

Mediations

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Editors' Note

The world, as ever, is in turmoil. Even as dictators and autocrats are overthrown in some parts of the world (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya), in others, even the most minimal conditions of liberal democracy — freedom of the press, freedom of association, free and fair elections — are under threat. In many countries, including Hungary and Russia, right wing governments are picking apart constitutional guarantees (sketchy to begin with) in the name of stability and the protection of their electorates from foreign powers with (they claim) questionable motives; as one might expect, such populisms (without exception) benefit the few at the expense of the many. In those places where liberal democracy and capitalism have been meshed together and passed off as the final stage of human history, the global legitimation crisis that should have arisen from the causes and consequences of the 2008 financial crash can be found only in dribs and drabs, hither and yon. There certainly was a before to neoliberalism — the specific configuration of governmentality that we continue to endure, and which remains the vocabulary of state decision-making worldwide. And there certainly will be an after. What form this *after* might take depends on how we understand the unfolding political and cultural dynamics of the present, which depends in turn on a nuanced sense of the forces that shaped the codes and logics of neoliberalism, transforming them into a doxa that has proven difficult to shake even as the meltdown of its certitudes occupies front pages around the world.

This issue of *Mediations* offers insights into the past, present and potential future(s) of neoliberalism. It begins in what might seem a surprising place: Robert Pippin's assessment of Slavoj Žižek's *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012). The ambitious project of Žižek's book is to produce a new model of dialectical materialism through a return to Hegel via Lacan; though Žižek has thought through the implications of this particular conjunction many times before, here he engages in a thoroughgoing account of a system intended to perform one key task of philosophy: to apprehend our time in thought. Though Pippin praises Žižek's commitment to Hegel (Žižek returns to Hegel in a serious and rigorous way), he is more critical of the Hegelian-Lacanian conjunction that Žižek proposes to map, especially at the most basic and important level of producing an ontology of the subject. To put it bluntly, Pippin argues that Žižek gets the subject wrong: apperception simply doesn't demand the self-negating gap that Žižek feels is so important to the subject.

It is because the connections between self-consciousness and reason are significant for Žižek's larger philosophical and political project that Pippin focuses his critical attention here. "What Hegel thought was the greatest accomplishment of modern civil society — its ability to educate (as *Bildung*) its citizens to their equal status and profound dependence on each other, and so to educate them to the virtues of civility and trustworthiness — has become a lie," Pippin writes. Our ability to navigate the blind alleys of neoliberalism depends as much on a clear articulation of philosophy as it does on the identification of political limits; Pippin's engagement with Žižek is an example of how the former is essential to the latter.

The next articles offer frontline accounts of two recent political developments with repercussions well beyond the national settings in which they take place. In "The Transition from Liberal Democracy: The Political Crisis in Hungary," political scientist and former Hungarian Minister of Culture, András Bozóki, offers a precise and thoroughgoing account of the current political situation in Hungary. Since taking power in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has used the advantage of its super-majority (it holds more than two thirds of the seats in parliament) to reshape the Hungarian political landscape. Despite the criticism it has endured from within and without, Orbán has worked quickly and aggressively to undo democratic checks and balances, creating in the process a political and administrative landscape that means his party — Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union — will be difficult to remove from power for many years to come, if ever. A new constitution has been pushed through, with an amendment in the works to make the major left party in the country illegal (due to its links to Soviet-era governments); state-run media have become little more than mouthpieces of the state, while independent media have come under enormous state pressure to toe the government line; political appointments have been extended in some cases to a decade, ensuring that traces of Fidesz will remain behind even when the party is voted out; courts have been packed with party loyalists; and perhaps most alarmingly, ethnic tensions have been aggravated through the mobilization of a political narrative that identifies Hungarian problems as the result of outsiders intent on manipulating the country for their own benefit. In great detail, Bozóki lays bare the causes and consequences of the rise of the Orbán government, and identifies the all-too-real challenges facing those who oppose the direction in which Hungary is heading.

The situation in Hungary is mirrored in recent events in Russia. Maria Chekhonadskikh and Alexei Penzin describe the public emergence of an opposition movement to the Putin government between the two stages of the recent federal elections in that country (December 2011 and February 2012). The long-expected announcement that Putin was once again going to run for President still came as enough of a shock to send opposition groups out into the streets. Chekhonadskikh and Penzin lay out the complex and unstable political composition of the protestors, who represent a wide range of opinions, aims, and ambitions. While much of the

population remains entranced by the “stability” promised by a Putin-government that insists that Russia is still in a special period of transition, the promised alternative offered by the opposition is becoming more and more real. “The heated political debates on the streets, in families, at workplaces, and in universities are a fresh and stunning reality here,” Chekhonadskikh and Penzin write. “Something irreversible has already happened — mass politicization and a rising political consciousness cannot be stopped and trapped in banal mantras of representative democracy or closed off by Putin’s dubious electoral results.” Most promising of all is the manner in which this opposition is, finally, cutting the automatic link made between any new Left in Russia and the old Communist Party, a connection that for too long has cut the feet out from under active political contestation in the country.

It is not only in “transition” countries that governments can mobilize the promise of stability to manage the threat of change. Imre Szeman asks the question: what guides the faith that liberals such as Paul Krugman have in the concept of “conscience”? Krugman and other liberals — indeed, perhaps anyone and everyone who still professes faith in capitalism — believe that the excesses, pains, injustices and inequities of the current economic status quo can be reigned in through the proper application of conscience; in sum, capitalism only goes bad when bad (or incompetent) people are in charge. It is why Krugman’s analyses as of late voice ethical imperatives as much as the examination of economic axioms. It is easy to dismiss this appeal to conscience as pure self-delusion, or, more generously, as casting one’s lot too much in the camp of agency at the expense of attention to structure. But is conscience of necessity a ruse of capitalism? Conscience has been a paradigmatic concept in Western philosophy, one that has been framed as essential to ethics, politics, and community; it is that amorphous yet essential space in which the connections and conjunctions between individual and social take place. Szeman speculates on whether the Left needs something like an idea of conscience in its arsenal of ideas as a mechanism to bridge the gap between the one and the many, the individual and a new, reinvigorated common that will come into being after neoliberalism.

One intriguing response to neoliberal policies has come about in Iceland, where the Best Party (*Besti Flokkurinn*) has shaken up the formerly staid politics of the island-country that found itself at the heart of the 2008 market crash due to the fantasy professed by its banks of massive profits unencumbered by risk. The complete collapse of Iceland’s banking system (and subsequently its national economy) left Icelanders ready for a new form of politics. Enter the “anarcho-surrealist” Best Party, led by comedian and artist Jón Gnarr, which claimed the mayoralty and a plurality of city council seats in Reykjavik’s 2010 civic election. One of the keys to the success of the Party was a relentless attack on the deadened protocols and practices of official politics — those self-same standard ways of doing business that led to draining of Iceland’s banks. Through an interview with the party’s general secretary and chief strategist, Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir, Andrew Pendakis learns about the party’s formation, its

political goals, and its understanding of the shape of contemporary politics. Can the humor and irony on which the Best Party relies be the basis for a new politics in Iceland and elsewhere — a salvo against neoliberalism from a direction it might have least expected?

Max Haiven's contribution explores strategies of resistance to neoliberalism by investigating the consequences of (to use Randy Martin's phrase) the financialization of everyday life. Haiven's provocative intervention takes the digitization, globalization, and neoliberalization of the financial sphere as the terrain on which politics is (of necessity) played out today. This produces political limits and challenges that need to be clearly mapped out and understood, not least because finance depends on resistance rather than being unsettled by it. As Haiven notes, the power of finance emerges in part because of the necessity of individuals to engage in it "as an ultimately tragic form of resistance to their material conditions of life under neoliberalism." The idea of "resistance" on which the Left so frequently anchors its hopes is flawed in yet another way. Because we live at moment in which "there are very few if any spaces of autonomy, solidarity, and possibility that have not been co-opted by financialized neoliberalism and whose seizure we must resist," Haiven argues that we need to constitute a new political rhetoric that more accurately names our political circumstances. His astute critique of the assumptions shaping left discourse at present offers us a beginning from which to do just this

The four essays comprising the second half of this double issue offer probing narratives of the before of neoliberalism by returning us to the mid-century roots of discourses of creativity, the avant-garde, and technological society. Sarah Brouillette explores the emergence of social scientific studies of the importance of creativity and innovation for the economy — a link that has become a mantra in the twenty-first century. Brouillette offers accounts of the studies of Frank Barron, Abraham Maslow, and Teresa Amabile, all of whom influenced the writing of influential management guru Tom Peters. In a perversion of an avant-garde impetus, these writers argued for the creation of new modes of labor and society in which work constituted a space of self-actualization, and where one's individual creative ends would (magically, it seems) equate with that of the social whole. Brouillette shows that, long before Richard Florida, artists and writers offered organizational psychologists and management theorists models of the ideal worker in a knowledge economy: self-starters who find life in their work, and who in doing so maximize development of the economy as well.

Evan Mauro urges us to reconsider the political productivity of the avant-garde. Though much critical discourse has disavowed it — in part because of the kinds of uses to which Brouillette shows its discourses to have been put — avant-gardist practices, objects, and theories persist. What are we to make of the fact that these continue well past the point when (according to Peter Bürger and others) they are supposed to have died off? Mauro offers an alternative genealogy of the twentieth-century avant-garde organized around the concept of "life" at its core. He argues that "the

avant-gardes' eventual appropriation by capital was not the negation or perversion of a state-revolutionary project, but a contingent and labile value struggle that wanted to find new modes of aesthetic valuation, and became attached to larger revolutionary projects at specific conjunctures." As evidenced in all manner of contemporary political and aesthetic struggle, the fight over life and social reproduction at the heart of the avant-garde remains key to the fight to bring about an after to neoliberalism.

Jackson Petsche's "The Importance of Being Autonomous," explores the positive potential, for the present moment, of what might be considered the precise opposite of the historical vanguard: "*l'art pour l'art*," as mobilized by the Decadent writers of the *fin de siècle*. Petsche's essay is the winner of the 2010 Michael Sprinker Graduate Writing Competition, which recognizes an essay or dissertation chapter that engages with Marxist theory, scholarship, pedagogy, or activism.

A third alternative genealogy is offered in Matthew MacLellan's, "Capitalism's Many Futures." Many of the most prominent and influential economists and social theorists of the twentieth century imagined the outcome of technological and knowledge society to be the end of capitalism. From Hilferding to Hayek, Schumpeter to Keynes, and Galbraith to Daniel Bell, and in surprisingly congruent ways given their differences of outlook and opinion, the development of the economy from industrialism to post-industrialism was understood as (of necessity) also generating a shift from capitalism to post-capitalism, i.e., socialism. MacLellan explains why these thinkers believed that technological advances developed in contradiction to capitalist accumulation, and considers the ways in which neoliberalism has squared this apparent socio-historical circle through changes in class structure, the absorption of culture and the everyday into work, and a reframing of the importance of knowledge for the economy.

This issue also includes reviews of Richard Dienst's *The Bonds of Debt*, Miriam Hansen's final book *Cinema and Experience*, and Michael Berubé's controversial *The Left at War*. The themes and issues addressed in all three of these books speak to the questions and concerns animating contemporary left politics, and contribute to our understanding (in more and less successful ways) of the causes and consequences of neoliberalism. Finally, Adam Carlson offers us an account of his experience at *Charles Taylor at 80: An International Conference*. Wither liberal political philosophy? Can it manage its contradictions even within the social and economic conditions of this new century?

Imre Szeman, for the *Mediations* editors

