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Conscience and the Common

Imre Szeman

One of the aims of *After Globalization* (which I co-authored with Eric Cazdyn) is to probe mainstream liberal arguments as to where we should move from here — here being the moment after the ruling ideologies of globalization have foundered on the shoals of the 2008 global economic crisis.¹ This crisis took down with it, in addition to banks and national economies, the political aims and ambitions of the Washington Consensus that for two decades pushed governments around the world to adopt market-friendly (that is, neoliberal) policies and to abandon or curtail such meek social policies as once may have existed within capitalist societies. For us, the best way to understand globalization is as an ideological parlor trick: a loud and extended public pronouncement of a new stage of the zeitgeist that meant new economic policies had to be adopted of historical necessity: lower (and lower, and lower) taxes on businesses, fewer public services, austerity for taxpayers combined with plenitude for corporations from the public purse. At a time in which global GDP has never been larger, everyone seems to believe that there is less money to be spent on all that once constituted the imagined (social) good life: such things as great schools and universities, universal public health, full and meaningful employment, and community and social programs of all kinds. One might have expected the obscenity of the new Gilded Age to be exposed for even doubters to see when, in the fall of 2008, the curtain was pulled back on the desperate machinations of a global financial system extracting surplus from (amongst other dark crevices) the public's desire for decent housing.² The huge sums paid out by governments around the world to major corporations and banks (under the guise of protecting the little guy) in order to limit the blow of the financial crash on capitalists should have meant that the lights were turned on and globalization was finally exposed as a well-staged political performance whose scale and spectacle we found all too engrossing and distracting.

But this is not what has happened — or if it has, only to a limited degree. What has come after globalization? More globalization — more tax-cutting, more austerity measures, and increasing levels of economic and social inequality — with the sole

difference being that the imperatives of globalization continue to be carried out even as many of its ideological operations have been abandoned or eclipsed. Tax-cutting and the slashing of social services has now become naturalized as the rational and normal function of states; the ideological element of globalization discourses (e.g., the need for states to be lean and mean so that they might remain competitive against other polities around the world) no longer seems to be required in order to legitimate these processes or to underwrite the moralizing language that has flourished in their wake. Corporations and governments can't afford pension plans, so individuals have to stop spending and save for their own retirement; debt is bad, so individuals and states have to reign in their spending and stick to the basics — food and education (since states can no longer afford this!) in the first instance, prisons and the military in the latter; and, since the economy is dependent on consumption, individuals had better start spending money again to keep it alive and their jobs intact. The impossible circle of saving more while spending more is squared by making everyone feel guilty and inadequate all the time, and so always also in need of redemption, whether through the process of beefing up their bank accounts (saving only to spend later) or by buying things to make themselves feel better in a landscape defined by permanent austerity and emptied of larger social goals. The necessity of a new language of the political has never been clearer, even if the possibility of putting one together seems to be more difficult than ever; the Occupy movements and the energy of the Arab Spring confirm rather than challenge this point.³

One of the thinkers whose ideas we critique at length in *After Globalization* is Nobel Prize winning economist-turned-political pundit, Paul Krugman. Admired by many on the left, and emblematic of liberal solutions to our current crisis, we find Krugman's ideas as wanting — and as dangerous — as those of the neoliberals whom he seeks to displace from the center of our political imaginary. Our main criticism of Krugman (and other liberals) is that while he seems well-aware of the conditions endured by today's global collectivity, his proposed solution to push the United States in a new, more equitable and just economic and political direction is...more of the same, more of precisely those mechanisms that brought the globe to where it is now. Krugman likes capitalism as an economic system — indeed, he can imagine no other. He doesn't like (some of) its negative outcomes, including income inequalities and profit-taking by the few at the expense of the many. Krugman believes that the "bad" outcomes of capitalism can be reigned in and its "good" aspects (e.g., competition, innovation, efficiencies, etc.) made to flourish through the intervention of a social ethic that has been allowed to deteriorate. He terms this ethic a "liberal conscience." While he doesn't explain or expand on what the *content* of this conscience might be — that is, what it enables or proscribes, what its premises or presumptions are — the *form* that this moral feeling takes appears to be the classic "inner light" of conscience that guides one to act in the right way. Globalization thus becomes for Krugman and other liberals a case of moral misbehavior or ethical misdirection, whether

knowingly so (as in the case of those who want to benefit at the expense of others) or as a result of misinformation (the fault of bad epistemology or limited information, or simply that which arises from the difficulty of managing a planet-wide economic system comprising hundreds of national actors each intent on maximizing their own positions to the detriment of the whole). For Krugman, the solution to the present crisis is not to make fundamental changes to economic and political organization, but for everyone to once again operate in tune with their liberal conscience or moral compass, which would, one presumes, reduce income inequalities and ameliorate the blunt, brute impact of capitalism on most individuals in contemporary societies.

It is hard not to read this invocation of conscience as little more than self-delusion. If only everyone acted in accord with their conscience, the problems that capitalism generates would disappear! Capitalism is a problem not due to its very structure, but because bad people have been allowed to play the game of competition and profit badly! Insofar as capitalism needs to be operated with conscience, it is clear that it — capitalism — is being granted priority as a social or historical formation: we're stuck with capitalism (the idea of necessity rears its head here again), so something is thus required to make it work as best as it can. One could easily imagine a different solution. If this economic system or axiomatic produces outcomes that are other than we desire them to be — outcomes not in accord with our conscience — why not change the economic system (since conscience, if it is to operate at all as intended — that is, as an unswerving guide as to how to act or not — *cannot* be malleable)? As employed by Krugman and others, conscience can be read as the resolution of a social problem at the level of the individual; it is a moral or ethical solution to a properly political crisis, a politics that is allowed to retain its (apparent) necessity through an equation that renders capitalism a fixed rather than variable element of human society. As I suggested above, the insistence on conscience transforms globalization into a moral problem: temporarily, human beings took leave of their senses, only to receive a wake-up call in the form of an economic crisis (and perhaps as a result of their nation's military misadventures, too); from now on, we'll all once again act in accordance with our conscience and avoid the temptations that produce bubble economies. But what Krugman takes to be misdirection or a collective, protracted error in judgment is better seen as a deliberate political program of neoliberal moral education in the language of the market — a program that extends well beyond the U.S. party politics Krugman uses as an analytic, and which speaks to the more general logics of contemporary capitalism expressed (in different ways) by thinkers from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello.⁴

Conscience, then, is a ruse of capitalism, constituting little more than a strategy by which socio-economic relations can remain the same underneath by removing some of the grime off the surface of society. Or is it? The concept of conscience has been explored and developed from innumerable vantage points — religious, philosophical, sociological, and psychological — over the history of Western thought. Though it

is hard to do it justice in a short space, it would not be much of an exaggeration to suggest that conscience is perhaps the paradigmatic figure of Western philosophy, one into which is condensed a whole range of epistemological, ontological, and ethical preoccupations and anxieties. Conscience is a concept that combines contradictory impulses (more on this in a moment); it is also one that is essential to what we have come to understand as the primary dynamic of the *political*, which is to say, of the relation of the individual to the social — both the constitution of the individual by the social and the constitution of the social through the accumulation of individual desires and actions (a transformation of quantity into quality if there ever was one). Whether it is understood as god-given, as a core element of human Being, or as a product of socialization and psychological development, at its most basic level conscience ensures that the individual acts in accord with the social. Though Krugman's appeal to conscience might well be misplaced, it may be that in order to conceive of a common after capitalism, one has to think about conscience and the manner in which this inner compulsion of the individual enables ways of being together differently. At a minimum, the process of re-working this old, dusty concept to a new political end might point to the shape, character, and/or limits of some of the ideas of the common with which we are now working.

But before I consider what conscience might have to do with the common, it is essential to ask a prior question that bears upon its import and function. What do we mean today when we invoke the political (as I have above)? There seem to be two dominant ways of understanding this term and the demands that it makes on us. The political is either the social mechanisms through which collective life is organized or it is a break into or interruption of these selfsame mechanisms. Construction on the one hand, destruction on the other, both taking the political as their name. These two modes of the political seem to be in direct contradiction; yet both senses circulate freely today, as when we imagine the day-to-day management activities of state bureaucracies in the West and the revolutionary protests of Egyptian youth on the streets of Cairo as constituting examples of political actions. Is this (apparent) contradiction anything more than the consequence of a semantically rich and complex word with a long history, which has expanded from naming the affairs of state (*politika*) or science of government to include revolutionary acts aimed at taking over or undoing the existing state of affairs? Does it point to some third thing lying behind these two modes of the political which organizes and gives meaning to both — something like the concept of power?

The political as construction or organization: "All human beings require warmth, rest, nourishment and shelter, and are inevitably implicated by the necessities of labour and sexuality in various forms of social association, the regulation of which we name the political."⁵ The regulation of social association emerges out of strict material necessity: human beings are social animals, who unless they are (in Aristotle's terms) "a beast or a god" have to live in concert with other humans (*socius*: a comrade)

since they are not creatures who are sufficient in and of themselves.⁶ The demands generated by the necessity of the social can (of course) be fulfilled in various ways; there is no necessity to any particular form taken by the social, and there are certainly better and worse forms, especially as measured by the degree of equality that exists among a society's members.⁷ "Regulation" can quickly become excessive prohibition and intrusive management — that is, a form of consent to social organization that is coercion by any other name.

And thus the need for the other form of politics — the political as destruction — one whose aim is to liberate the deadened form that social association can sometimes take. The need for revolutionary politics is directed not only at the politicians in charge, or the form of state politics and the commitments spelled out (or not) in constitutions, but to the lifeworld that political forms have generated in their wake — habits and practices of daily life that make contingent political forms into a necessity felt at the level of the body. "Moments of sensation punctuate our everyday existence, and in doing so, they puncture our received wisdoms and common modes of sensing....I argue that such moments of interruption (or what I will variously call disarticulation or disfiguration) are political moments because they invite occasions and actions for reconfiguring our associational lives."⁸ In this recent turn to affect in political theory, the political becomes disruption through the simple act of feeling and sensation, whose very possibility is clung to as an indicator that there is still occasion for politics as rupture in a world in which official politics have become little more than "a routinised game, a form of hyper-politics, with no possibility of changing the game itself."⁹ What would come after "an interruption of previous forms of relation" is left to the imagination.¹⁰ This second form of politics passes judgment on the first, but resists naming or defining forms of social association other than those which constitute the received and common to be interrupted today; what might be intuited from this stance, however, is that on the other side of the political rupture, disarticulation and disfiguration (whether through sensation or otherwise) would become unnecessary, as daily life is now reanimated as the mechanics of sensation are returned to some ontological purity such that simple feeling no longer constitutes a political interruption of routine relations, i.e., it is no longer a depressingly minimal site of utopia (as long as one feels, politics is possible).

The word "association" appears in Davide Panagia's description of the political as interruption, just as it does in Terry Eagleton's definition of politics as regulation. It is a word no longer much used in relation to politics, even though it was prominent in early revolutionary politics. The name of the First International (1864-76) was the International Workingmen's Association, an organization divided between two philosophies of the political which mirror the ones named above. Mikhail Bakunin favored direct action against capitalism and advocated a politics of rupture. By contrast, Karl Marx and his followers come off as liberals in the vein of Eurocommunism, advocating a politics of the party that attends carefully to the social mechanisms and

regulation of collective life — not without revolutionary intent and an imperative to generate true collectives, but also a form of politics willing to work against existing norms, habits, behaviors and political systems by working with and through them. Association of any kind would seem to demand regulation and coordination. The decision to kick Bakunin out of the International can be read as a failure on the part of the Association to be as revolutionary as the situation demanded. But it can also be taken as an example of the fundamental character of human association, which is that it requires regulation as a way of organizing all those individual quantities into a social quality — a mechanism of coordinating scale, managing desire, and generating a social freedom that is other than the crude freedom of the individual imagined within libertarianism. Both modes of the political are essential. The politics of destruction begets the politics of organization. The tendency of contemporary critical thinking is to emphasize the first at the expense of (or even in fear of) the second, either by framing the politics of construction as always already a dangerous fixing in place of possibility (which can only result in populism or totalitarianism) or by imagining that on the other side of the *here* comes a moment in which there is but a single mode of political being that extends from the individual to the state — something akin to what Michael Hardt advocates in his re-description of the concept of “love.”¹¹ (There are resonances in what I am saying here with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction of paranoid from reparative reading, but I’ll leave that aside here).¹²

To imagine the common, to think an after to globalization, demands that we pay more attention to the politics of organization — which means, too — and it surprises me to say so — to think about conscience in relation to left politics. As I said above, conscience combines contradictory impulses. It can be conceived of as the product of social authority, as the outcome of forms of socialization that generate appropriate behavior in individuals; just as frequently, it is imagined as that mechanism of moral reflection or deliberation that pulls *against* the insistence on appropriate ways of being or behaving (as captured by the actions of “conscientious” objectors or in the phrase “follow your conscience”). Both of these aspects of conscience fit well with liberal political philosophy: the first, an example of the place where the social contract takes effect and is acted out, the second as that impulse to greater forms of individual and social freedom that can impel this social contract to reshape itself to better effect, undoing the contingency of specific historical political forms and the always-present danger of group-think through the bravery of individuals who manage through their actions to identify (supposedly objective) moral and ethical codes that have yet to be added into the liberal social equation.¹³ For the Left, this second dimension of conscience comes across as both philosophically (in its suggestion of some objective horizon of morality) and historically (in its easy appeal to a slowly accreting progressive society) suspect, while the first is but another way of describing the operations of hegemony (what “keeps a people in the ways it was meant to go, and insensibly replaces authority by force of habit”).¹⁴ This no doubt

explains much of the aversion of the Left to conscience. But let's be clear: hegemony need not always be imagined in the negative, as if one of the goals of politics was to create a social without it. Antonio Gramsci's description of a mode of civil society "in which the individual can govern himself without his self-government entering into conflict with political society — but rather becoming its normal continuation, its organic compliment" sounds like a description of conscience, though one drained of any sense that conscience must always exemplify a herd mentality in which it is little more than a "civilizing" suppression of primal drives that are at the core of human Being — and human freedom (Freud's and Nietzsche's view of conscience, if for different reasons).¹⁵

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton writes:

The avant garde's response to the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic is quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit. And of course they are absolutely right. Truth is a White House communiqué; morality is the Moral Majority; beauty is a naked woman advertising perfume. Equally, of course, they are wrong. Truth, morality and beauty are too important to be handed contemptuously over to the political enemy.¹⁶

Could the same not be said of conscience? It may well be a liberal ruse that mistakes (deliberately) the mechanisms of hegemony for ethical and moral consensus, mitigating interruptive politics through an insistence on the necessity of social rules and organization. But is it not the case that such organizing mechanisms are needed to constitute the common, especially as a means of bridging that scalar gap between the one and the whole? Conscience is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the common; one needs something like it, even if the dominant variants of the concepts are linked to ethics rather than politics, or to systems of rights (in the liberal sense) as opposed to systems of obligations. As it moves past the easy comforts of the politics of destruction to a politics of construction, the Left should produce its own version of conscience — one that begins by challenging and rejecting those ideas to which Krugman and others appeal as the ethical standard of behavior within the deeply unethical social form of contemporary liberal capitalism.

Notes

1. After Globalization (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
2. The desire for housing is still too often treated as an example of an acquisitive, "bad" consumerism: for many commentators, those who jumped into subprime mortgages got what they deserved when their interest rates were boosted and they lost their houses as a result of being unable to afford payments. Without wishing to affirm the role played by housing in affirming property regimes, it seems to me that access to housing should be deemed not a privilege but a universal right — a legitimate desire exploited by the finance industry to generate profit. For a recent discussion, see Jimmy Carter, "Decent Housing

Is Not Just a Wish, It Is a Human Right," *Guardian* (20 June 2011).

3. The discussion that took place at the recent policy convention of the Canadian New Democratic Party is emblematic of the degree to which political rationality has changed since 1989. Though no decision was made in the end, it seems all too likely that in the future the word "socialist" will be removed from the preamble to the party's constitution, since this term seems to be an impediment for the Party to achieve what has apparently become its goal: electoral victory within the existing Parliamentary system.
4. For a fascinating account of neoliberalism as a form of moral (re)education, see Jörg Wiegertz, "Fake Capitalism? The Dynamics of Neoliberal Restructuring and Pseudo-Development: The Case of Uganda," *Review of African Political Economy* 124 (2010): 123-137.
5. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 1990) 410.
6. Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 14.
7. In the words of Jacques Rancière, "politics...is that activity that turns on equality as its principle." Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999) ix.
8. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 2-3.
9. Bülent Diken, "Radical Critique as the Paradox of Post-Political Society." *Third Text* 23.5 (2009): 579.
10. Panagia, *Political Life of Sensation* 3.
11. Michael Hardt with Caleb Smith and Enrico Minardi, "The Collaborator and the Multitude: An Interview with Michael Hardt." *minnesota review* (2004): 61-62.
12. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 123-51.
13. As Rousseau puts it, the most essential form of the law is one "which is not graven on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of the citizens. This forms the real constitution of the State, takes on every day new powers, when other laws decay or die out, restores them or takes their place, keeps a people in the ways it was meant to go, and insensibly replaces authority by force of habit. I am speaking of morality, of custom, above all of public opinion; a power unknown to political thinkers, on which nonetheless success in everything else depends." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, ed. Drew Silver, trans. G.D.H Cole (New York: Dover, 2003) 36.
14. Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourses* 36.
15. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: International, 1971) 268.
16. Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* 372.