

Mediations

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Occupy Nothing: Utopia, History, and the Common Object

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And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?...And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters.¹

We have come to torment you before the time that your spirit might be saved a little longer. Not the spirit of God, the one that seeks an escape from the dust of our being, for we had been right to kill that imposter long ago. Rather the earthly spirit, the utopian impulse toward the city shining on the hill: our collective desire for the society of equality.

The streets that we will never walk. The society that we will never know.

The torment that follows is an inquiry into 1) the dialectical logic of the contemporary configuration of the capital-labor relation, and 2) the corresponding contradictions through which we are developing a political-aesthetic critique of the logic of contemporary anti-capitalist struggles as they have surfaced over 2011-12 in the West. The activity in the background of the arguments presented here is that of broadly defined "leftist" protest as it has manifested in the United States and Canada in the recent wave of political protest unfolding through Occupy Wall Street and the stirrings of students and workers that continue to bubble in its wake: the specter of Tent-City looming over our politics.

It seemed at first an amusing and novel form of utopianism, this march of the ants out of their anthills out to an empty square, demanding everything from nobody. There was a skirmish or two, and thanks to the combined "powers" of the now redundant (i.e., incredibly boring) sphere of corporate media and the increasingly banal world of the Internet, a *fleeting image of possibility* passed across the screen of consciousness. Once it passed, the situation again became a matter of time, a time that we no longer

possess, but has, in the world's last autumn, returned to possess us once and for all. What we rose to occupy had already occupied us: the thousands of tents reflecting not a poverty of vision, but an unconscious admission: *The World Is Ending: Bring Tent*.

Our focus here is an argument about how we are to understand the material trajectory of the current economic moment. This argument is an attempt to develop the logic of Fredric Jameson's and Aaron Benanav's theses regarding the becoming historical of the crisis of the capital-labor relation, an argument based in part on a careful and provocative reading of Marx's differentiation between relative and absolute surplus labor in Chapter 25 of *Capital Vol. 1*.² Structuring our thoughts is a conviction that Jameson's and Benanav's theses on labor present a radically Hegelian interpretation of both Marx and the dialectics operative at the present conjuncture.

An integral part of Jameson's theses regarding unemployment in *Representing Capital* is his rearticulation of his conclusions regarding the form and function of the utopian impulse, which he presented in *Mediations* in 2010 in the essay introducing his new work on *Capital*. Reading these two aspects of Jameson's most recent thought together has not proved particularly inviting, it seems, as the "new set of conclusions" set out in *Mediations* have not been reflected in the living body of theory continuing to probe *Archaeologies*. However, we have all known for a long time that thinking dialectically requires a seriousness and a suffering that aren't in the habit of resolving. While many of the political claims of this paper are directed toward Occupy Wall Street, it is the current formation of the relation between economics and political aesthetics to utopian signification that is the primary object of our labor.

In other words, the subject of this paper is both Occupy and not Occupy, and the prescription onto which it opens is Occupy Nothing. What we desire to bring to attention is an understanding of the generalization of the political-aesthetic logic of Occupy Wall Street, its diffusion, in other words, into the very atmospheric fabric in which the stuff of political action is embedded at present, *a process of diffusion from which Occupy itself appeared*.

In his 2005 book *Caamps: A Guide to 21st-Century Space*, Charlie Hailey suggests that we are witnessing "a resurgence of camps" and that "[d]efining the camp is a central problem of our contemporary moment. [...] To understand a camp's paradoxes is to begin to comprehend our current spaces."³ For Hailey, writing on the crest of the last wave of economic utopianism, it's not so much the *proliferation* of the camp that marks our contemporary moment, but the *antagonisms* through which the camp positions itself spatially and discursively.

The space-time of tent-city cuts across aesthetic registers in a way that makes all thought contained to an individual relative sphere — or, in true space-time speak, coordinate system — appear as a splash pond before the resonating ocean of human experience.⁴ Who among us woke up in the cold, damp, and pre-morning dark of Occupy's tent cities and did not see and feel, if only in flashes, the reflection of the refugee camp and the battlefield, the aesthetic of FEMA tarps, hobo camps, and family

vacations gone terribly wrong?

A central contradiction embedded in contemporary manifestations of tent city is that while in its crisis formations it is an index of political and social failure, it is increasingly being taken up as a political-aesthetic strategy. Clear already, in other words, is that the relationship between the abjection of the refugee camp and the activism of the political camp is not just peculiar, but fundamental to the contradictions of camp spaces to which Hailey anchors “our contemporary moment.” Which is to say that, in ways that are becoming increasingly literal, the politics of disaster fills the space in which we live, move, and fear for our being.

In the last chapter of *Representing Capital*, Fredric Jameson, thinking along a similar trajectory as Hailey, articulates the possibility of a political project *within* the generalization of camp spaces. Jameson’s theorization of unemployment implies the raising of the tent-city phenomenon to the level of a political-economic paradigm. Jameson claims that the global expansion of capitalism has given birth to a historically unique and globally extensive network of abjection:

[The] massive populations around the world who have, as it were, “dropped out of history,” who have been deliberately excluded from the modernizing projects of First World capitalism and written off as hopeless or terminal cases, the subjects of so-called “failed states” (a new and self-serving pseudo-concept) or of ecological disaster or of old-fashioned survivals of allegedly immemorial, archaic “ethnic hatreds,” the victims of famine whether man-made or natural — all these populations at best confined in camps of various kinds...surely the vessels of a new kind of global and historical misery...[should be] considered in terms of the category of unemployment.⁵

To subjectivize the Real of globalization via the condition of unemployment in this way is to break with the mystifying narrative-economies of hope that have long coerced our necessary minimum consent, such as the Peter Pan tales of “boom and bust” (which sound almost comforting from this side of history), and to suggest, as Benanav does in his essay “Misery and Debt,” that we are witnessing the emergence of “a crisis of the reproduction of the capital-labor relation itself.” Benanav develops this central claim through Marx’s distinction between “relative” and “absolute” unemployment, a movement of the dialectic crucial to understanding what is at stake in the political aestheticization of abjection today.⁶

The central point that we take away from Benanav’s cogent reflections, and which we express in the form of a Hegelian *result*, is that the new forms of abjection produced out of the full subsumption of the globe under capital must be distinguished into two categories epitomized by their relation to labor: the first, the more common notion of the reserve army of labor and the second, absolutely superfluous populations, the

latter presenting an insurmountable challenge to political organization historically committed to the site of production as its terrain; for, to be absolutely superfluous, is to have no function in the production process — to be unemployed not in the sense of being between employment opportunities or waiting for recovery, but to be subjectivized as permanently unemployable and absolutely unnecessary. It is not, however, to be outside of capital (the absolute couldn't be so lucky). That, in fact, is the real kicker. No work to do, no house to fix, no happy family, nowhere to go — and yet, still inside a capital that provides nothing today and promises nothing tomorrow. “Jobs for All” is no longer even whispered, let alone championed. The new optimism is “Jobs for Some.”

It is on the foundation of the preliminary critique of contemporary political-economy offered by Jameson and Benanav that we must consider the material conditions of absolute surplus, or absolutely surplused populations, as one of the most significant, if not the primary, economical-aesthetic register of politics today. It is on the basis of this imperative that we put forward *the common abject*, a concept through which to capture the central contradiction of tent city in its paradigmatic sense. This internal contradiction of the common abject is constituted in its being both 1) the 99 percent, or the any-fraction of the impoverished “working” or indebted masses, and 2) the negation of that any-fraction via its simultaneous formation as a massive category of living flesh entirely redundant to capital after globalization. After globalization, we now know (always too late) that there will always be fewer and fewer jobs. This is the central political-aesthetic contradiction at the heart of the tent-city protest camp: *the globe's unemployable majority do not register in Occupy's otherwise universalizing percentile and yet foreground the aesthetic through which the movement reproduces its own figuration*. The claim of the 99 percent is that they are able to represent the interests of everyone (who counts), while at the same time the abject populations of their cities, let alone of the world, are displaced by the spewing wound of outmoded middle-class desires.

Before exploring a few of the more problematic expressions of this contradiction at the heart of tent city, we want to re-inflect this opposition between the unemployed and their negative, the absolutely surplused, through Jameson's re-presentation of his theorization of the utopian impulse at the sequential end of his *Representing Capital* project in the *Mediations* essay “A New Reading of Capital” from 2010. In this turn to Jameson's work on utopia we aim to do two things: one, to provide a further theoretical context in which to historicize the contradictions of the common abject, and two, to argue for an understanding of Jameson's alternative set of conclusions regarding the utopian impulse as a historicization and reappraisal in the wake of the crises of 2008 (and after). This reappraisal concerns his collected claims regarding utopian politics as formalized in 2005 in *Archaeologies*:

There I posited two kinds of oppositions: the first one was the opposition between Utopian models or projects and the Utopian impulse. I now want to reidentify these two rather different manifestations of Utopia in a new and clearer way: for I have come to realize that the Utopian texts (and also the revolutions) are all essentially political in nature. [...] In that case, I am led to affirm that the Utopian impulse, on the other hand, is profoundly economic, and that everything in it, from the transformation of personal relations to that of production, of possession, of life itself, constitutes the attempt to imagine the life of a different mode of production, that is to say, of a different economic system. [...]

[T]his distinction between politics and economics, between the achievable Utopia of the Utopian planners and the deep unconscious absolute Utopian impulse, is one between the social-democratic moment and the moment of communism. Communism can only be posited as a radical, even unimaginable break[. ...] Communism is that unimaginable fulfillment of a radical alternative that cannot even be dreamt.⁷

Properly historicizing and understanding Jameson's inversion of his key utopian categories of project and impulse requires reading them in light of the crisis of the capital labor-relation as theorized by Jameson and Benanav. In the alternative conclusions in *Mediations*, the utopian impulse shifts from being the political engine of coerced consent to being the "moment of communism," a shift tied to the absolute shedding of labor-power that constitutes one of the key features of the ongoing crisis of the capital-labor relation. The production of absolute surplus, in other words, is accompanied by a material shift in the ground of utopian signification. This shift is the shedding of the utopian impulse from the dialectic of production and reproduction; or, to put this in equivalent Marxist-Hegelian terms, *the negation, which defines the birth of this new economic epoch, is the negation of utopian desire within the reproductive ideology of global capitalism.*

Let us try to concretize what constitutes this negation of utopian desire by reading it through the development of the utopian desires of labor in the sequence from Fordist to post-Fordist production up until the eve of the massive subtraction that has been unfolding since 2008, a period that corresponds to the lifespan of the previous conception of the utopian impulse, from *Archaeologies* back to Bloch (to whom Jameson traces his genealogy of the term). If the heights of Fordist production were achieved through the coerced consent of labor as such, a coercion made possible through the exploitation and direction of the utopian impulse toward the phantom of a universal, home-owning, pension-receiving middle class, post-Fordism culminates in the explicit disavowal of this ruse on the part of capital, which pulls up the curtain on the golden promises of Oz to reveal that the chair is empty.

No doubt, as Marx suggested, dialectics is a "scandal" at heart. But in an age that

has drowned in a sea of spectacle, the pulse of the “real movement” is often no more than a faint vibration at the extremity of the banal. To see the consequences of this great deconcealment, we need look only to the most banal forms of prime-time entertainment. Let us consider, therefore, the butt of all jokes: reality TV and its deconcealment of social tragedy.

Reality TV is, on the surface, a comic genre. Yes, there are the tragic heroes and heroines, the deserving competitors that are struck down before the realization of their goals, even those who willingly fall on their swords in an expression of their unwavering sense of duty to fundamental ethical contradictions: the one that will not eat the bowl of cockroaches in obedience to a sudden rush of decency, the man who leaves the dating show to care for his kids. But in the end, someone always wins the money, finds their true love, gets their house renovated, or becomes a star.

There is, however, another sense in which, in essence, reality TV is fundamentally tragic in structure. This tragedy is not the abominable sentimentality substituted for nuanced emotional experiences and credible intellectual ideas; neither is the source of this tragedy the rendering of love, charity, bravery, discipline, etc., into profit-generating spectacle (as if spectacle could in some way define the difference between “reality” and “regular” TV), nor is it the elevation of the grotesque to the level of the beautiful in any number of other ways. The true tragedy of reality TV is the gap between its version of reality and the Real of capitalist society at present. We are not talking about the superficial sense in which the “reality” of *The Bachelorette* or *Undercover Boss* comes heavily mediated through the usual technological apparatus (the lights/camera/action of it all), nor of the obvious scripting and shaping that this implies. What constitutes the true tragedy of the gap between reality TV and the Real is that what is in fact played out on the screen is the specter of yesteryear’s liberal social-democratic (i.e., middle-class) dreams, convictions, and expectations, which, in the wake of neoliberalism, have shifted decisively from the realm of possibility to impossibility.

The tragedy, in other words, is not the perversity and radicalness of what is presented, but precisely its banality, and the fact that even the banal fantasies of the middle-class — a good job or boss, a loving partner and stable family, a house — are, in a generalized sense, impossibilities so out of reach for the average person in society that we pay to have their “real life” possibility staged for us during prime-time. The sentimental twinge and the thoroughly tedious suspense of it all stand in as the last-defense substitute for our unfulfilled and decaying desires. Take Mike Holmes, the fairy-godmother-jack-of-all-trades who protects us against the immoralities of the housing-market: what does he represent other than the last-ditch fantasy construction of a collective subject that feels completely helpless and worn out in the face of cannibalizing social forces?

It is this generalized death of every banal middle-class dream that constitutes the tragic realism of the past decade, expressing itself through the ever-intensifying

turn to both fatalistic social realism and apocalyptic fantasy. This is not the tragedy of Sophocles or Shakespeare, but the final concretization of the *Death of a Salesman*, the one stabbed in the stomach by Arthur Miller at the midpoint of the last century. Think of the current epidemic of social realism chronicling the relentless decaying of urban dreams; or think of the last men of the post-apocalypse, the father and son of Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*, standing on the edge of nowhere in the midst of universal destruction, registering all the symbolic darkness of *Father and Son*, the men we already know are to blame for everything.

It is in the context of this actualization of abjection in the aforementioned economic and aesthetic relations that we argue we should consider the political abjection that exploded across this continent and indeed the globe in the form of Occupy's tent cities. The generalization of the common abject, which names the dialectical relation of the relatively and absolutely unemployed, both necessitates and produces an understanding of tent-city protest as belonging to the aesthetics of death and characterizes aesthetic production as expressed through the negation of the utopian impulse in popular culture: the death of the spouse, the death of the house, and the death of fulfillment as such.

In closing we offer in juxtaposition two opposing utopian viewpoints, the first from Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman's 2011 book *After Globalization*, and the other — from a recent Occupy Wall Street campaign statement. At issue in this juxtaposition is the most critical issue concerning what used to be known as radical politics: the deconcealment of Nothing, the negation of the form of appearance of what was the spirit of capitalism in post-Fordism.

Nothing can save us. Not the schemes of government planning committees. Not the triumphant spread of liberal democracy to the four corners of the world. Neither sudden scientific breakthroughs, nor technological marvels. Neither quick fixes, nor golden bullets...neither vigilantes, nor vanguards. Not the nation...not common sense. Not capitalism. Not the future. [...]

So, all of these somethings (education, morality, nation, future, history, capitalism, common sense) will not save us. Nothing will save us. [...]

[At the current conjuncture] the relations that exist between things, between nations, between past and present, rich and poor, ally and enemy...are in the process of being deconcealed. What comes after globalization? The deconcealment of the absent relations that make up, and are made by our lives — the deconcealment of nothing.⁸

And now our friends from Occupy:

We want you to occupy something. This can be just about anything. Like a park, a farm, defending a foreclosed home, or holding a sit-in at your town hall or school. You might only need a half dozen or so dedicated people. Issue demands if you like, but don't go home until they're met.⁹

Occupy is a politics of something. In fact, it is clear from the above that Occupy has never met a something it didn't like. But something is not going to save us. Nothing may. Of course, nothing is a kind of something, as Cazdyn and Szeman state clearly elsewhere in the book: "Nothing is the thing without which something would not exist."¹⁰ If this utterance sounds like some kind of philosophical escapism, it is time you caught up on your physics in addition to your Hegel. It is also time that our politics stepped out of yesteryear's limelight and out into the dark. And what are we to do there, you ask? *Wait*. Wait without hope, that is, without hope for fulfillment, for though nothing can save us, it's not going to save us in the way we've always wanted, *deus ex machina*. There is a good chance, it is now time to admit, that we won't be saved at all.

The negation of any generalized ideological expectation for amelioration or fulfillment is in part what delimits the common abject and makes the apparent utopianism of Occupy at worst a cruel and ridiculous joke and at best a tragicomic spectacle. If you take away only one image from this paper, make it the following, from the epigraph above: the spectacle of Occupy's aesthetic contradiction is akin to that of those New Testament pigs, which, having been occupied by the demons cast out of the men of Gergesa, were driven to madness, running like wildfire down to the sea where they drowned.

Notes

1. Matthew 8:29 (King James Version).
2. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011); "A New Reading of *Capital*," *Mediations* 25.1 (Fall 2010) 5-14; Aaron Benanav, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes* 2 (April 2010) <www.endnotes.org.uk>.
3. Charlie Hailey, *Camps: A Guide to 21st-Century Space* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2009) 1-2.
4. I am working from an understanding of the physicality and relativity of reference frames developed through Einstein's key dialectical text, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (1916), in addition to the dialectics of *Capital Vol. 1* and Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Limiting thought and theory to an individual coordinate system would amount to, in this case, trying to theorize the aesthetic characteristics and registers of tent-city by severing Occupy's tent-cities from the specters that so obviously haunt them.
5. Jameson, *Representing* 149.
6. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1990) 791.
7. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005) 13.
8. Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman, *After Globalization* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 5, 57, 58.
9. Occupy Wall Street, "Occupy's Pledge to FIGHT BACK" <www.occupywallst.org>.
10. Cazdyn and Szeman, *Globalization* 57.

