

### **The Anti-Anti-Oedipus: Representing Post-Fordist Subjectivity**

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Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise.

What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.<sup>1</sup>

Chuck Palahniuk  
*Fight Club* (1996)

Yet in the midst of all these healthy movements of disgust and revulsion, indeed, to the very sound of windows breaking and old furniture being thrown out, we have begun in the last few years to witness phenomena of a very different order, phenomena that suggest the return to and reestablishment of all kinds of old things, rather than their wholesale liquidation.

Fredric Jameson  
*A Singular Modernity* (2002)<sup>2</sup>

One of the central assertions of Marxist political economy is the rejection of the existence of economic equilibria. Instead, we should understand capitalism as a mode of production that operates on contradictions, containing tendencies toward change, instability, and crisis that periodically necessitate a radical restructuring of the logic of the capitalist mode of production. It is precisely this notion of classical Marxism that the economic regulation school takes seriously.<sup>3</sup> Since capitalism always moves toward crisis, the

regulation approach suggests that we can arrive at a fuller understanding of the historical development of capitalism as a heterogeneous structure by transcending analytical approaches that remain singularly focused on economic laws and structures. The writings of the French Regulation School hence emphasize the centrality of the social component of capitalism. The social networks that surround the economic structure of a mode of production fulfill a vital function insofar as they create the social basis for and in turn replicate the conditions of the mode of production. Simply put, capitalism as a crisis-prone structure requires the support of its social dimension in order to regulate itself and produce moments of relative stability. An analysis of capitalism, the regulation approach thus argues, should focus on both capitalism's economic structure (the Regime of Accumulation, hereafter ROA) as well as its accompanying social dimension (the Mode of Regulation, hereafter MOR). This extended model of Marxist political economy presents an invaluable basis for cultural analysis, since it assigns culture a vital function in the dialectical interaction between ROA and MOR, producing and contesting those ideological structures and social forms that both stabilize and ultimately transcend different periods in the history of capitalism. This essay consequently constitutes a beginning exploration of contemporary culture based on this theoretical model. Specifically, I shall explore the consequences of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism for contemporary cultural production. Since the transition to a new economic structure requires a new MOR, that is, new forms of subjectivity and social forms, we can gain valuable insights into the sites of contestation between capitalist structure and its social dimension by examining the ways in which culture represents post-Fordist subjectivity.

Before entering into the analysis of cultural production, however, it seems necessary to establish the terms and basic definition of the analytical model that will inform this inquiry. As indicated above, the model of the regulation approach forms a valuable basis for cultural analysis, since it allows us to understand culture not simply as a mirror of social reality. Rather, culture occupies an active position and is an instrumental part of the ways in which capitalism resolves moments of crisis. Expanding the model of the regulation approach for our purposes, we can locate culture in relation to both social and material dimension in the following manner:

$$\text{ROA} \leftrightarrow \text{Culture} \leftrightarrow \text{MOR}$$

This means the following: a given economic structure (ROA) requires the support of (and is regulated by) its social dimension (MOR). This MOR is produced in the terrain of culture. Culture itself is therefore located at the

heart of the dialectical relationship between “the economic” (ROA) and “the social” (MOR). Culture is the terrain in which new attitudes, norms, conventions, and desires (and, of course, forms of subjectivity) are produced, contested, disseminated, and buried. Always necessarily heterogeneous and filled with contradictions between residual and emergent forces that surround a temporarily stable socioeconomic structure, culture is the arena of historical progress and the arena in which crises of capitalism meet sociopolitical structures in struggle, ultimately superseding former ROAs and MORs. Changes in the ways in which we narrativize knowledge and culturally represent structures of feeling must therefore always be interpreted in relation to the dialectical relationship between ROA and MOR within which cultural narratives and cultural forms assume a productive function.

To understand fully the ways in which capitalism supersedes a moment of structural crisis, we need to examine the ways in which the social dimension contributes to and ultimately facilitates the transition into a new ROA. Michel Aglietta summarizes the project of the Regulation School as follows:

We intend to show, therefore, how the regulation of capitalism must be interpreted as a . . . social creation. This theoretical position will enable us to conceive crises as *ruptures* in the continuous reproduction of social relations, to see why periods of crisis are periods of . . . intense social creation, and to understand why the resolution of a crisis always involves an irreversible transformation in the mode of production.<sup>4</sup>

If we then examine, for example, the crisis that necessitated the departure from Fordism, as its centralized, standardized, and strictly regulated mode of accumulation proved itself, beginning in the 1960s, to be increasingly unfit for the production of surplus value, we quickly realize the ways in which postmodernism (postmodern culture as well as postmodern theory) played an instrumental role in managing this moment of crisis. The forms of subjectivity (decentered, post-national, post-geographical) and the social forms and norms (pluralism, diversity, productive chaos, boundary-blurring) postmodern theory and culture advocate reveal themselves from this perspective as fundamentally important to the development of a new MOR that supports post-Fordism, the now dominant capitalist structure.<sup>5</sup>

By “post-Fordism” I therefore refer not just to the new, deregulated mechanisms of production and distribution. Rather, I use post-Fordism as an umbrella term describing both the contemporary ROA and MOR, uniting terms such as globalization, deregulation, flexible accumulation, neoliberalism, and multicultural capitalism, which are all facets of the larger structure

of post-Fordism. An analysis of the transition from Fordism into post-Fordism ultimately also has significant consequences for our understanding of the history of cultural production since the 1960s, the point at which Fordism had passed its height and began to experience a significant moment of crisis. The understanding of the dialectical function culture occupies as a concrete mediation between the economic (ROA) and the social (MOR) presented above indicates a necessary periodizing distinction between postmodernism and what I call post-Fordist culture. The intricacies of this periodization clearly transcend the limits of this particular project. Suffice it to say at this point that we should understand postmodernism as the culture of Fordism in crisis. Postmodernism exhausts itself at the moment at which Fordism is effectively superseded and post-Fordism has become the dominant socioeconomic structure. After the exhaustion of postmodernism we witness the emergence of radically different cultural narratives and forms that mark the transition into post-Fordist culture. It is at this point that the project postmodern theorists and authors hoped to be liberatory reveals itself not only as the very logic post-Fordism rests upon but also, and possibly even more significantly, as central to the supersession of Fordism and the resolution of a severe crisis within capitalism by generating what we now recognize as post-Fordism's MOR.<sup>6</sup>

If, then, we understand post-Fordism as the period in which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's anti-Oedipus, the personification of the postmodern sociopolitical project, has developed from what was considered to be a liberating philosophical and cultural concept into what revealed itself to be the ideal form of subjectivity supporting a new, deregulated, arguably even rhizomatic socioeconomic structure, we need to ask what the response to this development is. Looking at cultural representations of post-Fordist subjectivity can provide us with insight into the psychological and political consequences of the realization that postmodern subjectivity has revealed itself to have always already been post-Fordist subjectivity. Not surprisingly, as we shall see, contemporary representations of such forms of subjectivity differ greatly from the ways in which early postmodernism represented decentered subjectivity and the anti-Oedipus. Marked by anxiety and loss, narratives of post-Fordist subjectivity seem to point toward a distinct moment of crisis between the post-Fordist ROA and MOR. Simply put, life in post-Fordism is frequently represented as not very enjoyable. Since we are essentially dealing with a large-scale transformation in the socioeconomic structure that leaves behind Fordism's paternalistic logic (structurally as well as socially) and a transition into a post-Fordist structure in which we face a radically new form of standardization that in opposition to Fordism could be described as the "standardization of difference," it is not surprising that the

figure of the father occupies a central role in culturally representing the effects of structural anti-Oedipalism.<sup>7</sup> In post-Fordist culture, as we will see, the schizo is no longer a character out for a happy stroll. Instead, the schizo is frequently represented as the characteristic subject of post-Fordism, angrily roaming the world, an orphaned, involuntary nomad in search of his lost father.<sup>8</sup>

### The Schizo's Angry Stroll: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

The recognition of the functionality of postmodernism in general and of decentered subjectivity in particular in the context of post-Fordism has given rise to a moment in cultural production that is characterized by negative representations of the social and psychological consequences of post-Fordism's need for a radically restructured, often perplexingly complex and unstable MOR. What is it that makes deregulated subjectivity not enjoyable, what is our basis for evaluating subjectivity, and how does this basis interact with the demands of post-Fordism? The anti-Oedipus has not surprisingly (given the nature of the above-described socioeconomic transition) become one of the most dominant cultural narratives used to represent post-Fordism's anti-paternalistic, decentered, and deregulated structural and social logic. However, in contradistinction to early postmodernism, the anti-Oedipus no longer functions as a symbol of liberation from centrally repressive structures. Instead, the anti-Oedipus has become associated with the very reasons for which post-Fordist subjectivity is increasingly perceived as unpleasant and alienating in previously unknown forms. The anti-Oedipus has been replaced by the anti-anti-Oedipus.

To illustrate this, let us first turn to *The Sopranos*, one of the most critically acclaimed TV dramas in recent years.<sup>9</sup> The show famously represents a situation of increasing social instability through the father narrative. In *The Sopranos* a crisis in the socioeconomic structure is represented via the narrative of the existential crisis of an Italian-American mob boss Tony Soprano, a Fordist stock character in U.S. culture, traditionally depicted as ruling over and productively stabilizing the "family," an alternative Fordist economic system. The general plot of the show revolves around Tony Soprano's attempt to cope with the impossible task of acting as the central patriarch of his (economic) family. As Fordist father, the mob boss is expected to be able to keep the "family" together and under control, utilizing centralized repression to guarantee the productivity of the mob family as an economic system. The law of the father of the mob family hence clearly illustrates the relationship between paternalism and surplus production in the Fordist MOR, in which a centralized set of economic, social, and moral rules

in relation to which the subject must orient himself guarantees productivity. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* this logic famously finds expression in the common exclamation "Oh my Ford!" that illustrates the (ideo)logical and functional connection between the Fordist father, the religious/heavenly father, and the father of the family.<sup>10</sup>

The plot of *The Sopranos*, however, revolves around Tony Soprano's struggle with this Fordist role, which no longer seems to be accessible to him. Constantly lamenting the loss of the "good old values" of organized crime that used to structure the "business," Tony Soprano's existential struggle is essentially the struggle with the anti-Oedipal structure of post-Fordism. The "traditional values" (in other words, the MOR) that used to stabilize the mob family as a centrally organized, Fordist structure are now threatened by the influences of global capitalism, represented by the struggle between the Italian-American mob and various international forms of organized crime (which presents itself, to Tony Soprano's great frustration, increasingly as deregulated, globalized crime). Quintessentially strong, powerful, and productively ruthless mafia patriarchs of Fordism such as Al Capone who were able to develop a parallel economy to Fordist capitalism have in contemporary cultural representation been superseded by impotent, Prozac-dependent, and anxiety-ridden mob bosses who struggle in vain to keep the family together. Tony Soprano inherits a role that no longer exists. The result of being confronted with these systemic changes is Tony Soprano's intense feeling of irreparable loss and insecurity that famously drives the show and contributes to the consolidation of the narrative of the weak or absent father as the dominant social allegory of post-Fordism. Furthermore, the structural disappearance of the Fordist Italian American mob father is logically paralleled by the growing popularity of the mafia narrative in contemporary U.S. culture. The necessary reframing of the contemporary mob narrative produces and in turn thrives on the nostalgia for a lost, stable, and pleasant past. Even the horrific violence upon which organized crime is founded can in this scenario not only be redeemed but even be justified (if not comically glorified), as it "at least" operated upon a stable, centrally located set of rules and norms that structured the business and the family, and that endowed each necessary killing with a purpose resulting from economic necessity. In other words, mob killings are a means of policing the boundaries and stabilizing the constitution of the Fordist MOR. Once again, it is the father who nostalgically signals Fordist stability and whose loss, weakness, or absence allegorizes the chaos of post-Fordist deregulation.

For the purposes of our inquiry, one of the most interesting literary explorations of the struggle with post-Fordist subjectivity and the emerging nostalgic desiring structures is Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. The beginning

pages of *Fight Club* introduce the reader to what will form the motor of the novel's plot, namely the narrator's intense feelings of depression and existential anxiety. In parallel fashion, the reader is introduced to the reason for the narrator's depression. Post-Fordist society as the narrator finds it is marked by rampant consumerism, the ultimate logic and end of which is disposability (regarding commodities proper as well as the human being as commodity), substituting trash and lack of permanence for stable teleological narratives.

[C]rying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else, when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash. Anything you're ever proud of will be thrown away. . . . It's easy to cry when you realize that everyone you love will reject you or die.<sup>11</sup>

Stressing the nonexistence of teleological life narratives and forms of subjection and the impossibility of leaving behind something of enduring permanence (in other words, signaling the disappearance of structures of paternal lineage), the passage also introduces what will become the second level of the narrator's struggle against contemporary U.S. society: the perception of this society as inherently post-social. Society in *Fight Club* is represented as fragmented into isolated, bourgeois individuals.<sup>12</sup> Commodity exchange and the relationships between commodities become the sole determination of processes of subjection within the post-Fordist MOR. The central trauma of *Fight Club*'s narrator regarding the post-Fordist condition seems to be a general, initially not clearly defined sense of loss and lack.

The narrator works as a recall coordinator for a major automobile company, a job that further amplifies the perception of society as marked by the utter absence of a social bond, the reification of human relationships and the radical alienation of individual subjects. The relationships between subjects take on the form of mere numerical values in a mathematical equation, as becomes clear in a passage that describes the rationale of the narrator's job. He examines car accidents that have occurred as a result of mistakes in the manufacturing process.

[Y]ou take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (C). A times B times C equals X. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall.<sup>13</sup>

Marked by the necessary and functional dehumanization of others, his job does not produce compassion for the people he has to transform into abstractions. Instead, the horror of the situation lies for the narrator in his own function in this process. His job description corresponds to the function of the new “invisible” worker in the post-Fordist service and management economy. The narrator does his job well as long as he remains completely invisible, when he can avoid a recall and negative publicity. This form of labor makes social isolation a vital part of his job description, an impression that is amplified by the fact that the narrator remains unnamed. The narrator’s social isolation also extends to his private life, which mostly consists of outfitting his condo with new furniture (the “IKEA nesting instinct”). Interpersonal contact in the private sphere is limited to what the narrator in an analogy to airplane food and utensils describes as “single-use friends.”<sup>14</sup> As a result of his interaction with post-Fordism, the narrator develops a form of insomnia that seemingly can only be relieved by being able to enjoy a “real experience.” As everyday life in its absence of social interaction appears to the narrator to be simulated (“a copy of a copy of a copy”), the insomnia resulting from this experience can only be cured by actual social interaction.<sup>15</sup>

The narrator consequently attempts to locate such “real” social interaction in support groups for the terminally ill, and memorably in a support group for men with testicular cancer, which introduces the logical connection between post-Fordism and what is perceived to be a crisis of masculinity resulting from the anti-Oedipal structure of contemporary culture. This strategy of attending support-group meetings introduces the twofold logic underlying the narrator’s psychological problem: a social situation that is marked by the complete absence of an operating dialectic troubles, in Hegelian terms, the process of formulating a conception of oneself as a self. Already at this point we can see the beginning stages of a problematic logical connection between an anti-dialectical and an anti-Oedipal situation characteristic of contemporary cultural production. The perception of the alienating effect of ultimate difference between bourgeois individuals in post-Fordism potentially gives rise to both the critique of capitalism and the critique of anti-Oedipalism. But here, the search for “real” social interaction for the sake of formulating a functional form of subjectivity and the development of (self-)consciousness (the dialectic) becomes attached to the search for paternalistic/Oedipal relationships. This solution, however, is logically and politically clearly problematic. Suffice it to suggest at this point that post-Fordist subjectivity is represented as unpleasant precisely because it is inherently anti-dialectical. The impression of anti-Oedipal instability is connected to the absence of functional dialectical structures that offer the

potential for actual dialectical articulations of identity and self-consciousness.

“Self-Consciousness,” Hegel writes, “exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.”<sup>16</sup> The process of developing self-consciousness, of developing a sense of oneself as a self, requires the subject to recognize and to simultaneously be recognized by an “other” (subject). Developing a functional sense of self in a situation of social isolation (ultimate bourgeois individualism in utterly reified consumer capitalism) thus appears increasingly impossible, since subjection as a dialectical process is moved forward by mutual feedback between two subjects. Through an act of negation that sublates the prior state of consciousness that was marked by pure “being-for-self,” hence by supplementing the consciousness of “being-for-others,” the subject is able, through struggle or engagement with an other, to “survive its own supersession” and develop a functional sense of self.<sup>17</sup>

*Fight Club’s* narrator quickly determines that it is this lack of a dialectical struggle with an other that results not only in his insomnia but in his general dissatisfaction with post-Fordist subjectivity. Especially in the context of anti-Oedipal post-Fordism, the deregulated socioeconomic structure complicates such a dialectical process. The plot of the novel is thus driven by the narrator’s attempt to locate a situation in which a dialectical exchange between equal subjects allows him to develop a functional sense of self. The narrator develops various strategies for re-creating a substitute for the lost dialectic, such as attending the aforementioned support groups, which, he realizes, are ultimately not able to solve his problem. His insomnia returns as soon as Marla Singer begins to visit the same support groups the narrator frequents. Since she ironically also begins to visit the testicular cancer support group, Marla can easily be identified by the narrator as a “liar” and a “fake.” Problematically, however, the narrator has to engage in what is one of the few instances of a sign of a functioning dialectical movement that provides the narrator with some truth about himself: “with her watching, I’m a liar. . . . In this moment, Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth.”<sup>18</sup> The truth the narrator has to realize is that he, like Marla, visits the support groups purely to receive support without being willing to offer support in return. The narrator’s attempt to solve his problem by parasitically frequenting support groups inevitably fails and reminds us of Hegel’s insistence that recognition only has meaning when it is exchanged in a situation of equal power.<sup>19</sup>

After the failure of his first attempt to solve his problem, the narrator (with the help of his schizophrenic hallucination Tyler Durden) develops a new solution. The narrator founds fight club, a forum in which subjects that

suffer from the same form of social isolation and existential anxiety can engage in bloody fistfights that appear as brutally literal interpretations of a dialectical struggle. Yet, it is obvious that physical violence between two men does not quite correspond to the dialectical formulation of consciousness. Fight club, as well as its gradually developing political component “Project Mayhem,” are therefore characterized by clearly logically flawed attempts to solve the problems posed by post-Fordism. This in turn complicates readings of *Fight Club* that describe it as “a provocative anti-capitalist cultural artifact.”<sup>20</sup> Such readings miss the elements that actually form the primary focus of the narrative as well as the contradictions out of which the narrator’s depression actually arises. To be sure, the narrator struggles with consumer capitalism. However, the problem the narrator truly attempts to resolve is the transition into post-Fordist subjectivity that requires the departure from Fordist, Oedipal, centered subjectivity. The narrator’s problem is not repression by consumer capitalism but the ungratifying, hollow “freedom” it offers. In other words, the narrator does not struggle with repression (be that capitalist or otherwise) but with the absence of repression. This absence of repression finds its metaphorical expression in the figure of the absent father. The novel’s famous nihilism is thus not an expression of resignation facing a hegemonic structure of centrally regulating capitalism but rather arises out of the experience of post-Fordist capitalism, which operates without the centralized, repressive structures that were the hallmark of the Fordist MOR.

If the struggle against a centralized system of repression, often represented by a father-like, authoritarian figure standing in for the whole of capitalism, marks the literature of Fordism (proletarian literature being a clear example), we must conclude that the literature of post-Fordism is characterized precisely by the struggle with the experience of the *absence* of such an authoritarian figure representing a centralized mechanism of determination. As post-Fordism transitions into an economic logic of increasing deregulation and pluralism, leaving behind marginalization and repression via overt segregation and standardization, the “freedom” that is produced out of this system is increasingly perceived as a new form of unfreedom, since it is functionally opposed to dialectical processes of forming self-consciousness. As indicated in the epigraph to this essay taken from *Fight Club*, the narrator’s central psychological trauma is the absence of his father, who turned fathering into “franchising” and hence was unable to provide a stable family structure that would have been able to provide the narrator with guidance and a paternalistic “center” with which to dialectically struggle. Accordingly, Tyler Durden’s greatest wish is to fight his own father.<sup>21</sup>

The father becomes the symbol of the possibility of articulating one’s existence in relation to a centralized structure of rules and norms (through struggle), a center that is increasingly erased under post-Fordism. Tyler Durden, leader and father substitute for the men in fight club (he invents the rules of the club and implements the “law of the father”), summarizes the existential dilemma of the post-Fordist subject as follows: “If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never knew your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God? . . . If you could be either God’s worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?”<sup>22</sup> To this the narrator adds, remarking that this is all “Durden dogma” (and as such corresponds to centralized paternalistic logic), “we are God’s middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God’s attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing? Only if we’re caught and punished can we be saved.”<sup>23</sup> If resistance to capitalism under Fordism meant equating capitalism’s repression with damnation and the act of resisting it with promising salvation, the understanding of salvation under post-Fordism has radically changed. As post-Fordist capitalism itself stands opposed to unproductive centralized mechanisms of repression, the psychological struggle as represented in *Fight Club* is transformed into the desperate desire to recover a *pre*-post-Fordist repressive structure against which one can rebel and by which one can be judged.<sup>24</sup> The (negative or positive) outcome of the ideological resistance to capitalism proper is thus only a secondary concern. The narrator’s primary concern is the rejection of the anti-Oedipal element within post-Fordist capitalism.

At this point it appears prudent to pause for a moment and establish a clear definition of the central terminology involved in this examination, particularly of the concept of subjection/subjectivity. In his article on biopolitics and the labor of the multitude, also featured in this edition of *Mediations*, Antonio Negri presents a slightly different interpretation of subjectivity in postmodernity than the one I argue for in this essay. Attempting to clear what he sees as the often misunderstood concept of biopolitics from its false association with biological and naturalistic determinisms, Negri also argues for the significance of the concept of biopolitics as a “contradictory context of/within life” that highlights the existence of resistance as a “general phenomenon” in postmodernity. For Negri, biopolitics is a concept that points toward the “multiform *dispositif* of subjective production” that constitutes the very essence of what he calls the “postmodern affirmation.” I fully agree with Negri’s rehabilitated use of the concept of biopolitics, which must, in the function Negri correctly attributes to it, take on a central role in

the examination of immaterial labor (which, as I argue elsewhere, requires us to stress the non-naturalistic function of biopower to the degree that we can extend the examination of biopower in times of cognitive capitalism to the structural realm of what one could almost more accurately call *cogito-* or *cerebropower*). Yet, not just because of my argument regarding the need to historically differentiate between postmodernism and postmodernity, I would like to depart from Negri's description of contemporary subjectivity, most significantly when examining the relationship between subjectivity and resistance.

Negri's account of subjectivity and processes of subjection relies on the Foucauldian understanding of subjection as the product of contemporaneous processes of subjectification (the move toward specific subject positions, including moving toward new ways of thinking and being produced out of a new context) and desubjectification (the process of breaking free from, rejecting, or reformulating subject positions). Hence, according to Foucault (and Negri), a process of subjection always includes an element of desubjectification. For Negri, it is this element of desubjectification that reveals itself especially clearly in an examination of biopolitics in the context of postmodernity. In an examination of post-Fordist subjectivity, we must, indeed, pay close attention to the significance of desubjectification that accompanies this process. However, we must also distinguish between at least two forms of desubjectification: 1) desubjectification that constitutes a rejection of post-Fordist processes of subjectification and 2) processes of desubjectification that are aimed at the rejection of Fordist processes of subjectification, in other words, Fordist processes of desubjectification that under post-Fordism have become institutionalized and in fact have become crucial to the transition into and further development of a new MOR. As we shall see in more detail, postmodern culture and philosophy, narratives of resistance and political strategies of liberation, have in post-Fordism (or full postmodernity) not merely become co-opted, as is so often inaccurately claimed, but (and this is where the necessity of a rigorous periodizing project can be illustrated once more) postmodernism in fact has to be understood as the cultural and politico-philosophical expression of *Fordist* processes of desubjectification, processes that ultimately made the very transition into post-Fordism possible (the point at which they also lose their transformative power).

Furthermore, Negri correctly argues for a historically and materially specific examination of processes of subjection. This means that we must not only examine the changing function of processes of desubjectification in the context of the large-scale socioeconomic shift to post-Fordism, but also closely examine the multitude of functions processes of desubjectification

take on in the context of post-Fordism itself. We will get a more detailed insight into the need to complicate our understanding of categories such as "resistance" or the rejection of certain subject positions later in this essay. For the moment, suffice it to suggest that, especially in times of post-Fordist decentralization and its functionally chaotic structures of production and accumulation, resistance and liberation/progressive anti-capitalist action become increasingly difficult to link directly. To be sure, even moments of relative stability in the history of capitalism are always filled with contradictions and struggles that drive capitalism's development forward. Yet, especially since post-Fordism operates on a functional standardization of difference, it is of fundamental importance to foreground the dialectical interrelation of ROA and MOR that drives forward the historical development of the capitalist structure. Consequently, the function of dialectical critique is not primarily the reliance on a teleological aim (the grounds upon which Negri rejects such analysis) but the focus on the contradictions that are the motor of historical and structural development. Regarding post-Fordist subjectivity and processes of desubjectification in times of post-Fordism, this means that the development of the post-Fordist ROA and MOR depends on processes of desubjection that create, reproduce, and expand the decentralized networks. Championing difference and identities, the post-Fordist structure collapses the distinction between subjectification and desubjectification. Indeed, processes of desubjectification are often more appropriate and lucrative for post-Fordist economies than subjectification and we can thus suggest that one fundamental characteristic of post-Fordism is the effective institutionalization of desubjectification. It is for this reason, as we will see, that resistance and anti-capitalist critique become increasingly difficult to think. It is because we cannot simply link desubjectification and resistance that the psychological conflict I will trace in this essay emerges and that we must feel compelled to complicate rigorously our understanding of categories such as difference and desubjectification and analyze them in their precise functions in the context of post-Fordism.

Returning to our examination of the function of culture as the arena in which the struggles between ROA and MOR are carried out, we can see that post-Fordist cultural narratives critically interrogate postmodernism (which was centrally connected to Fordist processes of desubjectification). Postmodernism's demands for liberation based on a conception of freedom arising from a politics of pluralism and the abolition of centralized, repressive, Oedipal structures have in full post-Fordism structurally been met. However, as *Fight Club* argues, this has not been done in a manner that provides the subject with a form of freedom that is actually capable of producing pleasure. The supposedly liberating project of the anti-Oedipus is represented as a new

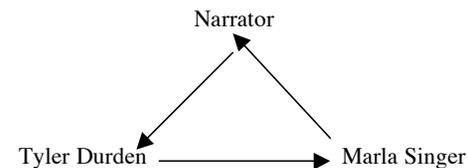
form of repression that arises out of the absence of traditional repression, and traditional repression thus becomes the paradoxical object of the post-Fordist desire of the anti-anti-Oedipus. The desire for liberation from Fordist repression has been transformed into the nostalgic and politically regressive desire for the restoration of repression as a way to recover stasis and control. The political and philosophical logic of the struggle against post-Fordist subjectivity hence merely gives rise to a nostalgically romanticizing (and de-historicizing) “at least” argument: at least Fordist norms and repression had a stable, easily identifiable centralized structure; one was at least able to rebel against the centralized father and formulate teleological narratives based on the desire to replace the father. *Fight Club*’s narrator remarks that “nothing is static. Everything falls apart.”<sup>25</sup> Impermanence and the lack of enduring teleological narratives, once the hallmarks of arguments that attempted to locate a liberatory potential within the abolition of “metanarratives,” have now become the main source of an impression of unfreedom arising out of the meaninglessness of total freedom in the absence of the centralized law of the Oedipal father.<sup>26</sup>

The interesting development toward the end of the novel is thus less the question regarding the success or failure of Project Mayhem’s supposedly anti-capitalist terrorist acts than the question regarding the development of the narrator’s process of subjection in relation to the trauma of anti-Oedipal post-Fordism. The point at which the narrator begins to reject categorically both Tyler Durden and Project Mayhem, the point at which the narrator for the only time feels deep regret for his actions, thus follows the killing of his former boss: “the problem is, I sort of liked my boss. If you’re male and you’re Christian living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your career.”<sup>27</sup> This realization illustrates that the object of the narrator’s desire is less the resistance to capitalism than the desperate search for a stable, paternalistic structure, which, as he ultimately realizes, can also be found in a paternally centralized company. The answer to the alienating effect of post-Fordism, according to the narrator’s logic, does not have to clash with capitalism itself, as post-Fordism’s unpleasant component is singularly understood as its lack of a centered paternalistic structure. Resolving his psychological crisis as he understands it hence does not require the narrator to be fundamentally opposed to the logic of capitalism. The answer does not lie in the destruction of capitalism but instead in the return to a more stable and therefore on an ontological level supposedly more gratifying stage of capitalism. The logical problem the novel tries to represent is the tension between two desires characterizing the deregulated, post-Fordist subject: the attempt to revive the dialectic and the desire to complete this task via the restoration of a paternalistic MOR. Rather

than voicing a critique of post-Fordist capitalism proper, *Fight Club* constitutes a critique of the rejections of deregulated subjectivity that merely focus on its anti-Oedipal logic without examining the post-Fordist mode of production in whose service deregulated subjectivity stands.

The restoration of Oedipal logic that results from the “faulty” critiques of deregulated subjectivity that Palahniuk’s novel ironically represents is symbolically expressed in the rite of passage that unites the members of Project Mayhem and marks them as members of a centralized structure replacing the lacking Oedipal family. Tyler Durden marks one hand of every member with a burn scar by kissing their hands and burning the trace of this kiss into their flesh with industrial lye activated by his saliva. Tyler’s kiss functions as the restoration of paternal lineage and as the replacement of the “name of the father,” the centrally organizing principle of the group. To everybody in Project Mayhem Tyler Durden becomes “the Great and Powerful,” “God and father.”<sup>28</sup> Tyler’s kiss-scar hence functions similarly to the way the “scar of the navel,” described by Drucilla Cornell, draws the marked subject into the Oedipal stage.<sup>29</sup> However, while the scar of the navel signifies an almost violent “symbolic tear” that “rips us away from the imagined cocoon of the preoedipal phase,” Tyler’s kiss transforms the entrance into the stage of Oedipal law nostalgically into a loving process that signifies an emotional social bond and disregards the psychological struggle associated with the entrance into a universe centrally dominated by the law of the father.<sup>30</sup>

Even the relationship with Tyler and Marla (who becomes Tyler’s girlfriend) that the narrator develops based on his schizophrenic hallucination is indicative of his desire to return to an Oedipal family arrangement. It is possible to map graphically the relationship of the narrator’s desire and the imaginary triangle of desire he creates among the three main characters (narrator-Tyler-Marla) as follows:



The narrator desires Tyler, who desires Marla, who in turn desires the narrator, as we find out at the end of the novel (in fact, the relationship between Marla and the narrator in the triangular situation is perceived by the

narrator distinctly as one of mothering). In Freud, the Oedipal model functions as an allegory for the necessity to curb the son's desire for unlimited enjoyment (represented by his desire for the mother) by means of paternal prohibition of incest, which stands in for all the desires that are detrimental to the stability of a given social structure.<sup>31</sup> Lacan extends this model by stressing the centrality of the acquisition of language for processes of subjection and the development of consciousness.<sup>32</sup> Just as we are marked by the father's last name that assigns us a position in a historical lineage and in a present structure of rules and norms, learning to name things (i.e., acquiring language) similarly forces us to adopt an entire set of social laws along with those names.<sup>33</sup> The triangle narrator-Tyler-Marla is an exact recreation of the Oedipal Triangle within which Tyler "stabilizes" the narrator's subjectivity by occupying the role of the father (marked by the kiss-scar as substitute for the father's last name) and by enforcing the law of the father (in part exemplified by *Fight Club's* famous rules and Project Mayhem's dogmatic ideology). The narrator willingly imagines this as a situation that represents the dysfunctional family structure, reminding him of his youth: "me, I'm six years old, again, and taking messages back and forth between my estranged parents. I hated this when I was six. I hate it now."<sup>34</sup> Despite his hatred for this, it nevertheless appears to offer more potential than his present situation. "Which is worse, hell or nothing?"

#### Why Post-Fordist Subjectivity Is Not Enjoyable

According to the narrator, post-Fordist, anti-Oedipal subjectivity cannot be enjoyable. Within contemporary cultural production, this is a rather widespread logical conclusion that finds expression in narratives of weak or absent fathers. This argument may be most famously expressed in Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections*, whose plot revolves around the gradual dissolution of a midwestern family, pained by the inevitable progression of the father's insanity, as well as by a condition common to most family members: anhedonia, the inability to experience pleasure.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the association of anti-Oedipal subjectivity with anhedonia bears the mark of a fundamental misrecognition. Moreover, it is this misrecognition that underlies the history of both the Oedipal narrative as one of the most significant metanarratives of Western civilization as well as much of the history of psychoanalysis as a discipline. As we shall see, the narrator tragically misinterprets the Oedipal process of subjection and mistakes a dialogical for a dialectical relationship.

Psychoanalysis describes (self-)consciousness as a result of the dialectical interaction between the son and the father, who socializes or "civilizes"

the son by regulating access to pleasure. Ontogenesis and phylogenesis are, according to Freud, dialectically interconnected and require a centrally located "law of the father" to guarantee that the development of each individual is stabilized (hence civilized) via the struggle between the "pleasure principle" and the "reality principle." In other words, the process of subjection, of developing a functional sense of self within the context of a civilization, necessarily carries with it, as Freud would have it, an element of discontent. Freedom for the subject reveals itself not as unlimited individual freedom but as freedom in contingency. Freedom is constituted but at the same time limited by the law of the father (a society's legal structure).<sup>36</sup> In Lacanian terms, the birth of the conscious individual coincides with the subject's acquisition of language, the passage into the Symbolic. Thought is born along with language, which means that the world with which the subject, through dialectical struggle, formulates a sense of self is the realm that is entirely overwritten with symbolic signifiers, which in turn carry with them the legal, moral, and ideological structure of a given society.<sup>37</sup> To develop consciousness means to acquire dialectically the language of the Symbolic and with it the law of the father that constitutes the structure of the Symbolic (or what Lacan would call the Other).<sup>38</sup> This logic is deeply ingrained into the history of Western cultural production, in which father narratives are the common context for representations of processes of subjection. One need only think of the *Bildungsroman* in this context. In both the classic and the modern *Bildungsroman*, plot is produced by the central character's dialectical struggle with the law of the father/the Symbolic, and the success of the protagonist's education is measured by the degree to which he/she is successful in articulating a functional conception of self in relation to the central Oedipal structure.<sup>39</sup> Looking in detail at the father narrative and its disruptions and complications in a story that describes a problem in the process of subjection (or represents an unpleasant form of subjectivity) can thus provide us with a valuable entrance into the logic of a narrative's argument regarding a failed process of subjection.

As indicated previously, *Fight Club* is fundamentally concerned with paternal prohibition. According to Slavoj Žižek, one must supplement basic descriptions of the Oedipal triangle with the figure of the primal father, as each narrative only describes half of the social workings of prohibition. In the Oedipus myth prohibition is externalized, whereas in the myth of the primal father prohibition has been utterly internalized.<sup>40</sup> Žižek combines Freud's classical formulations of the interaction between repression and enjoyment to account for the phenomenon that the absence of the father must not necessarily result in the absence of his law — in fact, the law of the father operates ever more strongly in his absence once it has been internal-

ized by society proper. *Fight Club* describes this kind of reinstitution of the law of the father. Faced with a social situation that is marked by the absence of a centralized, paternalistically organized structure of determination, hence by the actual absence of an Oedipal logic of subjection and the stabilizing power of the law of the father, the narrator re-creates such a father figure complete with a social network/symbolic structure surrounding him. This network, the fight clubs, notably operates even after the disappearance of Tyler by following the internalized law of the father (Tyler's rules). The realization that the parricide (killing Tyler) cannot remove the father from the center of the structure, the realization that Project Mayhem cannot be stopped, hence presents the true horror of the situation for the narrator, who ultimately has to realize the gruesome and repressive consequences of his nostalgic longing for the return to centralized order.

As *Fight Club* indicates, the reason that post-Fordist subjectivity is not enjoyable appears to be connected to the logic of the father narrative as well. What then is the relationship between the father/Oedipal structures, subjectivity, and enjoyment? The most common (and most uncomplicated) formulation of the concept of enjoyment constructs it simply as the freedom from repression, as the ability to do what one pleases. Yet, as mentioned above, this basic formulation (much to the dismay of people who remain invested in the idea of bourgeois liberalism) is fundamentally flawed. Within Oedipal logic, freedom and subjectivity not surprisingly only have meaning in the context of a paternalistic structure (in dependency, therefore), which suggests that it is impossible to arrive at an idea of enjoyment in the absence of Oedipal repression. Consequently, parricide, as explained above, only consolidates and internalizes the law of the father. There is a direct and necessary relationship between enjoyment and repression/the law of the father. Žižek's writings on the interrelation among enjoyment, power, and Law can help us further illuminate this point. According to Žižek, transgression (that is, the formulation of enjoyment in postulating a situation of freedom beyond repression) necessitates for its logical conception the existence of Law — “without Law there is no transgression, transgression needs an obstacle in order to assert itself.” Following this assumption, according to Žižek, one must further conclude that “it is not enough to say that the ‘repression’ of some libidinal content retroactively eroticizes the very gesture of ‘repression’ — this ‘eroticization’ of power is not a secondary effect of its exertion on its object but its very disavowed foundation, its ‘constitutive crime.’”<sup>41</sup> The absence of repression, of the superego, can thus easily be understood as resulting in the lack of enjoyment as defined through negative opposition to a centralized rule, shedding light on the obviously strange and partially ineffective forms of resistance-

enjoyment in *Fight Club*. The preferred form of freedom that provides enjoyment to the narrator and the men in fight clubs is thus defined by the desire to be actively able to resist a father figure.

This argument regarding the relationship between repression/the law of the father and enjoyment is further underscored by Žižek's analysis of what he calls in reference to Lacan the “paradox of desire.” To understand how enjoyment functions in dialectical relation with repression one must additionally consider the roles played by fantasy and desire. Desire, according to Žižek (channeling Freud and Lacan), is a socially produced element created out of previously constructed social fantasies.<sup>42</sup> In simpler terms this means that, for example, the desire to win the lottery must be analyzed in relation to the preexisting social fantasy that winning the lottery is a good thing, in itself hence fundamentally intertwined with the logic of capitalism. Desire is socially created and as such depends on a social network of values and norms. Furthermore, Žižek argues, the paradox of desire is that we “mistake for postponement of the ‘thing itself’ what is already the ‘thing itself,’” that desire “retroactively posits its own cause.”<sup>43</sup> There is, therefore, a tension between desire and the object of desire. This object of desire paradoxically appears to constitute desire by eternally remaining out of reach. It is this paradox of desire that Lacan expresses in his description of *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire. For the sake of our inquiry it is worth quoting Žižek's summary of this argument at some length.

It is the famous Lacanian *objet petit a* that mediates between the incompatible domains of desire and *jouissance*. In what precise sense is *objet petit a* the object cause of desire? The *objet petit a* is not what we desire, what we are after, but, rather, that which sets our desire in motion, in the sense of the formal frame which confers consistency on our desire: desire is, of course, metonymical; it shifts from one object to another; through all these displacements, however, desire none the less retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object, make us desire this object — *objet petit a* as the cause of desire is nothing other than this formal frame of consistency.<sup>44</sup>

Enjoyment, defined as the fulfillment of desire, is not created at the point at which we reach *objet petit a*. Rather, it is the endless deferral of *objet petit a* to which paternalistic rule bars access that constructs desire and thus pleasure. Unbarred access to *objet petit a* results not in unlimited pleasure but, on the contrary, in the very absence of desire and ultimately of pleasure. It is

this phenomenon *Fight Club*'s narrator discovers to be the ugly underbelly of bourgeois individualism's flawed logic, the very logic that becomes increasingly hegemonic in anti-Oedipal post-Fordism. The actual absence of the father appears to be the cause of the unpleasant perception of deregulated subjectivity.

Let us then put together the parts of our inquiry into the logic of enjoyment and subjection and articulate the relationship between the (law of the) father and enjoyment. In his examination of Lacan's seminar on the name of the father, Jacques-Alain Miller explores this point in a somewhat simplified but for our purposes effective manner. According to Miller, enjoyment's constitutive moment is located in the father barring unhindered access to *objet petit a*. Enjoyment, therefore, is defined by and as an aspect of the name of the father.<sup>45</sup> Expressed in a matheme, the relationship presents itself as

NP (J)  
DM

NP, the law or name of the father (*le nom du père* stands in for the logic of a patriarchal order most commonly indicated as a result of lineage, locating the subject via the process of being assigned the father's last name), constitutes *J* (enjoyment, or *jouissance*) by barring access to the object cause of desire DM (which, in the context of the Oedipal triangle, corresponds to the desire for/of the mother), thereby producing and reproducing the forms of desire that in turn make enjoyment possible. For the question of enjoyment in relation to subjection this formulation hence takes us back to the well-known Lacanian formulation of subjection:  $\$ \leftrightarrow a$ .<sup>46</sup>

The actual absence of the law of the father and of a stable centralized mechanism of repression in post-Fordism, as *Fight Club*'s narrator experiences, thus result in the impossibility of formulating a conception of enjoyment. This assertion may initially seem nonsensical, yet one has to look no further than our basic expectations for literary plot to illustrate the value of this point. Plot in traditional literary narratives is fundamentally directed at but also a result of what presents itself as the literary equivalent to *objet petit a*. We could turn to the basic narrative conventions of the *Bildungsroman* as one of the dominant genres in Western literary history to illustrate the importance of this logical structure for cultural production. For our purposes, however, it suffices to look at the narrative that is possibly the least interested in complicating the relationship between desire and enjoyment: the story of revenge. The entire plot of such a story is driven by the simple and all-consuming desire for revenge, a scenario whose imagination is sufficient

for the production of enjoyable plot (and fantasies) for the reader as well as for the protagonist while postponing the actual act. Now, let us imagine a slightly different novel, one that begins after the dramatic act of revenge has taken place. A post-revenge story, we quickly realize, would inevitably be ranked among the most boring stories ever told. Who would truly be interested in the harmonious life of the Count of Monte Cristo after he has "satisfied" his lust for revenge? Who would enjoy reading an alternative version of *Moby Dick* in which Ahab succeeds in killing the white whale, finally achieves transcendence, and returns to shore to lead a satisfied, peaceful life? Just as struggle is the essence of the dialectical progression of processes of subjection, the lack of a continual deferral of *objet petit a* is the very essence of plot.

The current moment in cultural production is in part defined by nostalgia and representations of returns to previous, simpler, paternalistic moments in history. Yet, as we see in *Fight Club*, such attempts to locate enjoyment in the past are not merely regressive. They are, as indicated earlier, fundamentally based on a misrecognition regarding the relationship between the dialectic and Oedipal subjectivity. As illustrated by the narrator's coping mechanisms, the experience of post-Fordism tends to create the impression that the Oedipal structure is the only way of locating a functioning dialectical process of subjection, which suggests to the narrator that the only way to resolve the problems of post-Fordist subjectivity is to return to an Oedipal past. Yet this regressive trend emerging out of the resistance to post-Fordism fails to distinguish between dialogical and dialectical relationships and, as a result, conflates enjoyment and happiness. As we saw earlier, Freudian and Lacanian models of subjection are indeed helpful for the project of critiquing the logical flaws of facets of capitalist ideology, such as the concept of bourgeois individualism. However, this should not be taken to mean that what appears to be the dialectical interaction between subject and the Symbolic (the Other) in the Oedipal triangle is the same as the relationship between being for self and being for other in the Hegelian dialectic, or as the relationship between subject and material reality in the Marxist dialectic. On the contrary, there is something in the Oedipal structure that is hostile to true dialectical progress. Simply put, a true, functioning dialectic defines progress as sublation, that is, as the result of the interaction between thesis and antithesis that are both changed, yet preserved in the process of supersession. In the relationship between son and father, or between subject and the Symbolic, only one pole of the structure changes: the subject. The father and the Oedipal order, however, remain centrally located and unchanged, which is necessary for the perpetuation of the paternalistic order. Paternal repression, as we can see in *Fight Club*, is not dialectical, yet is frequently

mistaken for a dialectical relationship in the context of post-Fordism.<sup>47</sup>

Especially in the context of post-Fordism, it becomes necessary to emphasize the distinction between Hegelian/Marxian processes of subjection that are dialectical and Oedipal processes of subjection that are dialogical. In fact, Lacan's linguistic account of subjection that essentially describes a process of productively disrupting a singular, pre-social voice that must be replaced with the voice of the Symbolic (which is always pluralistic, yet still paternalistic) indicates that we should conceive of this process of subjection as dialogical in a Bakhtinian sense.<sup>48</sup> Expressed in Bakhtinian terms, Lacan equates Oedipal subjectivity with the entrance into the Symbolic as the moment at which the subject learns to speak in a dialogic or polyphonic voice. Like the Oedipal subject, polyphony is a multitude of phonetic values which, in order to gain value in the first place, are contingent on a centrally located, organizing structure. In such a situation the subject merely "takes meaning" and the structure of "meaning" itself remains fixed. Within the context of this distinction, enjoyment, which can only exist in relation to and is constituted by the Oedipal, reveals itself as similarly dialogical in nature. Happiness, as we shall see, is the positive affect created out of a dialectical interaction. The narrator's inability to recognize enjoyment as dialogical results in the misinterpretation of anti-Oedipal subjectivity as defined by the inability to produce positive affect.

Furthermore, the political danger of this misrecognition of Oedipal subjectivity as dialectical, as the narrator learns toward the end of *Fight Club*, is that he locates the problem of anti-Oedipal capitalism in the adjective, not in the noun. Consequently, the return to paternalistic structures is constructed as opposed to or even as a progressive alternative to post-Fordist subjectivity. Even narratives that represent the desire to restore a "real" dialectic by reintroducing the struggle between the subject and material reality are compromised by the nostalgia for Oedipal subjectivity, literalizing the materiality of subjection and less focusing on the actual experience of materiality than advocating the struggle with "real, natural life" as the locus of masculinity. One popular example of this is the booming branch of the reality television genre that focuses on the "realism" of Fordist or manual labor. Especially in the context of post-Fordism's increasing supersession of Fordist production, the labor associated with "Fordist peripheries" becomes an exciting (and escapist) spectacle in contemporary cultural production. Already at this point it becomes obvious that such regressive projects carry with them the forms of reactionary gender politics that will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay. First, however, we shall turn toward a regressive trend that Palahniuk's novel and countless other cultural artifacts illustrate: locating opposition to post-Fordism in the return to a previous

stage of capitalism, in particular to the enjoyable structures of paternalistic Fordism.

#### Nostalgia for Ford(ist Labor)

As we have seen, not all rejections of post-Fordism and deregulated subjectivity are anti-capitalist. However, they often look as though they are, which explains the common misinterpretation of *Fight Club* (both novel and film) as an anti-capitalist work. Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman argue that "the truth is that *Fight Club* in the end offers a critique of the social and political conditions produced by contemporary capitalism only in a way that reconfirms capitalism's worst excesses and re-legitimizes its ruling narratives."<sup>49</sup> While this is a valid argument, I would like to add that a more rewarding reading differentiates between the film and the novel, reading the novel as decidedly self-conscious regarding the narrator's inability to produce a critique of capitalism proper. As Giroux and Szeman correctly observe, the novel is mainly interested in problematizing rejections of post-Fordism that "re-legitimize" certain "ruling narratives" of capitalism. These ruling narratives, however, are notably not part of post-Fordism but of Fordism and its paternalistic MOR, the return to which appears to the men of *Fight Club* to be a viable solution to the problems post-Fordism poses. Whereas the novel attempts to interrogate this problematic regressive political potential that the transition into post-Fordism includes, the film in contradistinction spectacularly fails to capture this interesting and complex facet of post-Fordist capitalism, indeed reducing *Fight Club* to a one-dimensional, uncomplicated, and ultimately logically flawed and politically regressive rejection of capitalism.

The objective of Project Mayhem as represented in the film is the destruction of the credit system, which seems to suggest that anti-capitalism is Project Mayhem's primary ideological and political goal. In the novel, however, Project Mayhem's goal is the destruction of the Museum of Natural History, a quite striking difference that is often disregarded, since it does not quite match up with the anti-capitalism many readers would like to find in the novel.<sup>50</sup> After all, if the novel were indeed centrally motivated by anti-capitalism, why would Project Mayhem's target be a museum and not something more attractive and radically chic such as the credit system? Substituting the destruction of the credit system for a narrative of destruction aimed at the return to a previous moment in history, the movie thus transforms the narrative into a far more pleasant and fashionable radical story. In contrast to the film, the novel succeeds as a politically progressive work precisely because it is *not* interested in representing a hip, attractive group of

anti-capitalist revolutionaries. Instead, the novel focuses self-consciously on the ironic failures of the fight clubs and Project Mayhem and on the regressive politics created out of the negative experience of post-Fordism. The problem examined in the novel revolves not merely around the question of whether one dislikes consumer capitalism. Rather, the novel represents the politically troubling desiring structures that the experience of post-Fordism produces. Palahniuk's novel asks the same question much contemporary cultural production seems to be concerned with: what happens when the widespread political solution to the rejection of post-Fordism in fact becomes Fordism?

In his examination of the initial reaction to the pressure of the emerging post-Fordist ROA (or what he calls "flexible accumulation"), David Harvey seemingly cannot do without a descriptive vocabulary that illustrates the fundamentally ambiguous if not negative reaction to the ontological dilemma of suddenly having to articulate one's existence within the context of a radically changing socioeconomic environment. Flexible accumulation and the gradual supersession of paternalist Fordism produces reactions Harvey describes as "baffling," "bewildering," or "difficult," creating a perception of widespread "confusion."<sup>51</sup> In his latest book, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Richard Sennett describes the common effect of the experience of the contemporary stage of capitalism as the longing for the stability of Fordism, which was "at least" characterized by the development of stable skills, the existence of a regulated workday, career and social services provided by the state, and a more tangible, material form of production and dissemination of commodities. Sennett himself is not entirely free from this nostalgically romanticized construction of the Fordist past, yet he is quick to point out that this desire for a return to Fordism is not altogether logical, since instability, as Marx already pointed out, has always been central to the capitalist mode of production and is thus not exclusive to post-Fordism's standardization of difference.<sup>52</sup>

Still, Sennett claims, this nostalgic reaction to the new capitalism has become widespread and is motivated by a logic of the lesser evil, the "at least" logic we are already familiar with by this point. This becomes apparent in a passage that makes it especially difficult to dissociate Sennett's criticism of idealizing Fordism and his own nostalgia for its stability. "In terms of wealth and power," Sennett writes,

a paternalist like Henry Ford was indeed as unequal to workers on the assembly line as any modern mogul. In sociological terms, however, he was closer to them, just as the general on the battlefield was connected to his troops. The sociological idea here is that inequality

translates into distance; the greater the distance — the less a felt connection on both sides — the greater the social inequality between them.<sup>53</sup>

Separating social and economic structure in his analysis of anti-Oedipal post-Fordism, the two dimensions whose dialectical interconnection the regulation approach foregrounds as the necessary basis for an accurate analysis of capitalism, Sennett replicates the logic of the narrator of *Fight Club* and attempts to salvage paternalism's stability, as if it were possible to consider it in purely sociological terms, that is, independently from its capitalist implementation. For Sennett, as for *Fight Club*'s narrator, the decision comes down to choosing between a social situation that induces "dread" and one that induces "anxiety": "anxiety attaches to what might happen; dread attaches to what one knows will happen. Anxiety arises in ill-defined conditions, dread where pain or ill-fortune is well-defined. Failure in the old pyramid was grounded in dread; failure in the new institution is shaped by anxiety."<sup>54</sup> It is once again the "at least" attitude that reveals itself as characteristic of literary mediations of post-Fordist culture. The underlying logic is representatively summarized in the pragmatically anti-dialectical solution of *Fight Club*'s narrator to the problems posed by deregulated subjectivity: Which is worse? Hell (dread/Fordism/Project Mayhem/centered subjectivity) or nothing (anxiety/post-Fordism/the lack of the father/deregulated subjectivity)?

The regressive consequences of this logic become apparent in the desiring structures that allow for the transformation of fight club into Project Mayhem, which constitutes the sociopolitically devastating exaggeration of the logic of fight club. Whereas fight club introduces the interconnection between the desire for the restoration of a dialectical struggle and the desire for the restoration of the father figure (Tyler Durden and "Durden dogma" as the law of the father), replacing hollow, total freedom with the desired "contingent freedom" offered by dialectical struggle, Project Mayhem is the consequence of this flawed logic taken to its extreme. Rather than being content with their relatively comfortable lives in the service industry, countless men are willing to subject themselves to the centralized physical and psychological repression of Project Mayhem and Tyler Durden. Project Mayhem is not an anarchist collective but the result of the nostalgic desire of a return to Fordism. It is a Fordist factory in which Tyler Durden functions as father/Ford/God, complete with division of labor and Fordist alienation.

[T]hey all know what to do. It's part of Project Mayhem. No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple

task perfectly. . . . I hug the walls, being a mouse trapped in this clockwork of silent men with the energy of trained monkeys, cooking and working and sleeping in teams. Pull a lever. Push a button. A team of space monkeys cooks meals all day, and all day, teams of space monkeys are eating out of the plastic bowls they brought with them.<sup>55</sup>

The novel is not about the desire to end capitalism, nor does it depict a single strategy that is actually opposed to capitalist logic. *Fight Club* is a novel about the shocking insight that resistance to post-Fordism is indeed capable of producing desiring structures that paradoxically lead subjects to willingly subject themselves to Fordist exploitation, seeking enjoyment in the restoration of a paternalistic leader.<sup>56</sup> The “clockwork” Project Mayhem stands opposed to the logic of post-Fordism but not to the logic of capitalism proper. On the contrary, the image of the “clockwork of silent men” with which the narrator associates Project Mayhem functions as a nostalgically idealized construction of Fordism as a simpler time in history in which manual skills and physical labor were at the heart of the labor process.<sup>57</sup>

#### **The Importance of Being Versed in Country Things: Immaterial Labor, Feral Subjects, and Simulations of Interiorized Knowledge**

One facet of the psychological crisis post-Fordist subjectivity tends to create is what is frequently described as a lost connection to reality, a concern that is reflected in the common anxiety to have lost the ability to have “real” experiences. The reality of an experience in turn, as *Fight Club* illustrates, is in post-Fordism commonly measured in terms of its physicality. In this context, Fordist labor allows for both the restoration of paternalistic structures as well as the return to the possibility of having a “real” experience via physical labor. Tyler Durden himself is accordingly not a post-Fordist but instead the perfect Fordist subject. Time and again the narrator admires the fact that Tyler is “full of useful knowledge” (Tyler knows how to put common products of consumer capitalism to use by making them into a bomb, napalm, etcetera). The kind of knowledge Tyler possesses stands opposed to the kind of knowledge that characterizes post-Fordism. Jean François Lyotard discusses the effects of increasing computerization and digitalization on knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard claims that cybernetics and the new hegemony of computers necessitate the translation of knowledge, if it is to remain operational, into quantities of information. The consequence of this is an increasing “exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the knower.” “Knowledge,” says Lyotard, “is and

will be produced in order to be sold; it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ‘use-value.’”<sup>58</sup> What Lyotard understands as the “exteriorization of knowledge” corresponds to what Sennett describes as the disappearance of traditional skills (which for Sennett are corporeal skill, mostly relating to manual or Fordist labor).<sup>59</sup> Knowledge is only accumulated in order to be exchanged, without a direct implication for the subject who has accumulated the knowledge. This emptying out of traditional use-value of knowledge forms the basis of the anxiety of post-Fordism and, as we can see in *Fight Club*, constitutes the form of post-Fordist alienation that lies at the heart of the anxiety of the post-Fordist subject.

Contemporary capitalism is frequently represented as primarily interested in exchanges in knowledge, erasing the primacy of the actual product and, more significantly for the men of *Fight Club*, of the (laboring) body. Similarly, information becomes increasingly important in the context of immaterial forms of capitalist trade and accumulation such as the stock exchange. As the example of the trade in stocks illustrates, the new capitalist structure is based on an increasingly complex and decentralized network of determinations that become increasingly hard to oversee for the individual subject and almost entirely independent from the individual’s physical existence. As indicated earlier, certainly not everyone’s labor in the contemporary context is digital, immaterial, or professional/managerial. The dominant forms of labor in post-Fordism, however, are becoming increasingly immaterial, which, as cultural production indicates, appears to be one of the reasons for its negative experience. It is thus beneficial for our analysis at this point to establish a workable definition of the concept of immaterial labor in order to concretize the analytical model, which we shall use to evaluate contemporary culture’s representation (and rejection) of immaterial labor. One of the first explorations of the concept of immaterial labor can be found in Maurizio Lazzarato’s writings on the emergence of forms of labor he associates with the rise of “mass intellectuality” since the end of the 1970s. According to Lazzarato,

The concept of immaterial labor refers to *two different aspects* of labor. On one hand, as regards the “informational content” of the commodity, it refers directly to the changes taking place in workers’ labor processes in big companies in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). On the other hand, as regards the

activity that produces the “cultural content” of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work” — in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.<sup>60</sup>

While the basic terms laid out by this definition are valuable for our purposes, cultural production frequently indicates that we are finding ourselves already one step beyond the situation described by Lazzarato. As William Gibson’s representation of the socioeconomic function of “the footage” in *Pattern Recognition* illustrates, contemporary society has in fact moved closer to what Lyotard would call a complete trade in exteriorized knowledge, an economy, thus, in which networks of information and the dissemination of knowledge begin to function independently from and begin to take precedence over the exchange and production of commodities proper.

Parallel to the decreasing importance of the laboring body, post-Fordist, immaterial economies begin to be characterized by what Paolo Virno describes as an “essential homogeneity” resulting from the full inclusion of the life of the mind into labor processes. Similarly, labor time and enjoyment are fused in the life of *Fight Club*’s narrator, since private time for him consists exclusively of the consumption and (re)production of trends. “Therefore,” Virno argues, “since work ceases to constitute a special and separate praxis, with distinctive criteria and procedures in effect at its center, completely different from those criteria and procedures which regulate non-labor time, there is not a clean, well-defined threshold separating labor time from non-labor time.”<sup>61</sup> Post-Fordist labor, since it is increasingly immaterial in nature and therefore troubles traditional definitions of labor, allows for a radical increase in new forms of exploitation. Simply put, the troubling of the boundary between labor and private life gradually erodes the last forms of the individual’s control over his/her labor processes while simultaneously assigning unwaged, immaterial labor the individual may not even perceive as such a central function in the production of surplus value. We can, therefore, understand the frequent romanticization of physical labor in contemporary culture as the regressive result of the subject’s desperate wish to regain control over his/her own material and immaterial production processes.

Similarly, such regressive desiring structures indicate that the ways in which power is exercised over the subject have radically changed as a result of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Whereas Fordism was characterized by centrally organized repressive mechanisms and an Oedipal logic of inclusion/exclusion, immaterial, anti-Oedipal post-Fordism’s

productive apparatus operates on differentiation and pluralism, a logic to which mechanisms of exclusion are fundamentally opposed. As Lazzarato points out, “the slogan ‘become subjects,’ far from eliminating the antagonism between hierarchy and cooperation, between autonomy and command, actually re-poses the antagonism at a higher level, because it both mobilizes and clashes with the very personality of the individual worker.”<sup>62</sup> Once again, this illustrates the extent to which a transition in the structure in capitalism is always connected to a necessary transition on the level of its accompanying MOR. The transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist MOR is characterized by a specifically radical re-signification of ideological structures, beliefs, and forms of subjection. As contemporary cultural production demonstrates time and again, ideas that under Fordism constituted forms of opposition against centrally located apparatuses of repression have been transformed into the very logic of the post-Fordist MOR. Specifically, the desire to overcome mechanisms of exclusion and segregation that limited access to free and independent processes of forming “identities” has, under post-Fordism, been productively included in the diversifying logic of bourgeois individualism and neoliberal capitalism. Yet, as we see in *Fight Club* and other texts, this celebration of different identities, of the process of becoming subjects, does not offer true freedom and liberation but is completely included in post-Fordism’s immaterial processes of production.

Yet, more dramatic than the shift in the ways in which subjectivity, community, or Fordist narratives of liberation function is the perception of the effects of immateriality itself. Tyler Durden and fight club allow the members to learn “useful” and non-exteriorized knowledge, which is associated with a less alienated form of knowledge. The Fordism of Project Mayhem’s useful knowledge is mirrored in the ironic perception of physical labor as a less alienated form of labor. Labor in Project Mayhem, an extension of the physical literalization of dialectical struggle in fight club, does not only allow the men to “fight” an increasingly immaterial existence by being able to once again use their bodies: the goal of fight club and of Project Mayhem is completely to reduce the men’s bodies to objects of Fordist utility. However, it should now be obvious that this is not to be read as an act of opposing the logic of capitalism but, like the opposition to post-Fordism’s anti-Oedipalism, as merely an act of opposing the immaterial nature of post-Fordist capitalism, while nostalgically idealizing the function of the body within Fordism: “fight club gets to be your reason for going to the gym and keeping your hair cut short and cutting your nails.”<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, the way in which the narrator meets Tyler Durden (or rather the way in which he imagines the meeting, since Tyler is the mental projection of the narrator’s desire for a supposedly less alienated form of Fordist

subjectivity) corresponds precisely to this rejection of post-Fordist immaterial labor and the new forms of alienation arising out of the “exteriorization of knowledge.” The narrator meets Tyler on a nudist beach. He watches Tyler, “naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face,” as he collects driftwood and begins to build what the narrator later identifies as a giant wooden hand arranged in a specific angle in relation to the sun.

[W]hat Tyler had created was the shadow of a giant hand. Only now the fingers were Nosferatu-long and the thumb was too short, but he said how at exactly four-thirty the hand was perfect. The giant shadow-hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler had sat in the perfection of a hand he’d created himself.<sup>64</sup>

The first meeting with Tyler thus introduces us to one of the fundamental desires of the narrator, namely the desire to possess actual, unalienated, material, manual skills, skills that are utterly inconsequential and devoid of value in a post-Fordist economy. Yet, Tyler’s hand and its method of construction also indicate the attachment to a form of knowledge that predates Fordism, which foreshadows the goal of Project Mayhem to resolve the pressures of the present by returning not just to a Fordist social structure but indeed to a pre-civilized situation. The post-Fordist subject stands in polar opposition to this escapist desire for “feral subjectivity,” which I will return to shortly.

Currently popular representations of the complete destruction of post-Fordist civilization can in this context be understood as logically similar responses to the complexity of post-Fordism. Destruction in this sense functions as a desperate and regressive means of simplifying post-Fordist chaoplexity in a way that allows for the return to relatively simpler structural determinations and therefore to a context that will hopefully once again allow for the formulation of stable (since regressively recentered) conceptions of subjectivity. As we can see in *Fight Club*, apart from simplifying context, destruction also becomes a means of escaping post-Fordism and returning to a Fordist or even pre-Fordist world. Fittingly, the ultimate goal of Project Mayhem is directed at bringing about such a radically regressive and nostalgic transformation of society that promises to offer enjoyable alternatives to post-Fordist subjectivity. The narrator of *Fight Club* describes the objective of Project Mayhem as follows:

We wanted to blast the world free from history. We were eating breakfast in the house on Paper Street, and Tyler said picture your-

self planting radishes and seed potatoes on the fifteenth green of a forgotten golf course. You’ll hunt elk through the damp canyon forest around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five-degree angle.<sup>65</sup>

The rejection of immaterial post-Fordist subjectivity hence extends Project Mayhem’s “liberating” process of devolution even beyond the return to Fordism. Its ultimate objective is the de-historicized, nostalgic return to a pre-civilized existence that in its primary reliance on physical labor promises to be easier to map and more productive in terms of locating enjoyment. As we first saw in reference to the destruction of the body in *Fight Club*, the novel’s idealization of pain and injury is a result of the desire to reduce the body entirely to utility, transforming it first into a Fordist machine that stands opposed to the growing insignificance of the body in an immaterial economy. In a situation in which labor is increasingly cerebral or affective, the body’s remaining function is limited to that of a canvas for consumer capitalist signs and as the vehicle that keeps alive and transports the main productive organ of post-Fordism: the brain.

As contemporary cultural production illustrates, however, this growing insignificance of the body gives rise to a nostalgic attachment to physicality. Simultaneously, physical labor as an aspect of a lost MOR is constructed as standing in opposition to post-Fordist subjectivity, endowing the regressive reduction of the body to use-value with a seemingly transgressive or even revolutionary quality. To be sure, this nostalgia for the laboring body is singularly characteristic of the fully post-Fordist subject; of subjects, that is, that are completely included in a post-Fordist economy. This means at the same time that there persists a situation of uneven development regarding the inclusion of subjects into post-Fordism and there remain what Harvey calls Fordist peripheries that constitute possibly the last clear markers of class difference in post-Fordism. This well-known formulation, however, can lead to false conclusions regarding the nature of capitalist structures. As indicated earlier, even forms of labor we may associate more readily with a previous mode of production are not remnants of past capitalist structures. Instead such peripheries should simply be understood as part of the heterogeneous constitution of post-Fordism. As is the case with every mode of production throughout the history of capitalism, post-Fordism’s heterogeneity Harvey describes as a situation of uneven development does not constitute a historical difference but the uneven development resulting from structural complexity. It is, however, this impression of a historical difference that underlies nostalgic rejections of post-Fordism that reconstruct non-

immaterial or professional/managerial class forms of labor as idealized time portals that allow us to return to historically superseded forms of subjectivity. Simply put, we get a glimpse of the obfuscation of class difference by the simulation of historical (not structural) uneven development at the paradoxical moments at which the professional managerial class-subject derives pleasure from periodically and nostalgically choosing to inhabit the same subject position as the laborers who exist in spaces that are idealized as Fordist peripheries. Examples of this are currently booming sectors of the tourist industry that offer Fordist or pre-Fordist labor as adventure vacations for post-Fordist subjects.<sup>66</sup> The enjoyment of physical labor in an immaterial economy for the post-Fordist subject hence becomes more accurately identity-tourism, a form of tourism few subjects who are still forced to physically labor in Fordist peripheries would perceive as pleasurable.

Increasingly, however, as we can observe in cultural production, pleasurable subjectivity is represented as regressive subjectivity, or more specifically as nostalgic forms of physical existence. Examples of this are the current popularity of “reality” shows that depict Fordist or physical labor, such as Discovery Channel’s hit series *The Deadliest Catch* (2005–present) and *Dirty Jobs* (2003–present), truTV’s *Axe Men* (2008), and CBS’s *Survivor* (2000–present). The opposition to “hyper-real” life in the hyper-technologized and immaterial environment of post-Fordism produces not only the exclusive association of reality with physicality but a different version of hyper-reality that finds expression in truTV’s retro-Fordist motto advertising “actuality,” not “reality.” This “actuality” is frequently defined in contradistinction to post-Fordist immateriality and consists of what essentially are escapist “vacations in our own bodies” from whose physical utility we have been increasingly alienated as a result of the increasing dominance of immaterial labor. “Experiencing our bodies” via severe physical injury, as *Fight Club* illustrates, is not a sign of masochism or nihilism but comparable to the regressive idealization of physical labor and thus part of the enjoyable recentering of physical existence in a digital world. Accordingly, shows such as *Survivor* or Discovery Channel’s *Man vs. Wild* (2006–present) and *Survivorman* (2004–present) thrive on the spectacle of the difference between interiorized and exteriorized knowledge that confines “real” experiences to an exoticized outside to the post-Fordist world. The pleasure of such survival shows hence resides in the possibility for the viewer to enjoy the post-Fordist subject’s general lack of “real” knowledge and skills that make basic survival in the wild problematic. “We know even less about reality than pre-civilized people,” seems to be the self-flagellating tenor of the show, consolidating the perception of post-Fordist life as unreal. More significantly, perhaps, the general impression of this view of subjectiv-

ity rests on the assumption that we have lost control over our lives, singularly accumulating exteriorized knowledge for the purpose of exchange in an immaterial economy. The popularity of shows that teach us survival techniques are thus doubly therapeutic: we gather what we designate as real (hence material and interiorized) knowledge essential to our survival in the wild and simultaneously construct an outside to post-Fordist capitalism in the form of the constant threat of being stranded in the wild. However, this “reality” and the construction of an outside to post-Fordism clearly must be understood as simulations in a Baudrillardian sense. The knowledge we gather is never turned into interiorized knowledge but instead remains confined to an exteriorized function, purely serving the perpetuation of enjoyably nostalgic discourses.

The climax of the regressive attachment to Oedipal subjectivity is a form of subjectivity that is connected to the idealization of the return to a wild existence after experiencing the repressive domestication of post-Fordist immaterial subjectivity: the feral subject. Sean Penn’s directorial debut *Into the Wild* (2007) illustrates the desire to return to a more pleasurable form of subjectivity via the return to and struggle with nature not just as escapist but as a clearly bourgeois and anti-dialectical desire.<sup>67</sup> The basic plot of the film revolves around the decision of a young, white, middle-class man to abandon all worldly possessions after graduating from college, following his desire to lead a solitary life in the wild and rebirth himself as Alex Supertramp. The awkwardness of the expression “rebirth himself” here indicates the flawed, anti-dialectical logic of his project. The force of the film’s critique, however, is located in the fact that it becomes increasingly virtually impossible to approve of and identify with the central character’s selfish and clearly irrational actions. Even a viewer who completely identifies with the character at the beginning of the film and enjoys his romanticized project of living in the wild by the end of the film reaches the same conclusion Alex comes to. Before dying of starvation, Alex Supertramp has an epiphany regarding the definition of a pleasurable and at the same time functional form of subjectivity. The last entry in his journal, which expresses the necessarily dialectical formation of subjectivity and positive affect that stands opposed to Oedipal/feral subjectivity and enjoyment, consequently reads: “happiness is only real if it is shared.”

Critiquing the post-Fordist bourgeois ideal of feral subjectivity, *Into the Wild* is largely characterized by strikingly beautiful and grandiose shots of nature and of Alex’s enjoyment of its sublime qualities. Nature’s sublimity, however, gives way to the sublimity of the post-Fordist city in a striking scene in which Alex briefly enters the city limits of Los Angeles. Both Alex and the viewer are confronted with the shock of the transition into the reality

of social relations in a capitalist society. For most of the movie Alex is indeed able to be the “Supertramp” that corresponds to his idealized picture of a return to nature. In the context of Los Angeles, however, surrounded by countless homeless people, Alex Supertramp makes the shocking discovery that he really is Alex Bourgeois-tramp, since the context of Los Angeles for the first time casts him not as a tramp but as a bourgeois tourist of homeless and destitute subjectivity, a realization that prompts him immediately to leave Los Angeles. It is after this discovery that Alex undergoes a transition and his existence is increasingly represented in socially more realistic terms, focusing on the misery, hunger, violence, and lack of protection that characterize the lives of homeless people. The visit to Los Angeles thus illustrates to Alex the privileged position from which he defines reality as physical existence in the wild. In his version of the wild he misreads his own subject position as Alex Supertramp. In the city, however, he finds out that the subject position he truly occupies is that of the homeless. It is this ideological gap, which gives rise to his escapist desires, that is closed at the end of the movie, forcing Alex to realize the necessarily dialectical construction of subjectivity.

#### **A Generation of Men Raised by Women: Gendering Post-Fordism**

We have seen not only that contemporary critiques of post-Fordist subjectivity frequently are politically and ideologically regressive in nature but also that this regression, along with the positions of racial and economic privilege that inform many critiques of post-Fordism, tends to mask itself as anti-capitalist critique. Such critiques of post-Fordism that disregard the dialectical connection between ROA and MOR hence constitute bourgeois desires whose regressive opposition to post-Fordism masquerades as materialist critique, a sheep in wolf’s clothing with no potential for radical critique or negativity. Yet it should be obvious by now that there is one additional dimension that is affected by the devolutionary turn produced by post-Fordism: gender. Even mainstream, liberal columnists cannot help but note that we seem to be experiencing a general trend that abandons the investment in the achievements of the various feminist and women’s rights movements for the regressive return to mid-twentieth-century gender conventions.<sup>68</sup> If we once again consider the prevalence of the anti-anti-Oedipus and the idealization of physicality as a means of recentering the subject as the horizon of the solution to the problematic experience of post-Fordist subjectivity, it is by no means surprising that contemporary gender politics and cultural representation of gender relations should be significantly affected.

To explore this problem in greater detail it is worth turning our attention to *Fight Club* one last time. As indicated earlier, the overt homosocial if not homosexual overtones of the narrative should not be read as opposition to the traditional family structure but instead as the regressive desire to bring “back the father” who rules a society of men. As Tyler Durden famously notes, post-Fordist society is characterized by “a generation of men raised by women.” “I’m wondering,” he adds, “if another woman is the answer.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently, it is not simply that post-Fordist subjectivity is perceived as unpleasurable because the post-Fordist structure is anti-Oedipal in nature and thus disallows the formulation of enjoyable forms of subjectivity. Indeed, both post-Fordism and post-Fordist subjectivity are clearly gendered. Post-Fordism is represented as a feminized form of existence, and it is this construction of post-Fordism’s effect as feminizing that constitutes one of the bases for its rejection. Fordism, correspondingly, becomes not merely the idealized locus of pleasurable subjectivity as a result of its Oedipal structure but the locus of masculinity.

As we saw earlier, the regressive rejection of post-Fordist subjectivity is accompanied by the idealization of physicality and the laboring body that presents a positive alternative to immaterial, deregulated subjectivity. Yet, it is not just the laboring body that is romanticized; it is decidedly the male laboring body. In other words, the tension between Fordism and post-Fordism becomes reinscribed as the tension between a fundamentally masculine and a fundamentally feminine existence because masculinity and reality are singularly defined in relation to physicality and the male laboring body. Immaterial post-Fordist capitalism, therefore, creates a crisis of masculinity by supplanting masculine forms of subjectivity with the feminizing world of the digital age and immaterial trade. Even representations of knowledge and skills, as we have seen, are channeled through this gendering of these two stages of capitalism. Fordist skills and interiorized knowledge — knowledge signaled by his ability to build a perfect hand, knowledge that signals his physicality, his ability to control his existence in relation to the surrounding world and his masculinity, which ultimately makes him into a suitable leader and father-surrogate — are what Tyler offers.

Furthermore, the feminizing effect and logic of post-Fordist capitalism are represented as furthering the inability to formulate a stable sense of subjectivity. The narrator informs us at the beginning of the novel that “all of this . . . is really about Marla Singer. . . . This isn’t about *love* as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*.”<sup>70</sup> Instability means anxiety. Enjoyment is attached to stability, centralization, the acquisition of a woman as a means of re-forming the Oedipal triangle, and thereby ultimately to the concept of “ownership” indicative of Fordist subjectivity. Richard Sennett

argues in this respect that the new capitalism is fundamentally characterized by surrender — the necessity to surrender previous forms of subjectivity. A new ROA requires a new MOR: in other words, forms of subjectivity that fulfill the demands of the new capitalism. According to Sennett, this new subjectivity resembles that of the consumer (who is open to changing with every new fashion) and replaces that of the owner (who finds stability in guarding private property). Sennett's argument here, however, is that these demands for the ideal subject clash with the persisting interest in those forms of narrating one's life that one is supposed to surrender.<sup>71</sup> Paradoxically, Fordist life narratives, as a consequence of the rejection of post-Fordism, become increasingly vital to the ways in which we are willing to make sense of our existence and their absence results in anxiety, paranoia, and depression. These Fordist narratives, however, are always gendered.

The result of this gendering of Fordism and post-Fordism as an aspect of the rejection of post-Fordist subjectivity is the regression to atavistic gender conventions. Yet, even more troubling is the rise of misogynistic logic that, much like class and race privilege, hides behind what on the surface may indeed appear to constitute anti-capitalist critique. We can find notable examples in Richard Russo's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2001 novel *Empire Falls*, which represents life in a former industrial town in rural Maine, now economically devastated by the end of Fordism. Yet, the critique of the socially crippling effect of post-Fordism that constitutes the surface narrative is once again channeled through a version of the father narrative. The main plot of the novel follows Miles Roby's desperate attempts to be a good father to his adolescent daughter Christina ("Tick"). Miles's broken family (his wife left him for a hypermasculine bodybuilder) becomes the extension of and logically connected to his desperate struggle against economic adversity resulting from the closing of the mill and factory that were the economic (and social) center of the town. Once again, post-Fordism is represented as a crisis of fathering and of masculinity. Yet, the sympathetic representation of Miles's struggle that invites traditional bourgeois readings that identify with his subject position masks the troubling logic that underlies the novel's attempt at critique. A detailed exploration of its shockingly regressive and misogynistic gender politics transcends the boundaries of this essay. Yet, we get a representative sense of this problem by looking at the narrative that frames the novel, which establishes Miles's nemesis: Francine Whiting, the rich widow of the former owner of the factory who has effectively taken over as the new leader of the town.

The novel begins with the story of Charles Beaumont Whiting, whose death symbolizes the end of the factory and Fordism. His death, however, is the result of his being psychologically tormented by Francine, which

ultimately causes Charles to commit suicide.<sup>72</sup> Henceforth, Francine, the symbol of post-industrialism, becomes the ultimate reason for the decline of the town (as defined by those who remain nostalgically attached to the idea of the factory, hoping that it will reopen and provide the men with work), as well as for the plight of Miles's life. The novel consequently ends with the only event that seems to be able to provide Miles with pleasure and with the possibility for a positive future. In a scene that conjures up the regressively reversed famous image of Addie Bundren in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Francine dies in a flash flood and Miles watches her dead body float down the river. The flood washes her away at the exact same spot at which her husband committed suicide years earlier, and the novel's final sentences leave us with a strikingly misogynistic representation of male, post-Fordist pleasure increasingly characteristic of contemporary cultural production.

Astride the body, crouched at the shoulders of the dead woman, was a red-mouthed, howling cat. Together, dead woman and living cat bumped along the upstream edge of the straining dam, as if searching for a place to climb out and over. Bumping, nudging, seeking, until finally a small section of the structure gave way and they were gone.<sup>73</sup>

The answer to the problems of post-Fordism, as *Empire Falls* illustrates, is represented not only as the return to Fordism, Oedipalism, and male physicality but often as the outright (violent) opposition to what is perceived as the feminization of society.

If culture is located in the center of the dialectical interrelation of capitalist structure and its supporting social component, producing and contesting the social forms and ideological structures that move capitalism and history forward, we can see that the representation of post-Fordist subjectivity is one of the most significant projects of contemporary cultural production. Representing and contesting the regressive desires and politics produced out of the experience of post-Fordism therefore once again illustrate the renewed need for rigorous engagements with negative dialectics and materialist epistemology. Whether bourgeois-escapist, conservative-regressive, or radical-critical, the ultimate horizon of cultural representations of post-Fordism and post-Fordist subjectivity is the materialist dialectic, the structure at which virtually all such representations at some point arrive. It is precisely on the level of cultural production's more or less successful attempts to struggle with what is widely perceived as post-Fordism's anti-dialectical structure that we must locate one of the most significant moments

of crisis in post-Fordism and one of the most lively and rewarding sites for critical inquiry.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: Owl Books, 1997) 41.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Arranged around the writings of its key figures, Alain Lipietz, Michel Aglietta, Bob Jessop, and Robert Boyer, regulation theory set out to critique neoclassical economic models by updating Marxist models of (political) economy. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the writings of the regulation school have focused on studies of long-term developments in capitalism as effects of moments of structural crisis and analyses of modes of production as the result of the interplay between economy and a dialectically connected social structure, whose permanent struggle (especially in periods of crisis) produces determining economic as well as social, cultural, and political forms. Significant works for the development of regulation theory are the following: Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2001); Alain Lipietz, *Mirages and Miracles: The Crises of Global Fordism*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 1987); Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction*, trans. Craig Charney (New York: Columbia UP, 1990); Robert Boyer, *Regulation Theory: The State of the Art* (London: Routledge, 2002); Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); Bob Jessop, *Beyond the Regulation Approach: Putting Capitalist Economies in Their Place* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation* 19.

<sup>5</sup> I should stress that this is a claim of a different order than arguments that describe postmodernism as having been gradually absorbed by contemporary capitalism. I would like to propose an understanding of postmodernism as always already part of the emergence of post-Fordism, facilitating the development of a new MOR that made the transition into full post-Fordism possible. The liberatory potential located in postmodern culture and theory, in other words, retroactively reveals itself as the result of a misrecognition of the true interrelation of postmodernism and socioeconomic structure (emergent postmodernity or post-Fordism). Postmodernism, therefore, poignantly proves right psychoanalytic arguments regarding the interconnection of *jouissance* and *méconnaissance*.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of this periodizing distinction, see my dissertation, "Nostalgia for the Future: Post-Fordist Literature and Culture," diss., U of Illinois at Chicago, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> This formulation of the "standardization of difference" is based on Jameson's famous description of the increasing standardization of contemporary society

precisely because of the spread and further differentiation of consumer capitalism. Jameson refers to this phenomenon as "the persistence of the Same through absolute Difference." For a more detailed version of this description of the relationship between standardization and the forms of "perpetual change" contemporary capitalism is based on, see Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 15–18.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed explanation of the ways in which the concepts "schizophrenia," "father," and "Oedipal family" are used in this context, see sections 1 and 2 ("The Desiring Machines" and "Psychoanalysis and Familialism: The Holy Family") in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 1–137.

<sup>9</sup> *The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999–2007.

<sup>10</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 7.

<sup>12</sup> As the narrator finds out, the concepts of "difference" and "freedom" in bourgeois individualism must always reveal themselves as hollow, as difference is reduced to ultimate, anti-social, and anti-dialectical difference, which the narrator perceives as social isolation. Expressed in terms of a currently popular concept, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's account of "singularity," the problems for the narrator emerge precisely out of his persistently bourgeois account of difference that never truly ends in a critique of capitalism (and its social dimension). In other words, as we shall see in detail later on, the narrator's critique of anti-Oedipal post-Fordism focuses singularly on the sociological problems post-Fordism poses. Dissociating the social from the economic, the narrator's attempts to overcome bourgeois difference and consequent social isolation can never lead to the moment at which, according to Hardt and Negri, "the common begins to emerge" as a result of the recognition of "singularity." In short, singularity can emerge out of difference only once we begin to analyze the ways in which we "share capitalist regimes of accumulation and exploitation" and the ways in which we "reproduce the common," which is where Hardt and Negri locate a possible moment of communication as singularities begin to communicate. For a more detailed exploration of this concept see Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin, 2004) 128–29. For our immediate purposes, however, it suffices to suggest that the narrator's dissociation of the economic and the social perpetuates his confinement in an inherently anti-dialectical situation.

<sup>13</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 20.

<sup>14</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 21.

<sup>15</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 11. The term "simulated" is here used in the context of Jean Baudrillard's writings on the hyperreal in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 111.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 114–17.

<sup>18</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 13.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* 115–17.

<sup>20</sup> John McCullough, “Tedium and Torture: *Fight Club*, Globalization and Professionals in Crisis,” *Cine Action* 65 (2004): 44.

<sup>21</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 45.

<sup>22</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 133.

<sup>23</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 133.

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted here that this discussion is limited to a specific group of people who are in fact entirely included in the post-Fordist system. As David Harvey notes, it is important to realize that the contemporary socioeconomic structure, like all previous ones, is not homogenous. Instead, it includes areas of “peripheral Fordism,” such as workers in the Third World or workers in sectors of the U.S. economy responsible for the shrinking but still essential forms of manual and physical production and manufacturing. For an explanation of this concept, see Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) 155–56.

<sup>25</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 100.

<sup>26</sup> For a basic outline of the argument of postmodern theory mentioned earlier, as well as for the concept “metanarrative,” see Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 34–37.

<sup>27</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 177.

<sup>28</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 190.

<sup>29</sup> Drucilla Cornell, “Fatherhood and Its Discontents,” in *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America*, ed. Cynthia R. Daniels (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998) 193.

<sup>30</sup> Cornell, “Fatherhood and Its Discontents” 193.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989) 640–41.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 24–25.

<sup>33</sup> Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 57.

<sup>34</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 57.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Picador, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> For the classic formulation of this argument, see Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989). A summary and further materialist exploration of Freud’s work as it relates to the basic arguments introduced here can be found in Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1974) 21–105.

<sup>37</sup> See the chapters “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” and “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or

Reason since Freud” in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2004). Louis Althusser ultimately develops these arguments regarding the function of repression in the dialectical formation of consciousness in his description of the process of the birth of the subject as a process of “interpellation,” within which the subject is “hailed” by the law of a given society into a specific subject position. For a detailed description of this, see the famous chapter “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review P, 1971).

<sup>38</sup> For a brief yet accurate explanation of these Lacanian concepts, see the chapters “The Lacanian Subject” and “The Subject and the Other’s Desire” in Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*.

<sup>39</sup> Even in the modern *Bildungsroman* that is characterized by representations of failed “educations,” this Oedipal logic remains the same and forms the basis of the element of social critique that locates the source of the failure of the subject’s initiation in a crisis of society’s Oedipal structure. It is within this context of a failed initiation into a society that is a result of a significant moment of sociopolitical crisis that we can read contemporary narratives of absent and weak fathers, which becomes especially clear for our purposes when reading *Fight Club* as a *Bildungsroman*.

<sup>40</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1991) 23–25.

<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997) 26–27.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *Awry* 6.

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *Awry* 7–12.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *Fantasies* 39.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “The Names-of-the-Father,” *Lacanian Ink* 27 (2006): 70–71.

<sup>46</sup> Žižek, *Awry* 197.

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Oedipus hence reveals itself not as the end of the dialectic but as a radical dialectical move that supersedes the stage of centrally limiting, Oedipal subjectivity. Despite that fact that the anti-Oedipus is also of fundamental importance for the transition into post-Fordism, the way forward clearly does not lie in a restoration of paternalistic structures but in the exploration of the dialectical contradictions of anti-Oedipal, deregulated subjectivity within the context of post-Fordist materiality.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed account of Bakhtin’s distinction between dialogic and polyphonic literature, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialectical Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) and *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

<sup>49</sup> Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman, “IKEA Boy and the Politics of Male Bonding: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and Violence,” *New Art Examiner*, 28 (2000–2001) 31.

<sup>50</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 4.

<sup>51</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 161.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006) 7–16.

<sup>53</sup> Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* 55.

<sup>54</sup> Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* 53.

<sup>55</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 122.

<sup>56</sup> The restoration of masculinity, the Oedipal family, and the figure of a strong father in the person of Tyler Durden is therefore also clearly linked to a totalitarian potential residing within the regressive desiring structures post-Fordism produces, which is indicated via allusions to Hitler (the making of soap out of human fat) as well as to Stalin (the establishment of a totalitarian, agrarian collective in the backyard of the house on Paper Street). It is quite poignant that it is precisely the totalitarian logic of Project Mayhem and Tyler's function as fascist dictator that is most commonly overlooked, resulting in the transformation of the figure of Tyler into a pop-cultural icon in ways that illustrate the significance of *Fight Club*'s critical intervention. In the context of misguided critiques of post-Fordism, fascism may in fact reveal itself as an enjoyable alternative to anti-Oedipalism, reminding us of Klaus Theweleit's famous exploration of the relationship between (anti-)Oedipalism and fascism. See Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, *Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989).

<sup>57</sup> Within contemporary cultural production such nostalgic representations of Fordist labor are strikingly common, as are narratives that highlight the regressive nature of nostalgia for Fordist subjectivity. Popular examples include the TV drama *Lost*, whose entire second season revolves around various forms of re-creating Fordist assembly line labor as replacements for lost teleological narratives, and movies such as *Into the Wild* (which will be discussed in more detail later in this essay), which strikingly represents the bourgeois desire for and romantic construction of Fordist and manual labor.

<sup>58</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* 92–96.

<sup>60</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006) 133.

<sup>61</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti et al. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004) 102-03.

<sup>62</sup> Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" 135.

<sup>63</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 41.

<sup>64</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 22.

<sup>65</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 116.

<sup>66</sup> Especially significant in this context are vacations that unite physicality and traditional narratives of masculinity. Among the most poignant examples of this in a U.S. context is the increasingly popular cattle drive.

<sup>67</sup> *Into the Wild*, directed by Sean Penn, Paramount Vantage, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Maureen Dowd's article "What's a Modern Girl To Do?" *New York Times*, Sunday, 30 October 2005. The article made it into the top ten of the *New York Times*' most e-mailed articles of 2005 and describes the perturbing return to seemingly outdated gender norms that is rapidly reversing the achievements of the feminist movements.

<sup>69</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 41.

<sup>70</sup> Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 4.

<sup>71</sup> Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* 4-5.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Russo, *Empire Falls* (New York: Vintage, 2001) 15–16.

<sup>73</sup> Russo, *Empire Falls* 483.