

Editors' Note

As this number of *Mediations* appears, the battle is well under way to frame discursively the current economic crisis. Is it a mere downturn, a discrete effect with identifiable causes — hapless borrowers, predatory lenders, lax overseers, greedy financiers, incompetent bureaucrats — strangely enough all already familiar to us as stock melodramatic figures? (These principals, it is true, all seem happy enough to play themselves on TV). Or is it rather the symptom of a systemic imbalance — of what the readers of this journal might prefer to call an inherent contradiction? For the moment it is nothing more or less than a rift in the smooth reproduction of society. What it will mean in the fullness of time — that is, in the retrospective gaze of historical narrative — is not something we can know; but nor is it something we can dispense with knowing. What the current crisis means (in other words, what it provisionally is for us — and therefore what it effectively is, what kind of openings and closings it represents, what kind of event it might then turn out to have been) is, at the moment, up for grabs. It seems likely that Keynesianism (or what the media call the “Left,” by which they mean competent neoliberalism combined with a nostalgia for social-democratic ideals) will walk away with a victory in the short term. Beyond that things get murkier. The struggle to name the crisis takes place not just between the Left and liberalism, but within the Left itself, and it is not our place here to attempt to decide among the various accounts of it, each of which carries with it its own prognosis and its own program. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the crisis is to be a long one — not in the customary sense of the prolonged downturn predicted by virtually everybody, but a crisis that will turn out to have extended into our past as well as our future; that is, a chronic imbalance that irrupts into historical time with increasing insistence. Whatever dire possibilities this entails, and these are profound, it also opens

up a space in which to insist on the question of the sustainability of the system itself — a question which lurks as an anxiety beneath even the most officially confident rescue operations.

Meanwhile, the present is equally marked by the conspicuous absence of an organized Left, much less an organized proletariat. For the moment, nobody any longer believes that we have arrived at the end of history; but nor should we mistake the dissolution of a certain kind of “working-class politics” for the wholesale liquidation of class itself. The question of “political subjectivity” — of the mediations, be they institutions, ideas, or movements, that bind individuals to history, that open up spaces for the creation of new collectivities — is therefore an urgent one. Each contribution to this issue explores potentials for forms of political subjectivity that emerge from the productive limits — limits, that is, that are not to be thought as purely external and negative — of contemporary capitalism.

It is only fitting, then, that this issue should begin with Antonio Negri, whose contributions to what has been called (for better or for worse) “post-Marxism” remain incalculable. Originally presented as a talk at McMaster University in 2006, “The Labor of the Multitude and the Fabric of Biopolitics” presents us with a further elaboration of that conceptualization of the political familiar to us from Negri’s recent collaborations with Michael Hardt, *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2005). Here Negri revisits key concepts formulated by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben, an engagement that leads to an historicization of the very concept of “biopolitics” that any future reading of Negri’s work will have to take into consideration. Examining a set of contradictions that Foucault’s work attempts to resolve, Negri conceives “biopower” as a dynamic function, suggesting that its transformation not only corresponds to the emergence of new productive forces under post-Fordism, but also immediately gives rise to new strategies of resistance. What this means, then, is that the theorization of subject formation (and subjection) that constitutes a hard core of poststructuralist thought also points to a locus of anti-capitalist politics (and modes of desubjection). One is reminded in reading Negri that the most powerful critics of the dialectic (beginning with Marx!) are themselves dialecticians. Here Negri draws our attention to the Marxian “watermark” of his own politics: the (dialectical) insight that capitalism produces its own gravediggers.

But while Negri’s conclusion might lead us to say that revolutionary potential today lies with the “multitude,” Mathias Nilges’s “The Anti-Anti-Oedipus: Representing Post-Fordist Subjectivity” (winner of the 2007 Michael Sprinker Prize, about which more below) suggests that nothing could be further from the truth. Like Negri, Nilges locates the development

of a new logic of subjection in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism; a transition, moreover, that he describes as the changeover from a centralized and strictly regulated mode of accumulation to the more global, deregulated, and flexible form we know today. For Nilges, nevertheless, Negri fails to distinguish between those forms of desubjection that correspond to a rejection of Fordism, on one hand, and those that correspond to a flight from post-Fordism, on the other. This distinction proves to be critical precisely because postmodern theory, and Foucault’s work specifically, is revealed to be what Nilges calls “the “politico-philosophical expression of *Fordist* processes of desubjection, processes that ultimately made the transition into post-Fordism possible.” The point, in other words, is not that postmodern theory and culture have been merely appropriated by the market. On the contrary, Nilges — who grounds his insights in the work of the French regulation school — insists that the transition to this new regime of accumulation (i.e., neoliberalism) would have been impossible without the concurrent development of a new mode of regulation, whose emphasis on decentered and fluid subjectivities not only facilitated the passage into post-Fordism, but more importantly corresponds to postmodernism itself. Much of his article is subsequently dedicated to showing, through analyses of contemporary culture, how the ascendancy of post-Fordism as the dominant socioeconomic structure — the emergence of postmodernity — signals therefore nothing other than the exhaustion of postmodernism as a political project rather than its realization. Postmodernism’s realization in postmodernity and its exhaustion as a liberatory project are in other words the same thing. At the same time, this movement gives rise to a new cultural logic marked by a nostalgia for not only Fordism but, when this nostalgia too sinks under the weight of its own contradictions, for a kind of “feral subjectivity.” In this way the vindication of dialectical critique that informs Nilges’s response to Negri ultimately becomes the point of departure for a powerful analysis of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural production.

From there, we turn to the failed state and the “long space” of imperialism, colonialism, and uneven development. In “The Failed State and the State of Failure,” Peter Hitchcock examines the proliferation of state collapse within the developing world following the dissolution of “actually existing socialism” in the 1990s. No doubt Marxism offers a means to comprehend the political conjunctures that culminated in the devastation of states like Somalia and Sudan; yet, Hitchcock reminds us that Marxist thought has long been marked by an inability to reconcile its critique of political economy with an analysis of state formations (or deformations). Hitchcock subsequently turns to the absence of any engagement with the State in *Capital* not in an attempt to square empirical phenomena (state failure) with

theoretical abstraction (political economy), but to demonstrate that the productive tension between these moments is ultimately capable of yielding a more complete understanding of each. The chiasmus invoked by the title, therefore, is in no way merely rhetorical, and instead points to impasses both within thought and in politics that are equally symptomatic of material transformations within the economic world system. For Hitchcock, then, the conceptual link that underwrites this chiasmus is provided by the rise in the organic composition of capital and the concomitant falling rate of profit that ultimately leads to those economic crises described in the first volume of *Capital*. There Marx observes that the general rate of profit falls as the organic composition of capital – a measure of changes in its technical composition and, therefore, productivity – rises. For this reason, Marx contends, crises are intrinsic to capitalism, which requires the development of those technologies that bring about increases in the levels of productivity but, nevertheless, drive the rate of profit down. Hitchcock subsequently offers a critique of the concept of the “failed state” as an ideology, which, eliding those structures and histories that have consigned the global south to the periphery of capitalist production, functions as a convenient justification for interventions of all stripes. At the same time, however, demystifying the notion of sovereignty alone is not enough, since, as he explains, sovereignty corresponds to objective circumstances within the world economy as well. Read in this way, the failed state is revealed to be an extension of the crisis in contemporary capitalism that renders whole populations and states superfluous within the worldwide system of commodity production. Superfluous, but for all that not nonexistent, and without, as his final sentence makes quite clear, romanticizing state failure, Hitchcock hints that the failed state too is a zone of creativity.

We next turn to Laura Hudson’s reflections on the role of the environmental and animal rights movements in contemporary politics. Responding to the skepticism with which the Marxist tradition has generally regarded these issues, Hudson’s contribution argues that the objectives of ecology and animal rights, far from being distractions from the social and economic concerns that underlie Marxist criticism, in fact contribute importantly to the latter. Significant commentary, to be sure, has been devoted to exploring the intersections between environmentalism and Marxism, while efforts to formulate possible linkages between the latter and animal rights have been scarce to say the least. Beginning with a critique of the weak essentialisms that typically inform deep ecology and animal rights alike, Hudson explains that the failure of these movements stems from the one-sidedness of their concepts, which paradoxically become more anthropocentric the more desperately they attempt to disavow their anthropocentrism. But capitalism

already tends to dissolve the distinction between human and animal, and here the emphasis is placed on the animalization of workers described in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Needless to say, liberal democracy has always availed itself of humanism as a means of obscuring these very conditions. But it is precisely this belief in the singularity of human beings as citizens of the State that has been undermined by a certain account of sovereignty. Agamben’s understanding of “bare life” (*zōē*) reemerges at this point not as a mere theoretical linchpin, but as a marker of those sociopolitical changes that have resulted in a leveling of the ontological difference between the animal and the human. But the limits of Agamben’s analysis become conspicuous as soon as we realize that the power to undermine this distinction lies not with sovereignty, but with capitalism. Marx’s text, then, opens on to an account of human “species-being”: a form of self-consciousness whose radical potential lies in its negation of an unmediated relation to nature and in the idea that any substantial reconciliation with that nature is to be located in the overcoming of capitalism itself. If we understand animal rights in this way – as the desire for a not-yet-articulated concept of the human that points to a future utterly different from the present – then a possible confluence of this commitment and Marxism comes into view.

A similar evaluation of nascent forms of political subjectivity animates Brian Thill’s contribution, in which the examination of previously unexplored connections between Stokely Carmichael’s Black Power and Herbert Marcuse’s theory of liberation provides us with a reevaluation of the New Left. Dispensing with the nostalgia and oversimplifications that characterized our thinking about the 1960s, Thill highlights a set of limitations that characterizes the convergence of Marxism and the new social movements in the course of this period. Of particular importance to his account is the 1967 Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation. Staging exchanges between various commitments that would influence the shape of the New Left, the congress bears witness to what Thill describes as the beginnings of a dialogue between Black nationalism and the Frankfurt School. That these two positions have been considered incommensurable, if not antagonistic, is not surprising; the call to dismantle what Marcuse called the “affluent society” entailed a different set of exigencies than those that informed Carmichael’s militant anti-racism. And yet, the impasse between these two positions is potentially mediated here by their shared interest in the work of the nineteenth-century abolitionist Fredrick Douglass. For it is in Douglass’s conception of the rebellious slave, Thill argues, that both Marcuse and Carmichael discover a figuration of revolutionary subjectivity that we might understand as the negation of white racism and bourgeois conformism alike. Of course,

solutions that appear on the level of rhetoric are by no means transposable with those that emerge from the dynamic plane of history, and Thill's essay, which refuses facile conclusions, takes an unexpected turn when we discover that Marcuse and Carmichael share not so much a solution as a mistake. The figure of the slave in Marcuse and Carmichael performs a synecdochical function that now risks flattening the very real difference between the past and the present; a risk, moreover, that our own attempts to understand the New Left – and the 1960s more generally – must avoid at all costs.

Shifting focus, we turn to Pablo Castagno's "From Provinces to National Television: Celebrity Culture and Collective Recognition in the New Spain" (the 2005 Sprinker Prize winner). Castagno analyzes recent Spanish television in the light of changes in the economy that brought about profound shifts in Spanish social and political structures. Celebrated from both the right and the left of the Spanish political spectrum, the emergence in the 1990s of what economists have called the "New Spain" not only signaled a complete and welcomed integration into the networks of world capital, but served as evidence that the nation had succeeded in overcoming the forms of underdevelopment suffered under nearly four decades of the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. That "success," however, called for a new system of regulation that would precipitate wide-reaching transformations in Spanish culture, which, as Castagno's essay demonstrates, are nowhere more evident than in the production, distribution, and consumption of television programming. Turning to this particular form of social regulation, we encounter the familiar appropriations of popular culture carried out by the bourgeoisie in any number of national and historical contexts. The expropriation of Spanish popular culture, nevertheless, was submitted to a process of unparalleled intensification afforded by both the introduction of privatized broadcasting stations and the development of a new kind of cultural phenomenon: reality television. Engaging in close readings of television shows like *Gran hermano* (*Big Brother*) and *Operación triunfo* (*Fame Academy*), as well as interviews with individual viewers, Castagno's contribution reveals how the mobilization of fame and spectacle underlie the image of a "New Spain" in which everyone equally participates. And insofar as the recent crisis in the Spanish housing market as well as the influx of dispossessed African migrants reinforces the suspicion that such equality exists only within the realm of ideology, Castagno's intervention suggests that the "New Spain" was ideological in the classical Schwarzhian sense: nothing more than an illusion well-grounded in appearances.

We conclude with Joel Woller's investigation of working class culture, social movements, and politics in the United States, and of the role of collective memory in union activism during the Great Depression. This

period in American history, as is well known, was defined by an open and head-on conflict between capital and labor that would bear witness to the great struggles of the working class; that these struggles should today appear alien and strange to us signals not only the impasses constitutive of contemporary politics, but also the lack of any concept capable of mediating the relationship between that past and our present. For Woller, then, it is this particular mediation – this conceptual missing link, so to say – that collective memory provides. Turning to the efforts of the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC), Woller analyzes the various ways in which organizers mobilized the history of labor unions in the course of the 1930s and 1940s. But what is striking about Woller's intervention is that "collective memory" is here not a positive link, forming the backbone of a kind of "Left (or Union or working-class) heritage." Rather, it functions negatively. It is significant that what is memorialized most powerfully is not success, but failure; not working-class accomplishments, but the destruction of a union and the end of an era of union politics: the violent repression of the 1892 Homestead Strike and its aftermath. Why? Past success is by definition the prehistory of the present, and celebration of past accomplishment is in this sense an endorsement of the status quo. But failure marks the history that didn't happen, the utopian possibility of a path foreclosed; more paradoxically put, failure points to the real history to which our own dismal present is the counterfactual alternative. In the commemorations of the Homestead Strike, we meet unexpected confirmation not of mainstream progressive historiography, but of the "weak messianism" of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

A final word on the Michael Sprinker Prize, which, as we have noted, was awarded to two of the essays published in this issue. The Michael Sprinker Graduate Writing Competition was established to remember Michael Sprinker's commitment to Marxist intellectual work and to graduate teaching and students. The award recognizes an essay or dissertation chapter that engages with Marxist theory, scholarship, pedagogy, and/or activism. Submissions are judged by a committee composed of members of the Marxist Literary Group. The winner receives professional recognition and a prize of \$500. Traditionally the article is, after peer review, published in *Mediations*. The deadline for submission is usually in May. Full details on the 2009 competition will be posted soon on the MLG website: <http://www.mlg.eserver.org>.

Emilio Sauri and Nicholas Brown, for the *Mediations* editors.