus on calculative reason. The attempt to try to understand and rationally pursue one's interest overtook the aristocratic focus on heroic action, as generalized commodity production gradually delinked the individual's social ascent from the battlefield. As understood through incel subjects, sexual drives are compatible with the interests in a way that the passions are not. While the passions are chaotic and randomly generated, the sexual

drives are understood through an objective measurement of desirability that incel subjects claim to understand clearly. Thomas Hobbes, for example, justifies a powerful state apparatus based on negating certain passionate processes and elevating others, including rational deliberation between equal subjects (Hobbes 1988). Following neoliberal sociality in general, a similar move is accomplished within dominant masculinity. The drives are to be subordinated to a rational process of self-making and self-care, and certain practices are put forward that can support one's position in sexual relations. The conception of sexual dysfunction put forward by incel subjects severs apart these two aspects—one's position within sexual relations, and the ability to elevate one's position through certain activities—by arguing that only some masculine subjects can accomplish sexual elevation. Pursuant to the apparent laws of evolution, incel ideology puts forward a criticism of neoliberal masculinity.

Incel ideology is motived by imagined instinctual compulsions that are said to be hard-wired into the body itself. The drives are not an expression of preferences particular to diverse individuals. Rather, the sexual drives are composed of residual compulsions that arise from humanity's relationship to the animal kingdom. In other words, the drives are composed evolutionarily. This line of thought is peculiar because misogynistic depictions of women's passions, desires, and sexuality have been often underwritten by contingency and unpredictability. This view puts forward a feminized mode of desire that is fickle, irrational principles that belie all command for rational calculation fostered by the ascendency of the capitalist mode of

production. Yet, in affixing the passions to biologically-encoded evolutionary dynamics, incels produce a different form of desirous passion that they claim is predictable, knowable, and has been synchronized with rational calculation inasmuch as calculation can be used to pursue desire.

This apparent contradiction—drives on one side and historical structure on the other—is important for understanding how incel subjects produced their subjectivity. The *raison d'être* of the incel's complaint is that sexual relations are biologically encoded, but they are not treated this way in dominant social discourse (Tait 2018). From this view, the liberal elaboration of personal preference as somehow indicating something specific about particular persons is a mask. Behind the disguise lie sweeping historical processes that determine sexual habits in a manner that comports to the selection of superior sexual mates. The idea that the desires expressed by particular subjects are authentic elements of the singular subject—a thought that is critically central to liberal thinking within a capitalist mode of production—is rejected.

Of course, it is most likely not untrue that sex is as much a matter of "drive" as it is socially-mediated taste. Notwithstanding the patently false view that sexual desire is simply epiphenomenal to ironbound evolutionary laws, bourgeois society often treats "sexual drives" as a process that is determined by individual choice. Such a view is, clearly, wrongheaded. We might remind ourselves that today's fetishism of passionate choice has become increasingly reified by the imposition of consumption patterns. What's more, the crystallization of desire into socially-resonant categories

now happens at unprecedented rates. With much of today's social interaction now algorithmically mediated, the temporal rate by which wide consumption patterns coalesce into seemingly homogeneous desires is rapidly dwindling. Social media platforms that are not directly centered on facilitating sexual relationships, like Instagram, have produced similar effects. For example, a mass consumer base for surgical procedures to look like social media influencers, like the recent trend described as "Instagram face," have proliferated (Kale 2019). In light of these intense processes of homogenization, we might consider how the incel's desire to find structural patterns behind desire has some significance, even if incel ideology is incorrect empirically and a political problem. Stripping away the detritus of resentment, incel's interpretive transformation of the desire into an imagined evolutionary structure represents a desire for knowledge of social relations. According to Étienne Balibar, the "violent *desire for* immediate *knowledge* of social relations," or, to make these social relations discursively accessible, is a foundational tendency within both racism and sexism (Balibar and Wallerstein 2011, 19). The development of a detailed "scientific" schematic that explains the incel's condition tells us so much.

The will to know social relations, which are in this case misguided and disfigured by resentments, articulates a specific abhorrence towards women through a broader criticism of the dominant frame of today's masculinity. The perception of their problem, from the view of the incel, is that an evolutionarily fixed form of attraction determines how women select partners. This cardinal feature of incel

sociality puts the incel subject in diametric opposition to dominant masculine forms that are mediated by thinking of sexuality through a market lens. Where there is a market, there are also common "innovations" that are understood to better one's position. We may see these so-called innovations within common activities that define dominant masculine forms today, like the practices of self-betterment, personal mastery, and responsibilization. Yet, these very practices—practices that circumscribe neoliberal masculine forms—are destabilized by incel insistence that sexual relations are naturally fixed. It is for this reason that the characterization of today's emergent men's rights partisans as a straightforward expression of neoliberal sociality must be scrutinized (Van Valkenburgh 2018, 14-16). By advocating for a theory of fixed, biologically determined sexual drives, the connective tissue that fastens today's dominant masculine formations to the current production regime is ideologically attacked.

Constructing Incel Subjectivity

Importantly, incel's rejection of the connection between the dominant masculine types and post-Fordist economic imperatives gives birth to an idea of noneconomic subjectivity. Behind the seemingly empty economic subject of dominant liberalism is a presumption of the possessive individual, a person who views themselves through the lens of self-objectification (Macpherson 2011). One's skills and abilities are viewed as objectifiable entities that can be alienated for consumption, esteem, status,

etc. Be it the postwar moment of "breadwinner liberalism" (Self 2012) or the more recent entrepreneurial form of the market-friendly subject that can deploy their abilities for self-advancement is essential. However, incel's subordination of subjectivity into a determinative structure of evolutionary drives bursts apart this market-friendly presupposition. Here, the subject becomes hemmed into a historical evolutionary situation, which is to say that the activity of the individual cannot overcome naturally embedded structures that are collectively shared. This claim made by incels severely limits the subjective effects of autonomous activity. From the standpoint of the incel, all persons, including themselves, are transformed; the former empty and homogeneous subjects, with their rationally driven alterable attributes, are swept away. Though

By ossifying incel's position within a naturally fixed sexual hierarchy, the establishment of a foundation from which positive claims regarding sex are made. We have, for some time now, witnessed an ongoing hollowing out of "positive freedoms" (freedom to) and the simultaneous ascension of "negative freedoms" (freedom from) in everyday political rhetoric. In *Escape From Freedom*, Erich Fromm argued that the capacity to imagine positive freedoms has already been in decline before the postwar boom took hold (Fromm 1994). Fromm contended that the modern subject was imperiled by strong cultural and political shifts, resulting in the construction of significant anxieties that opened up subjects to authoritarian systems of submission. While we may justly question the independence of psychological conditions in Fromm's narrative—not to mention the place of class struggle within his thinking—

Fromm is nevertheless helpful in pointing out that the postwar era was not the perennial moment of positive freedoms and democratic life that some liken it to be.[17] Incel subjectivity does not depart from this overemphasis of concerns around negative freedom. What makes incel subject is not what they do, nor what they could potentially do, but the idea that what they do does not at all matter. This is because the incel claims that their condition is determined by evolutionary tendencies that cannot be easily overcome. Their positionality is, in a sense, mired by naturally occurring negative unfreedom of evolutionary biology. Yet, since their relative unfreedom is thought to be locked into an objective material structure that goes beyond fungible social dynamics, any path towards remediation is elevated beyond relinquishment of constraint. This is to say that positive claims (e.g. freedom to) are incidentally opened up for right-wing partisans. Take, for example, one mainstream conservative thinker's provocation that sex should be somehow "redistributed" (Douthat 2018). Incel ideology begins with an absolute obsession with the apparent negative unfreedom of evolutionary exclusion, and yet this same perspective ends up producing terrain adequate for positive claims to be made from the right.

This dynamic presents the following paradox: how is it that the incel can identify with imagined negative freedom only to end up driving towards claims of positive freedoms, like the right to access sex?

17. In fact, the acclaim for postwar positive freedoms could may even be misplaced to our own detriment; there is no innate political valence within positive freedoms, after all.

This apparent paradox becomes less difficult by understanding how incel subjects have developed a language and set of ideas that put to use language that does not seem to belong to them. The primary claim developed by incel subjects has moved through the narrative frame of "consent." This maneuver follows a wider tendency of reactionaries to use the materials of their enemies in new ways (Robin 2011). Radical right subjects and organizations have regularly appropriated discourses, ideas, and even organizations forms from left-wing enemies; from fascism's use of the mass party to Hobbes's use of "the people" for justifying total sovereign power, the right has regularly incorporated materials from the left. Incel rhetoric follows this pattern: incel subjects interpret their sexless condition through the discourse of consent. The very name, "involuntarily celibate," indicates their "non-consensual" condition of celibacy. This cuts against the progressive interpretation of consensual sexual relations, in which sexual relations are understood through patterns of mutually-voluntary actions that do not take place under conditions of duress. Incel subjects attempt to turn this concept against itself by arguing that the conditions under which sexual relations take place are not neutral due to the presence of sexual drives that privilege some men other others.

Of course, the emergence of this interpretation presupposes that there was a period when these conditions of duress were not present, a moment whereby consent was not trespassed. *This is, perhaps, the unconscious of the incel phenomenon: an unspoken nostalgia for the postwar social arrangement.* As has been already noted, the postwar period saw women's access to waged social reproduction was indirect,

mediated through the male breadwinner's direct access to the wage form (Cooper 2017). With the demolition of male-mediated employment opportunities, millions of women entered the workforce, resulting in a nullification of the Fordist family wage. This change in political economy transformed how normative sexual encounters take place. From the viewpoint of incel ideology, the Fordist family wage appears like an affirmative action mechanism for men who, under "normal" conditions, would not be evolutionarily worthy of sexual and emotional attention. Thus, incel thinking turns vitriolic when encountering neoliberal masculine forms of redress like self-help, as the identity itself is predicated on the abolition of what was once a benefit of postwar political economy.

The transmutation of sexuality, from the Fordist family wage into a regime of desirability mediated by market incentivization, informs how incel subjectivity constructs the potential for positive claims based on an ideology of total negativity. Today, negative freedoms are more naturalized than ever—freedom from specific constraints is the *du jour* mode of neoliberal governance (Brown 2006). The basis of negative freedoms—again, freedom from some constraint—are considered barriers to equal competition. No meritocratic justification can be made where asymmetrical, politically generated constraint exists. This idea, specified by Wendy Brown and others, is that today's subjectification is one of "human capital" (Brown 2015). Here, the subject is compelled to "work on themselves," always striving to advance their competitive position. The idea that no barriers should prevent competition refers to

the naturalization of negative freedom, while positive freedom has been significantly narrowed into questions concerning engagement within a market.

So long as political barriers do not exist, "free" competition supposedly prevails. The experience of the incel subject is so punctuated by this dynamic that their self-perception becomes subject to a naturalization process. The problems that they may face—whatever their particularity, local context, and however the sum total of these dynamics relate to configurations of dominant masculine formations—are all entered into a framework of inevitability. Thus, the incel becomes a sort of partisan of a pseudo-evolutionary psychology—as opposed to sex-role theory—to understand their condition. The interpretation of sex as a marketplace spurs the incel subject to naturalize their own perceived condition.

Incel's reflex to self-naturalize its condition through articulations of biological fixity becomes an ideological problem, however, because they foreclose competition. If the incel identifies himself as a "sexually obsolete" individual, then the outcome of competition is already well known. The incel cannot participate in the "marketplace of sex." From this viewpoint, there cannot be any meaningful competition, as the outcomes are predetermined. The problem then becomes the fact that false competition cannot be overcome. This effectively moves the incel subject toward possible positive, political interventions. A political intervention, centered on an uneven pattern of sexual competition, opens space for an ensemble of misogynistic ideas that already exist within the arrangement of dominant masculine formations.

This is to say that this dynamic causes an authoritarian impulse that is well documented, with over-the-top misogyny common in incel discussion forums.

Importantly, this brings us to what is most peculiar about incel subjectivity: that they construct a biologically fixed hierarchy of sexual subjects only to place themselves at the bottom. This is altogether unlike other forms on the radical right, such as the fetishization of national belonging, like the Italian fascist movement, or of racial identities, like US white nationalism, where a fixed hierarchy is established to legitimize the domination of those who had constructed the hierarchy. One phenomenon that comes close to the incel dynamic is that of white women in the US white nationalist movement. Such women have historically played a significant role in bolstering a sexual hierarchy whereby white men are thought to be superior to white women (McRae 2018). However, this example still stands considerably far from the incel construction. White women's consent in the construction of a sexual hierarchy does not mean that they are placing themselves at the absolute bottom. Despite their relatively lesser position than white men, white women are thought to have a significant place within the phantasm of white nationalist life. To say nothing of their imagined superiority over men and women of other races, the figure of the white woman is thought to play an essential role in racial reproduction, family life, and in the cohesion of a white community (Gordon 2017, 109-138). In short, their relative inequality to white men is still a position of elevated significance. What is interesting about incel subjectivity is not the idea that a fixed hierarchy exists, but that it argues for an ontology that further naturalizes, and in a sense justifies their sexless

condition. Incel ideology is a circuitry of self-victimization that oscillates between desire and denial. Incel subjects desire to become victims. But their integration within the neoliberalized masculine bloc forecloses their capacity to make a legitimate claim to victimhood. It is here that the real of the incel frustration exists. And it is from this location that the incel has begun to stage a type of insurgency within the dominant masculine pole. This insurgency is fueled by a reactionary subjectivity, one that is affected by what I call indifference.

Affect: Subjects of Indifference

A principal distinction of the self-described "incel" is their performances (Butler 2006, 36) of indifference directed towards themselves.[18] Incel participation in online forums and chats demonstrates a veritable breadth of discourses that trivialize, disregard, and aggravate experiences of suffering and trauma. This disregard is itself an anti-normative practice since today's discourse has significantly broadened the category of trauma as a legitimate area of harm (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Yet, the tendency goes further as many incel subjects directly engage in virtual self-injury, often by telling stories about one's own failure in love and sex. These web-mediated discourses indicate a particular affective structure. Subjects of indifference indicate a highly reflexive—yet remarkably unreflective—condition. I call this emotional pattern the "indifferent structure of feeling."

18. As I see it, the incel is a performative subject, a being whose activity has formed their sense of self.

The incel is moved by a structurally-enabled ambivalence regarding his own victimization. On the one hand, the incel intuitively feels as though he is a victim of some kind. This drive towards demonstrating the harm done to them is not random, but it is generated by today's neoliberal sociality. In *States of Injury* Wendy Brown elucidates this liberal tendency, whereby the subject attempts to demonstrate harm to the state to obtain protection (Brown 1995). Yet, on the other hand, the desire of this subject—to be reified as a legitimate victim and thus to receive protection—is not achievable because of how dominant masculinity is related to, and integrated within, the neoliberal logic of competition. What redress could he who loses have under conditions where competition and merit are the paradigmatic mode? We can understand this ceaseless push and pull as an antinomy of desire and denial that facilitates a considerable level of ideological unintelligibility. It places the subject in an interregnum of meaning, as the mediation of various non-hegemonic masculine forms fails to cohere.

Indifference was evident when, in 2018, Alek Minassian staged a premeditated attack in Toronto, Canada (Beauchamp 2018). Minassian used a rented van to run over as many people as possible. His attack was successful, with 10 people killed and 15 others wounded (Passifiume, Connor, and Stevenson 2018). Just before the attack, Minassian posted the following on Facebook:

> Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010 (sic), wishing to speak to Sgt (sic) 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys (sic) ! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger! (BBC 2018).

Minassian's post demonstrates a lack of concern for harm to those he wishes to destroy, and for his plight as a "harmed" subject. ”C23249161” refers to Minassian’s assigned Canadian military identification number. This might lead us to connect Minassian's violent outburst with the classic fascist tropes of militarism and cult-of-death masculinity (Marsella 2004). However, he prematurely withdrew after only 16 days of basic training (Yang and Campion-Smith 2018). In addition, the reference to his military experience is bookended by discourses that significantly cheapen his message. On one side, Minassian directs his attention to an imagined community that exists solely on the internet—4chan. On the other, Minassian demonstrates partisanship to a social-Darwinist ideology rooted in evolutionary psychology, of which he believes himself to be at the bottom. The post ends with a reference to mass shooter Elliot Roger, a figure who is often infamously heralded within the incel community (Roger 2014). Even Roger is subject to satire; the reference to Roger as the "supreme gentleman," an in-passing comment in one of Roger's videos, has become a kind of inside joke on internet sites like 4chan (Reddit 2018). Minassian's suffering as an “incel” subject is not dressed in the austerity of traditionalism, nor the aristocratic garb of heroism (Robin 2011, 184-200). Minassian's post, like many posts written by incels, is self-consciously kitsch (Sontag 2018). They appear uninterested in garnering mass public appeal. This moves us to ask: what is his post actually about? And what do posts like this aim to do? For what purpose are they written? This form of discourse, rather than using harm as a way to appeal for aid, expresses a disdain not merely for the cause, but also for the consequence, of his action.

Minassian's words foretell wanton violence that is premised on a grievance that is never sincerely entered into the social register.

This indifference is wedded to Minassian's claimed subjectivity. The incel is a demonstrably reactive subjective formation. Their structuring principle is a rejection of all appeals for assistance based on harm. From the start, the incel subject positions himself against himself. He wants to say that feminist issues about women are forms of supremacy that are bankrupt and lack legitimacy. Where the feminist might see the horizon of freedom and choice for women, the incel claims to observe women's biologically-determined desires that are justified by way of feminist discourse. Despite the obvious cultural nature of today's ascendant liberal feminism, the incel doubles down on a biological determinism that relegates him into a sexually obsolete category. One self-described incel tells us this:

> Before we formed organized religions, about 70 percent of the male population were not supposed to reproduce at all. Only the top 30 genetically most superior males reproduced with about 99 percent of the females. The rest of the male population were not outcast from society though, they either became shamans, or preformed physical labor to help the tribe or community (ZarathustraSpenta 2019).

Here, a theory of biological determinism, steeped in evolutionary psychology, is thought to corroborate their experience of failure to attract sexual partners (Ging 2019, 12). The failure is, for them, empirically evident, and is thus entirely devoid of becoming a source of pride; rather, this is a subjectivity that flourishes somewhere between self-contempt and nihilistic non-overcoming. Self-denigration—as opposed to valorization—makes the incel subject into a kind of weapon, a subjectivity whose mere existence enacts an anti-political (Tietze and Humphrys 2015) sort of auto-criticism levied at the social and political world.

The incel, and all subjects of indifference, do not have a coherent ideology, but a partial style that contains a particular perception of one aspect—sexuality—of human life. While incel subjects do not have an organized worldview, they have attempted to project a "common sense" around sexuality that runs against the dominant form. Indifference is an aesthetic or style; it is a performative disregard for the suffering and pain of others born of self-disregard, rather than a fully-formed ideological construct born of self-aggrandizement. Indifference follows a long tradition of "coolness" and the presentation of apathy in the American lexicon (Stearns 1994). It is for this reason that the concept of a "structure of feeling," as developed by Raymond Williams, is helpful (Williams 1978, 128-135). "Structure of feeling" refers to a subjective, intuitive interpretation of an emergent condition or set of conditions that have yet to become settled into any institutional, organizational, or systematic pattern. Similarly, subjects of indifference are responding to new conditions as they come forward, meaning that the performance of indifference is indeed over-determined. They are forced to engage conditions with a "practical consciousness," which is to say that subjects of indifference are engaged in what some thinkers of masculinity have described as a "dialectical pragmatism" (Demetriou 2001). And, yet, the conditions that indifferent subjects face are not localized nor precisely culturally specific—they are, rather, ultimately systemic changes. As I will specify later, this includes patterns of life under today's financial regime of production, inflected through an algorithmically-mediated sociality. These conditions have induced a level of unintelligibility that gives these subjects some

subjective freedom from the dominant sources of ideological hegemony; and, yet their relative reactivity is unharmonious and has produced a considerable amount of *ressentiment*, making any subjective "freedom" rather illusory.

The conscious and unconscious activity of the subject of indifference is scrambled. The problem of desiring victimhood and yet not being able to have this desire fulfilled goes through a process of transubstantiation which, to put it psychoanalytically, we may call *jouissance* (Lacan 2014). The pleasure of disregarding harm—and, importantly, the pleasure in neglecting the particular claims of harm made by others—is a key feature of the indifferent structure of feeling because of—not, in truth, despite—the subject's own inability to become reified as a socially-accepted victim. When an incel wrote, "I laugh at the death of normies," this was not a description so much as a fiber optically-enhanced performance, whose enjoyment was likely enhanced when it was quoted on the Southern Poverty Law Centers website (Janik 2018). The purpose of such an utterance is not only to violate a normative expectation of empathy. The purpose is to bring pleasure by way of incensing the other.

This pleasure from indifference has given birth to a rather unusual batch of ironized subjectivities. In addition to the "incel" and its related "beta" persona is another type: the "weaponized autist" (Klee 2017). Here, we have a subject who ostensibly self-identifies as autistic (Merrin 2019). This subject asks not for acceptance, nor does this subject attempt to deconstruct a set of neuro-typical normativities. Rather, this is a subject who self-consciously claims autism and

"weaponizes" this mental health condition for dubious purposes. This frequently occurred when the so-called “free speech” demonstrations took place in ostensibly liberal cities like Berkeley, California, and Portland, Oregon (Zine 2018). Subjects on websites like 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit frequently cross-examined pixelated photos of anti-fascist demonstrators and matched them with social media profiles (Manning and Andrews 2017). In one case, an arrest was made because of a 4chan post by an anonymous person. This post gave a detailed account of the attack and the alleged attacker by using multiple various pictures from the protest and from social media. The original 4chan post was full of discussion of “weaponized autism” as the force behind such a post (Anonymous 2018). Other posters engaged in doxing would remark on their condition, noting that “I (sic) am glad my autism can finally be useful.” Another person noted after an arrest was made, “It’s incredible. Nothing beats weaponized autism.”[19]

If these persons have been diagnosed with autism is questionable. To ask this individual question misses the point. The same question may be asked of those who describe themselves as involuntarily celibate, as beta-males, and as any other ironized self-identification. Notwithstanding authenticity, the propensity to self-identify and persist in virtual communalism with individuals who identify in similar conditions tells us little about their actual situation than it does their relationship to today’s neoliberal masculine bloc. What these subjects share is a relationship to performative

19. From my own research—30 hours of observation on 4chan during the Berkeley “free speech” protests.

indifference; acts and utterances whereby indifference is performed in a manner that discredits and ironizes any claims of bodily harm and psychic trauma. This performed indifference is most striking when indifference is oriented toward the self. The most distinctive element of these new subjectivities lies in an elaborate disdain for their plight.

Often subjects of indifference will turn against the self—subjects of indifference will often elicit and enact digital, and sometimes actual, self-harm. An important feature of online incel culture is "incelselfies," forums where incels post pictures of themselves for others to remark on. Sometimes the feedback is kind, though most often it is not. The typical response varied, but most comments are disparaging. For example, one commenter used a homophobic response to an incelselfie: "It's over buttercup. You could def survive in the gay community though, they go horny for all types" (Lord_DC 2019). Other posters tell narratives of their daily lives. These posts typically lay out a sequence of events that ends in a half tragedy, more caustic than sorrowful. One such post discusses a man's interaction with women at a party. As the narrative progresses, the women begin to ignore the protagonist and engage in sex acts with another man who is considered biologically superior. The story ends with the narrator-protagonist waking up—even in his dream he is of an inferior status. The post ends with a homophobic self-disparaging quip—"WHY MUST I BE SUCH AN INCEL FAG (sic)?" (ChairmanBen 2019).

The contours of the indifferent structure of feeling defy a coherent placement within the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, indifference signals a departure

or line of flight from this conception. This is not to say that the indifferent subject—the incel in particular—dissolves hegemonic masculinity in any manner. Rather, the incel is, in a sense, a militant who is both within and against hegemonic masculinity. This has everything to do with the subordination of today's hegemonic masculinities within the forcefield of neoliberal power. As we shall see, the incel demonstrates a particular stranglehold of the logic of neoliberal subjecthood over today's hegemonic masculinities.

One potential objection to this interpretation may be that the ideas put forward by incel subjects are, like many other forms of popular thought, simply incoherent. Here, the incoherence of incel subjects is born of their resentments. This line of thinking is essentially a pathological interpretation of the incel. And it demands either repression of this pathological aspect or care and compassion for the root causes of incel subjects. It must be understood that the latter aspect is, in truth, more strategy than ethics. The hope is that in taking core traumas of incel subjects seriously, their resentments can be exposed as what they are—coping mechanisms that obfuscate more meaningful feelings about themselves. Either way, however, the interpretation of incel subjects as merely irrational disregards the dynamic relation that incel subjectivity has to the wider masculine ensemble. Lost is the deeper insight around masculinity and the social formation that has upheld contemporary neoliberal capitalism. These insights are, of course, not born of intention via incel subjects, but they are the product of taking the incel phenomenon seriously enough to understand the social dynamic that has given rise to them.

Included in this social dynamic is this new structure of feeling organized around an indifference that is oriented towards self and other. The emergence of an affect of indifference represents a new phase of nihilistic politics that, perhaps, is only possible with the closure of emancipatory political possibility. Alexandra Kollontai once noted that sexual energies and relationships became fundamentally transformed amid the Russian Revolution. Winged and wingless eros were the terms that Kollontai used for thinking through this transformation; the potential for a "winged eros" signaled a new openness within both sexual and gender relations. Though neoliberal sociality has tended towards a certain kind of progressive convergence—or, for now, in this period, at least—the conditions of possibility of sexual relations remain constrained by a neoliberal political consensus and a masculine ensemble dominated by a related gendered rationality. The indifference that is projected by incel subjects is born of pessimism around the constraints of this situation. And while incel subjects remain constrained to the sidelines, the danger of indifference's generalization is always present.

The production of indifference is algorithmically mediated, and has been produced through discourse made on social media websites, forums, and mainstream social media. Journalists have regularly covered this corner of the internet—the so-called "manosphere"—which is an ensemble of right-wing internet websites, social media personalities, and online communities (Economist 2016). The "manosphere" is constituted by a large array of radical right and misogynistic political tendencies, each with its particular affects and belief structures. This corner of the internet effectively

operates almost like a "counter-public," except these are spaces where reactive, non-normative socialites may flourish (Neiwert 2017, 232-234). However, the emergence of indifference cannot be interpreted as a simple expression of web communications. Still, the medium through which this new affective form has come to pass is important and should be subject to some thought.

Resentment in the Age of Algorithmic Sociality

It is not only neoliberal social relations that condition the affective structure of the incel subject; it is also the medium, or form, through which their experience is expressed—the internet. Web 2.0 has a dual aspect; first, it provides an absolute glut of information, and second, it has generated a highly depersonalized form of sociality. These two conditions have aided, abetted, and nourished the indifferent structure of feeling.

Never before has so much information been available, accessible, at any time of day and under practically any conditions. As communications researcher Zizi Papacharissi argues, the information overload inherent to modern internet access has made rational interpretation of information practically impossible (Papacharissi 2015). Those online must strive to make sense of what is an insurmountable amount of information. It is simply impossible for subjects to understand, let alone rationally determine, all of the information that is produced and disseminated online. The amount of time and attention required to move through the amount of information

available on today's web is beyond what is possible. Dissonance amid non-stop information has engendered an affective mode of understanding, as well as a considerable amount of information-induced anxiety (Bawden and Robinson 2009; Kim, LaRose, and Peng 2009). Because subjects cannot understand all of the materials online through a calculative form of thought, feelings have been deployed as a way of sorting between various types of information. Feelings organized around already-formed opinions or views became a filtration system that can allow people to narrow down information into a discernable set. As Papacharissi contends, this affective mode of understanding is coterminous with the inauguration of a new online "public" sphere that consists of information transfer, communication, and self-expression.

The production of indifference must be understood in the context of this affective strategy, and some insights can be derived from thinking about incel subjects through this process. An affective sorting of information surely informs how subjects of indifference attempt to think through their situation. Indifference is a reactive mode that is premised on non-reflective reflexivity. Using this theoretical view, we may hypothesize that the framing around being involuntarily celibate has clearly found some resonance with subjects who move through the internet's vast amounts of information using an affective sorting approach. This is to say that the incel has a deeply sentimental understanding of their condition. But it follows that this mode of thinking and feeling represents a sentiment that is not entirely capable of producing an analytically critical perspective of the self. Despite the pretention

towards scientism within incel discourse—the deployment of evolutionary psychology, for example—the production of incel subjects clearly has more to do with an emotional process than a rational-scientific one. What motivates the categories of incel thinking is not rational exposition, or even something that approximates it, but rather an intuitive "common sense" process that raises certain discourses to the fore in response to its resonance with already-existing baseline feelings.

The ascendency of memes as a primary mechanism through which the incel culture is reproduced relies on this distinction. The use of a meme is, after all, devoid of technical information, details, and rational exposition. The meme-form carries very little information at all. Yet the meme—or, at least a good one—is always replete with *meaning* (Huntington 2013). This is indicative of a specific form of knowing that transmits information which is central to the construction of indifference into a structure of feeling (Guadagno et al. 2013). The pattern of knowing by way of sentiment exists alongside a whole ensemble of communicative capacities that are specific to web 2.0.

Sociality itself has become increasingly depersonalized through online communications. The online chat, the form, and the social media network all represent a new mechanism of mass communication and personal expression. This points towards a way of being with others that is, in a sense, well beyond the "hyperreality" that was thought to be a condition of postmodernity (Baudrillard

1994). This is because these spaces allow for the generation of an entirely new reality principle, one that does not have to "replicate" the real.

This depersonalization allows one to become the spectator of themselves to a degree that might otherwise remain impossible. Without social media mechanisms, it is altogether difficult to be a spectator of oneself; the spectator is materially linked through embodiment and corporeality. Setting aside the difficulty that embodiment poses for the theory of dominant masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 851), we can at least think of the disembodiment enabled by the mechanisms of the internet as providing a social base from which indifferent subjects like incels have been inculcated. In particular, the disembodiment and depersonalization of the internet have allowed space for indifference, insofar as one may subject their own perceived problem of involuntary celibacy to the abject and mean-spirited remarks by themselves and by others.

Absent an idea of this communication format, it is difficult to consider indifference as a structure of feeling because it is truly difficult to become indifferent to a corporeal self. This form of communication has, perhaps, helped move what might otherwise persist as apathy (Blumenberg 1997) into something altogether more aggressive. This is because apathy, as Hans Blumenberg eloquently discusses it, is interwoven with the position of a spectator of a shipwreck. The spectator is always on the outside, a subject whose activity is, at best, observationally activated. Algorithmic sociality, however, allows for one's self-perception to become disassociated from the corporeal realm. One can become a "participant" in something without the same level

of risk in a sociality that is premised on the physical encounter. Internet sociality is the secret dynamism of the indifferent structure of feeling because the internet allows one to get distance from oneself by performing as an online subject. Web 2.0 allows for a mutable mirror effect—the subject can take enjoyment in the demolition of themselves in a manner that is not conceivable otherwise.

The algorithmic medium thereby allows subjects of indifference to externalize something similar to what Freud described as the "death drive" (Freud 1961). The engagement of the corporeal subject with the sociality of the web 2.0 perhaps produces a new internal category within the psychic life of the subject more broadly. Theorizing subjection in and through the internet is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it seems feasible that incels, since they are affected by indifference, have deployed themselves in a new manner that is to some degree unlinked to their corporeality. Perhaps this has something to do with the dominance of a neoliberal mode of masculinity; within the masculine ensemble, the dominant forms of masculinity project a very narrow conception of sexual relations that are reducible to a subject compatible with the norms of today's capitalism. The question, then, becomes about why such a subject would ruthlessly relink this online self to the very corporeal problem of sexlessness. Why reify a social condition of sexlessness into an entire fixed framework? These questions complicate what Laurie Penny contends are residual sexist referents that have been algorithmically amplified (Penny 2013). Given the discursive freedom of the internet, however qualified by capitalist social media platforms and relative to the norms that these platforms embody, one might

anticipate these subjects to elaborate a different theory for why they have been consigned to "involuntary celibacy."

Speaking speculatively, what the indifferent drive towards self-nullification does is satirize the entire field of today's concern for empathetic trauma talk and inclusivity. The incel and the weaponized autist are both configurations that are difficult to sublimate into liberal hegemonic processes of subjection. By existing, these subjective positions satirize the field by making an impossible request, for example, sexual redistribution. However, "existing" cannot be taken for granted. Deploying such an agonistic subjectivity is altogether difficult to imagine without the emergence of a sphere of digital social life. Here, the discursive nature of subject formation that has been remarked on extensively is important. Judith Butler tells us this:

> The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be signaled as a linguistic category, a place holder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a "site"), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. (Butler 1997).

The internet has not only reproduced misogyny, but it has also become a technology that deploys new subjects that relate to misogyny in radically different ways. In other words, the relative discontinuity of internet social space allows for at least some relative distance from the hegemonic masculine bloc. These spaces—like 4chan, 8chan, Incel.me, etc.—give some semi-autonomous terrain for the deployment of discourses that are relatively sealed from outside pressure. In distinction, physical homosocial spaces are limited by their relation to capital, a relation that is always mutually produced by the dominant strain of masculinity.

Conclusion: Emergent Authoritarianism against Neoliberal Choice?

In this paper, I have argued that the incel can be understood as affected by an indifferent structure of feeling and that this subject is specifically within and against contemporary hegemonic masculinity. Since the incel phenomenon represents an internally incoherent subject structure and has a fraught relationship with neoliberal practice, its organizing principle has become centered on an affective performance of aggressive indifference. The medium of the internet is an important element in this story, as the production of such an agonistic subject that is within and against the hegemonic masculine bloc requires some relative autonomy for development.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the drive for self-negation or self-harm whereby one gets enjoyment (*jouissance)* from demonstrating an indifference to their suffering, appears somehow related to a wider tendency in the contemporary far right, for example, the political theories of neo-reaction (Moldbug 2009) and accelerationism (Noys 2014). Nick Land, perhaps the most infamous of the contemporary neo-reactionaries, starts his book on Georges Bataille with this: "I have always unconsciously sought out that which will beat me down to the ground, but the floor is also a wall" (Land 1992, xi). This drive toward destruction, a theorem that makes Heidegger's famous idea of "being towards death" (Heidegger 2008) into an end in itself, opens up numerous questions regarding the status of the subject and the relationship between these subjects in today's authoritarianism. This all seems to have

something to do with a stridently antipolitical mood that has taken root within many democratic states. Voting for a candidate, like Donald Trump out of spite has become a kind of political performance. Yet, meditations on recent elections seem to miss more dense developments that have occurred alongside them. Looking at incel subjectivity, we can see how the saturation of cultural formations like masculinity by post-Fordist capitalist demands has set off new, reactionary formations. These forms, like the incel, don the old mark of *ressentiment* and have already given birth to a set of new values. These *values*—which, we should note, are not simply ethical claims, but distinctively political orientations—could significantly alter the already tenuous political landscape we're operating within now. Their ability to do so will not be measured by their discursive durability nor their ideological coherence, but, rather, by highly contingent conjunctural factors that are beyond the scope of this chapter. One thing that does appear clear is that a defense of dominant liberal arrangements—for example, a defense of liberal masculinity—against ascendant right-wing forms like incels will have little success. After all, as I hope I have demonstrated, the reproduction of incel subjectivity today has everything to do with the neoliberal construction of masculinity in particular and sexuality in general. What's needed is an idea that moves beyond this arrangement. Doing so will most certainly require an idea of sexuality that accompanies wider transformations in political economy.

CONCLUSION:

TOWARD AN ANALYSIS AND POLITICAL STRATEGY

Today's stirring reactionary politics have understandably brought forth questions about their relationship to interwar fascism. No other moment has captured the attention of readers and thinkers alike. The assistance of fascism's mass killing by modernist aesthetics, a rationalized state apparatus, and the deployment of mature industrial capacities are devastatingly breathtaking. Hannah Arendt's idea of the banal violence of the Holocaust's logistics sits awkwardly with the persistence of fascism in the collective mind. What is so striking about fascism is its whole idea; Third Reich state bureaucrats had, after all, worked with activists, shock troops, fascist artists, and militant party cadre to produce a renegade historical trajectory. And while all of this seems contained to the past—a rising radical right has thrown the fascism question back onto the table. Could it be that another reactionary trajectory lingers nearby?

An open debate has unfolded around fascism, though its inquiry is distinctive from the above question. The debate's coordinates revolve around the terms and conditions of fascism's historical interpretation—inquiry orbits around taxonomical questions regarding the historical understandings of the interwar experience.

The evidence is ambivalent on this question. Today's right exhibits some similarities: a fetishization of leadership and a desire for a nationalist reboot (Griffin 1993). Reactionary politics even contains some anti-democratic features. But the

contemporary right also lacks some fundamental aspects of fascism. Today's right is not organized through a dense mode of civic association (Riley 2010). Nor is there a well-organized left enemy. The US militia movement is the closest approximation to the cadres of interwar fascism. Still, this movement is neither centralized nor organized (Cooter 2013, 37-66), such that a fascist party could instrumentalize it. And this is to say nothing about the undercurrent of libertarianism that continues to contour the radical right as a distinct political culture (Nash 2006). Because of the ambivalence of evidence, the fascism debate tends to become a dispute about which set of interwar fascism's historical qualifications are the most important.

Perhaps the question of fascism is beside the point; must today's right be understandable as "fascist" for it to present a grave danger?

That fascism appears to the mind of many is not wrong because this historical memory may be appropriated, as Walter Benjamin once described it (Benjamin 2006, 391). Appropriation of historical memory is not the same as the production of a comparative taxonomy based on historical data. Appropriation instead points to the path of politics, meaning that the experience of interwar fascism can work as a heuristic for understanding the dangers of the moment. This work has suggested that one such danger is organized around political alternatives. Perhaps the relation of today's reactionary politics to hegemonic liberalism is congruent with fascism's beneficial relation to a conformist German Social Democratic Party (Allen 2004, 145; Benjamin 2006, 393; Mann 2004, 61-62; Neumann 2009, 14-17, 29-33; Tooze 2006, 40).

Perhaps another danger could be the misidentification of the new with the old. Counter-revolutionary violence was not unknown to interwar leftists, and fascism was sometimes mistakenly interpreted through that experience. This dissertation's line of argumentation has been focused on demonstrating how areas that appear to hold continuity to radical right history—resistance to egalitarianism, the politics of whiteness, and reactionary masculinity—are sites of transformation. Without sufficient acknowledgment of changing conditions and adjacent internal transformations in right-wing political cultures, taxonomical questions about fascism can conceal inconspicuous changes that are important for countering the radical right by producing a new political trajectory.

This study has sought to understand if the right requires a rigorous theoretical and empirical conjunctural analysis. The research has brought me to see such an analysis as not simply interesting but necessary. Each chapter has laid out a critical assessment of the contours of today's right, including how it has become shaped and on what basis this shaping has happened. But the inquiry conducted has not fully delved into an analysis of the conjuncture.

This dissertation has justified the need for this type of analysis. But it has not been thoroughly conducted here. What is required is twofold: (1) an ideological critique that demonstrates not simply how today's right is contradictory but how these contradictions are symptomatic of a broader political situation, and (2) a compositional analysis of the class fractions with cross-class political allegiances that operate on a particular terrain defined by the current regime of production. This pair

must be put together in a complementary manner, such that the ideological contours, the arrangement of social forces, and the shape of neoliberalism's social structure can be understood as a conjunctural whole. Nevertheless, the research presented here provides some advancements and insights that may be useful for producing an accurate analysis of the right and its conjuncture.

With regards to ideological critique, some preliminary ideas have been laid out. Understanding that there is a problem with humanitarianism and that humanitarian reason has become a legitimizing feature of neoliberal accumulation is an important insight. And it has been demonstrated how longstanding aspects and dynamics of the right cannot be taken for granted. Both whiteness and masculinity remain essential parts of the contemporary right, but each has potentially decisive fissures and departures from the past. Too often, ideological criticism of the right does not consider how these changes may be symptomatic of failures of hegemonic liberalism. What comes of this is a flat interpretation of reactionary politics that fastens unnecessary blinders onto thinkers and organizers alike.

Critical ideological analysis of this type should direct us towards the class situation of today's reactionary politics. An important undercurrent of this dissertation is the argument that political fissures within the working class have produced an obscene political outcome for US politics. Opposition by rightward subjects of a liberal normative structure that cannot account for their actual economic condition is difficult for outside observers to apply unqualified normative judgement. Are these subjects straightforwardly authoritarian and thus condemnable? The answer

would seem much more complicated, but understanding this complexity requires a complete conjunctural analysis that does not cordon off critical analysis from today's liberalism.

Drawing liberalism's ideological apparatus into our critical view poses the problem of working-class solidarity outright. Conducting a meaningful conjunctural analysis is necessary, and I have become convinced that conducting it will require bringing together proper ideological criticism and a Poulantzian-style class analysis (Poulantzas 1982). What Poulantzas understood was the changing nature of class politics, with classes tending to become split apart and class fractions becoming sutured into cross-class political alliances. Even a perfunctory use of this kind of analysis will elucidate much about the nature of contemporary American politics and its partisan political cultures.

Such an analysis may help respond to the numerous questions generated by this work. One set of questions orbits around ideology and the issue of humanitarian politics. What status do political movements have that deploy a discourse of humanitarian politics from the left? Is it possible for the left to produce a rupture from the ideological status quo, as we have witnessed on the right? And what could this departure look like? These questions are as much about political possibility as they are about political desirability.

This work has begun to put the problem of class disorganization and left weakness on the table, but more research on this topic is surely justified. Perhaps today's lack of historical maneuver has more to do with the conditions of a social

struggle than imagined alternatives. It has become fashionable to put forward the need for an alternative idea for the future (Fisher 2009). However much we broaden the horizon of possibility at the level of consciousness, without an adjacent change in the conditions of everyday struggle, a truly counter-hegemonic idea of future life may not materialize among most people. There are obvious practical reasons for this. Entrenched interests combined with banal factors like social and economic path dependency all conspire against the transformation of society. But the problem is not simply a subjective one. It is not merely that antagonistic social forces exist and that these social forces take advantage of "home turf." As argued in chapter two, the decomposition of mass, fighting organizations of the working class is a lack that seems to organize the political present. Nowhere is this more obvious than the rhetorical use of "workers" and the working class with today's right-wing leaders. The availability of a discourse of workers for the right is truly perverse, and it demonstrates a general lack of contestation from the left.

In any case, this work suggests that the current strategy of liberal entrenchment may not be sufficient for contesting and overcoming a growing reactionary right. The latter feeds off the weaknesses of the former. And without a political strategy that takes this seriously, it may be that the right continues to find its footing.

What is most distressing is that the reactionary right need not win hegemony to produce a murderous historical trajectory. The significant problems of climate change, economic distress, and nihilistic delegitimization have rapidly moved from

the horizon into the political foreground. Reactionary politics need not win hegemony to hasten these problems. Their constant contestation of the liberal status quo continues to pull political energy away from resolving crises that, once they are here, are potentially irreversible. Facing these mounting problems will undoubtedly require reactionary defeat. But defeat is not possible without addressing the origins of reactionary politicization.

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