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AGAINST AUSTERITY: TOWARD A NEW SENSUALITY

CHRISTOPHER BREU

"Non-repressive order is essentially an order of abundance."

— Herbert Marcuse

The So-Called Age of Austerity

Austerity is a concept that is as slippery as it is ubiquitous. Whether it is the application of further neoliberal reforms in the name of stimulating more private sector growth (read: asset stripping and wage depression/elimination) or the disciplining of profligate social spending by insolvent nation states (read: paying for a private banking crisis with public money), the term austerity is everywhere invoked to bury what Mark Blyth describes as the brief experiment with Keynesianism that flourished for a year after the international economic collapse of 2007-2008 and to instead continue business as usual in the global economy (2013, 54-56). Indeed, the concept is so ubiquitous in our present moment that it seems to have become the defining signifier for our age, with much political and academic discourse describing us as living in the "age of austerity." It is probably a mistake to concede to the forces of neoliberalism their preferred term. Austerity, among other things, is a particularly transparent ideology. There is nothing austere about the massive bonuses and bailouts that the financial class has been awarding itself. Nor is there anything austere about the forms of conspicuous consumption and the fetishism of ever more disposable and more quickly obsolete commodities that drive whole sectors of the capitalist world system.

Yet, perhaps we should let the neoliberals have their concept. The term is so politically transparent and intellectually imprecise that it may make a better target than some others neoliberal capitalism may propose to justify its undertakings (although this perhaps wrongly assumes that ideology is a primarily rational construct rather than one, as Slavoj Žižek argues, is built on the logic of the fetish) (1989, 23-26). In addition, once a term has taken on

a certain ideological currency, it is almost impossible to dislodge. A better strategy is to use the term's weaknesses against itself and propose a counter term. It is this latter strategy that this essay will pursue, first by examining the ideology and its current instantiation more closely, second by demonstrating the link between the rhetoric of austerity and the violence of financialization and accumulation by dispossession, third by examining the effects of such practices on the sphere of labor and specifically the forms of labor manifested in the contemporary academy, fourth by proposing concrete labor actions that can be used to fight austerity in our immediate present, and fifth by drawing on Herbert Marcuse's account of "sensuous reason" and Timothy Morton's ecological version of object-oriented ontology in order to propose a new concept of sensuality that can challenge the ideology of austerity on an affective and embodied level.

Austerity—A Morality Play

As an idea, austerity lacks intellectual heft. Blyth argues that the intellectual roots of austerity as an economic policy are paltry:

There is no well worked out 'theory of austerity' in economic thought that extends back in time to some foundational statements that become more systematized and rigorous over time as there is, for example, with trade theory. We instead have what David Colander has called a "sensibility" concerning the state, embedded in liberal economics from its inception, that produces 'austerity' as the default answer to the question, what should we do when markets fail? (2013, 99)

In charting the thinness of austerity as an intellectual category and its force as an ideology, Blyth provides what is perhaps the best account of the rhetoric of austerity in relationship to the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 in both the US and Europe. Similarly, Florian Schui in his more ambitious history of the concept throughout Western thought, argues that while there is "overwhelming evidence that austerity policies do not deliver the desired results" to understand the ideology we need to recognize that "[c]ontrary to conventional wisdom, arguments in favor of austerity are not--and never have been--based mainly on economic rationales" (2014, 5-6). He goes on to assert that those who advocate for austerity have instead "based their arguments on moral and political considerations" (6).

Blyth and Schui, neither of whom are radicals (they both could broadly be described as neo-Keynesians), thus note the lack of theoretical and evidentiary support for austerity. The relative weakness of it as an economic concept suggests that the force of its appeal lies elsewhere: in what Schui describes as its moral resonances. Ideologies are often most effective when

they transpose meanings from one register into another. Peter Hitchcock describes this process as a metaphorization that, in turn, begets a temporal narrative that is “avowedly [an] allegory” (2014, 149). While Hitchcock is discussing the specific allegory that is capital, his insight equally applies to the contemporary narrative attached to austerity. Austerity drapes itself in allegory’s most traditional form: the morality play. Austerity is the name we give a particularly forceful moral allegory about profligacy, atonement, and redemption. As this language already suggests this is a version of the Judeo-Christian ur-allegory of sin and redemption. The subject (whether the individual subject or the state) has carelessly and extravagantly spent to the point of economic and moral (or, more precisely, economic as moral) insolvency, and so must go through a period of atonement and material suffering in order to reach financial and spiritual redemption. Or as Maurizio Lazzarato puts it: “In capitalism, then, solvency serves as the measure of the ‘morality’ of man” (2012, 58). And, as I will explore more fully below, in a global capitalist economy in which finance becomes an ever more central and seemingly self-valorizing activity, the morality of solvency and insolvency gets written onto whole populations.

Yet one of the ironies of the allegory of austerity is that this last (redemptive) part of the allegory remains continuously suspended. Like the African states that underwent structural adjustments in the 1980s or the parallel structural adjustments that are being made in Greece, Spain, and other (semi-)peripheral members of the European Union at the present moment, the payoff for the social suffering produced by such forms of structural adjustment never arrive. In world-system terms, such moments of structural adjustment often mark the moment when states shift from semi-peripheral to peripheral status (as is happening in contemporary Greece), in which states become loci of various forms of asset stripping, wage depression, wage and rights suspensions, and resource expropriation.¹ Thus, in this version of the allegory the suffering subject is held forever in a state of perpetual penitence.

In contrast to a Catholic imaginary in which the sin is confessed and the sinner is finally absolved, the moral address of contemporary austerity functions in a more Protestant, or even Calvinist, register. How one reacts to austerity and whether one has to be subject to austerity at all can all be read as indices of one’s status as elect or damned in neoliberal terms. The Protestant resonances of austerity’s allegory suggest that the proliferation of the allegory in the present moment is tied to the persistence, as Kathi Weeks argues, of Weber’s protestant work ethic in specifically post-Fordist forms in contemporary capitalism (2011, 82). The dimension of the work ethic that emphasizes savings may have shifted to self-actualization in the sphere of consumption, in which we are endlessly encourage to spend and consume and be ever more dissatisfied as consumers, but it persists relatively

¹For a brief account of the concepts of core, periphery and semi-periphery as they function in world-systems analysis, see Wallerstein (2000).

unchanged in the sphere of production, in which we are asked, in the neoliberal and increasingly biopolitical coordinates of contemporary capitalism, to work longer hours, for less pay, and to maintain an ever more seamlessly sanguine affective disposition while doing so. This affective split between a self that is presented as ever more entitled and demanding in the sphere of consumption and ever more compliant and disposable in the sphere of production is the schizophrenic form of subjectification around which the moral (i.e. super-egoic) address of contemporary capitalism is structured. This split suggests that the impossibility of attaining the promise of grace offered by austerity is present not only on the macrological level, in which the promises of austerity, as Blyth demonstrates, turn into a self-perpetuating cycle of immiseration for the many and recapitalization for the few, but also on the micrological level in which the contemporary subject stands perpetually guilty before the court of austerity, already having failed in realizing their ideal self via consumption while not working hard, fast, or cheaply enough in the sphere of production.

While the shift in in the realm of consumption from savings to attempts at self-actualization may seem to betoken a move away from the asceticism that characterizes the Protestant work ethic in its classic form, Weeks' persuasively argues that it instead produces neoliberal capitalist subjects as "ascetically indulgent consumers" (2011, 49). The asceticism of the work ethic is only seemingly overcome by the culture of narcissism and self-indulgence bemoaned by critics like Christopher Lasch and Daniel Bell; asceticism instead returns in the impossible demands for self-realization and the crafting of an ideal self that fuel the anxieties of post-Fordist consumerism.² It is part and parcel of the logic I have elsewhere termed "avatar fetishism," which is a version of commodity fetishism for the digital age (2014, 22-23). In avatar fetishism, the fetish is no longer a relationship between things that comes to stand in for a relationship between people; instead the things themselves become thoroughly secondary, so much messy and degraded materiality that is already ready for the landfill to the immaterial, avatar-based conception of selfhood underwritten by consumption. This asceticism is not only present in the impossible demands we make of our own material bodies to adhere to our avatar-based ego ideals, but also in the way in which any sensual relationship to objects is short-circuited in our approach to them as so many indexes and instantiations of our ideal self.

Austerity and Financialization

A similar logic of the fetishization of the immaterial and degradation of the material underpins the logic of financialization. It is not an accident

²See Lasch (1991) and Bell (1996).

that the ideology of austerity has emerged alongside financialization as interrelated dimensions of contemporary neoliberalism. As David Harvey describes it, financialization describes the exponential growth of financial markets, generated by new algorithmic and fictitious instruments, relative to other markets within neoliberal capitalism:

Strange new markets arose, pioneered within what became known as the ‘shadow banking’ system, permitting investment in credit swamps, currency derivatives, and the like. The futures market embraced everything from trading in pollution rights to betting on the weather. These markets grew from almost nothing in 1990 to circulating nearly \$250 trillion by 2005 (total global output was then only \$45 trillion) and maybe as much as \$600 trillion by 2008. Investors could now invest in derivatives of asset values and ultimately even in derivatives of insurance contracts on derivatives of asset values. (2010, 21)

Thus, the financial economy seems to be fully dematerialized and, as Franco Berardi describes it, “parthenogenetic” (2012, 105). Yet, as Hitchcock persuasively argues, “[c]apital accumulation is not outside the fundamental laws of physics or materiality, even at its most deregulated and abstract” (2014, 142). Instead, the fantasy of a fully dematerialized form of capitalism is one of primary ideological effects of financialization, one that covers over the relationship of the financial economy to various forms of material production as well as material assets, geographies, and infrastructures. In order to provide a materialist account of financialization, it needs to be understood as necessarily related to dynamics of what Harvey terms “accumulation by dispossession,” to forms of biopolitical, industrial, and agricultural production, and to the material infrastructure, including the digital infrastructure, that make its speculative dynamics possible (2005, 178).

Rather than further detailing the material underpinnings of financialization (which I have written about elsewhere), I want to take seriously the fantasy of dematerialization it underwrites precisely *as a fantasy*. This fantasy is produced by subjective effects of financialization as a practice and a discourse, even as, as Hitchcock asserts, financialization itself, with its superhuman speed and generation by algorithms and automated software, tends towards “subjectlessness” (2014, 147). Thus while the logic of the financial transaction tends to further and further remove human beings from its processes, in a precise echo of the way in which financial capitalism desires to remove human labor and material commodities as much as possible from its workings (shifting, in Marx’s terms, from M-C-M to M-M’), it is still apprehended by subjects on the level of fantasy (1977, 247-257). The fantasy it stages is one of transcending material constraints, of being able to write the world over through the precise engineering of large-scale semiosis. It is a finally a neoliberal version of the Adamic fantasy of making the world by (re-)naming it. This subjective fantasy is captured in the popular language

we use to describe the “larger than life” figures of financial capitalism and in over-the-top depictions like Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

If the fantasy that underpins financialization is one of the self writ large to the point of having a god-like ability to both transcend and remake the world, then austerity is its necessary flip-side. It is the moral guilt and asceticism that comes with the newly chastened self. In both cases, such fantasies are subjectifying: they produce subject positions for largely nonsubjective or transsubjective processes. They also traffic, like the discourses of work ethic and avatar fetishism discussed above, in an asceticism that removes us from the sensuous materiality of the world in which we live. Yet it is important to recognize that these subjective fantasies, while pretending to be symmetrical, are addressed to different subjects. The fantasy of the financier writ large is addressed to the financial and administrative classes, which is experienced by everyday workers and citizens vicariously (Scorsese’s film captures the ambivalent mix of condemnation and secret admiration attaching to figures like Jordan Belfort), while the laboring classes, underclasses, public workers, and even members of the professions are the subjects of the discourse of austerity.

The subjectifying effects for these latter groups of the discourses of financialization and austerity are nicely articulated by Maurizio Lazzarato in *The Making of the Indebted Man* (2012, 37-88). In detailing the subjective effects of both dynamics, Lazzarato’ draws upon Nietzsche’s positing of debt, guilt, and subjectification as complexly intertwined in the second essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* (2007, 35-67). In the essay, Nietzsche argues that guilt is a subjectifying technology that is organized around the production of memory out of pain. According to this genealogy, debt was initially literally inscribed on the flesh through torture, producing a memory of pain which becomes transformed into guilt. Thus physical suffering produces a subjectivity that paradoxically feels in thrall to the very forces that have produced its suffering. As Lazzarato argues, Nietzsche’s account of this subjective dynamic of *a priori* guilt can be used to understand the form of subjectification that accompanies debt.

Indebted subjects, which are defined, in the contemporary discourse of austerity, as whole populations and segments of the work force, are presented as morally insolvent and therefore guilty: “The ‘moral’ concepts of good and bad, of trust and distrust, here translate into solvency and insolvency. The ‘moral’ categories by which we take the measure of man and his actions are a measure of (the) economic reason (of debt)” (2012, 58). Thus, what were seen as hard won rights (rights to health care, pensions, child care, public transit, education, etc.) are now presented as excessive “entitlements” that are signs of moral insolvency. Like the work ethic, then, the discourse of austerity demands that the subject measure up to its dictates. Unlike the Fordist, productivist work ethic (and like the consumerist and post-Fordist ones I described above), however, the subject can never live up to the dictates of austerity and is always already guilty before its address. Of course

central to Nietzsche's genealogy is the transformation of power relationships (including relationships of violence and command) into interiorized moral judgments. Austerity functions then as a fundamental ideology in the present moment, one that obscures the political-economic relations that produced it. As with Marx's account of "primitive accumulation," then, what emerges out of violence and theft is naturalized as an everyday, pre-political reality (1977, 873-876).

Accumulation by Dispossession

The link between primitive accumulation, or what Harvey terms accumulation by dispossession, and austerity is not an accidental or arbitrary one. As a morality, austerity works to naturalize and further the work of accumulation by dispossession, or the generation of profit by the transfer or appropriation of wealth from one person or one entity to another. Accumulation by dispossession works through various means, including copyright law, interest rates, privatization, appropriations of the commons, and, when all else fails, violent acquisition (other words for primitive accumulation, as Marx points out, are "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force,") (1977, 874). Austerity works to justify previous moments of accumulation by dispossession, such as the interest produced by credit and especially subprime credit, that fueled both the housing bubble before the 2007 crash and much of the wealth generated and utilized by the derivative markets in the same era. As Blyth argues, the current "sovereign debt crisis," the ostensible justification for current austerity measures, is an effect of the bank bailouts and losses that occurred after the 2007-2008 crash:

That there is a crisis in sovereign [i.e. sovereign nation-state] debt markets, especially in Europe, is not in doubt. But that is an effect not a cause. There was no orgy of government spending to get us there.... There is no crisis of sovereign debt caused by sovereigns' spending unless you take account of actual spending and continuing liabilities caused by the rupture of the national banking systems. What begins as a banking crisis ends with a banking crisis, even if it goes through the states' accounts. But there is a politics of making it appear to be the states' fault such that those who made the bust don't have to pay for it. Austerity is not just the price of saving the banks. It's the price that the banks want someone else to pay. (2013, 7)

Austerity is thus first an ideology, one that masks and naturalizes the appropriation and use of public and common resources by private entities. Moreover this ideology is not merely retrospective, a means to justify not only the on-going bank bailouts and the unprecedented appropriations of public and common resources that has taken place under neoliberalism, but

also future-oriented as well. To the degree that we assent to austerity's allegory, it presents the public (both collectively and as individual citizens) as being at fault for the moral and economic insolvency of the state and of its own position within the capitalist world system. It thus presents an ongoing justification for asset stripping, the destruction of public services, and a renewed commitment to an ascetic work ethic.

The effectiveness of such a narrative is in its individualizing effects. Not only are individual citizens judged in terms of their relationship to insolvency and debt, but countries are treated like individuals. This personification is one of the most pernicious effects of the allegory of austerity: the common sense produced by austerity has the effect of imagining public debt on the order of personal debt, even as these are radically different forms of debt. Austerity as an ideology is thus built upon and works to justify the fragmenting effects that David Harvey attributes to accumulation by dispossession: "Dispossession, on the other hand, is fragmented and particular--a privatization here, an environmental degradation there, a financial crisis of indebtedness somewhere else" (2005, 178). Austerity and accumulation by dispossession thus both work by particularizing more generalized social dynamics--thus transforming, like most ideologies within capitalism, collective and socially produced into the particular and individualized. Such a position of course also masks any systematic understanding of debt as a necessary product of the capitalist world system, with its exploitative and unequal relationships, as Immanuel Wallerstein argues, between core and periphery (mediated by forces such as the IMF and their national equivalents, like the Federal Reserve), which in turn shapes the position of both states and individuals to the structures of debt and solvency (2000, 88-92).

In this way, austerity as an allegory both echoes and differs from the logic of "human capital" that Michel Foucault argues is central to the form of biopolitics distinctive to neoliberalism (2008, 226). Foucault argues that biopolitics (the political and economic management and direct shaping of biological life in the aggregate) works via the market under neoliberalism. Individual subjects are seen primarily as bearers of human capital, which measures the subject's ability to generate profit and income and thus maximize their life opportunities. In neoliberal biopolitics, all social relationships are privatized and marketized; individuals are deemed investment worthy (a.k.a. employable) or disposable depending on the share of human capital they possess. As ugly as this rhetoric is, with its spoils go to the winner mentality, the rhetoric of human capital still articulates a vision of economic investment (although one targeted to the already well off and socially advantaged). In contrast, the rhetoric of austerity treats all laboring subjects (whether citizens or nation states) as indebted and guilty before the law of accumulation. It thus can be used to justify all kinds of cost-cutting, appropriation, and asset stripping, even in situations of marked productivity and efficiency. If "human capital" is the logic of neoliberalism in its expansionist periods, then austerity is its logic in periods of decline and divestment.

Academic Austerity

The impact of austerity as an ideology of divestment is nowhere more evident in the US than in the war on public education and on teachers that has been taking place, with particular virulence, in the last five to ten years. As Marc Bousquet and Christopher Newfield have differently demonstrated, the war on affordable (ideally free), meaningful, and democratic public education has been going on almost since neoliberalism's inception in the late 1970s, but it has reached a new level of ferocity and developed new qualitative features in our so-called age of austerity.³ Before detailing the latter, I will give a brief account of the neoliberal reshaping of public education, or the production of "semi-public" or "quasi-public" education, in the last thirty five years. In *Unmaking the Public University*, Christopher Newfield demonstrates that there has been a thirty year ideological and material war on the well-funded, increasingly diverse, and democratic and activist minded public university system in the US that reached its apex in the 1970s. This war has had a number of fronts from the elimination of affirmative action programs and "politicized" programs like African American Studies, to the denigration of the humanities and the forms of social critique that they, at their best, foster, to the populist, ideological campaign to present college professors as out-of-touch and un-American elitists, to the campaigns against "bad teachers" and teachers' unions as hindrances to student learning. The war has had both ideological and material dimensions and can, in fact, be periodized provisionally in terms of which of these dimensions dominated at any one time. Thus in the 1980s and 1990s the war was primarily fought on the terrain of culture. This was the era of the culture wars and the right-wing jeremiads against the destruction of the traditional humanities by entities like cultural studies and world literature.

If progressive academics held their own in this battle, this is in part because the war was fought on the humanists' own terrain of ideas and culture. While some of the critics of academia came from the ranks of the economic conservatives who championed neoliberalism, more of them came from the ranks of cultural conservatives, whether political writers like George Will or David Horowitz or disgruntled academic traditionalists, like Allan Bloom.⁴ This criticism was relatively easy to refute and also functioned, in its hyperbolic invocation of the end of Western civilization as we know it, as a fundamental misrecognition of the continuity of academic business as usual in much of the humanities. As John Guillory somewhat ambiguously noted at the time, the claims of both sides in the culture wars were vastly inflated (1993, 3-84). Neoliberals, in opening the second, more materialist front in the war on public education would not make the same mistake of fighting the war on humanities professors' home turf. This version of the war does not

³See Bousquet (2008) and Newfield (2008).

⁴See Horowitz (2006), Bloom (1987), and Will (1999).

challenge professors on the level of ideas; it undercuts their livelihood and working conditions via the logics of efficiency, administrative oversight, and austerity. If we progressive professors won the war on the level of culture, or at least held our own, then, we are decidedly losing it on the level of economics. In the academy, as in the country, the left is winning the culture war, but the right is winning the economic war.

This economic war has taken a number of forms, including the exponential growth of administrators compared to tenure line positions, the replacement of tenure-line positions with non-tenure-track and “adjunct” faculty, the ideological war against teachers and teachers’ unions, the privatization of whole sectors of the university, the war against tenure and academic freedom, the attempt by for-profit textbook companies to write the curriculum, the concomitant deskilling of professors, and the exponential increase in public tuition (which has greatly exceeded inflation). A joke that has been making the rounds among administrators (I first heard it from a former Dean) is that we have gone from state schools to state located schools. This is certainly the case at Illinois State University, where I teach and which, as I have sardonically commented (in the same spirit of gallows humor used by the former Dean), should be renamed State Farm University (our biggest corporate donor) since it only barely functions as a state university anymore. As Marc Bousquet points out, most of these changes have been done in the name of various fiscal crises:

Through the managerial ideology, itself supported by a vast ensemble of reactionary social movements in the 1980s and 1990s, faculty no longer question the claims of ‘fiscal crisis’ while the campus pays millions to basketball coaches but sub-Walmart wages to mathematics faculty and custodians. The knowledge has taken hold everywhere that ‘markets’ are real but ‘rights’ are insubstantial, as if ‘market-driven’ indicated imperatives beyond human and political, of necessity itself, rather than the lovingly crafted and tirelessly maintained best-case scenario for the quite specific minority interest of wealth. (2008, 93)

As Bousquet indicates here, the discourse of austerity has been central in academia for a longer time than it has in the general culture. It has been a central discourse throughout the neoliberal era. Moreover, these crises, like all forms of austerity, are a manufactured ones. As with the banking crisis, the discourse of austerity in academia benefits the moneyed classes (in this case upper administration, software developers, and textbook company executives) while turning the defunding of academic laborers into a manufactured necessity.

Echoing its role in the larger economy, austerity in academia seems to both supplement neoliberalism and also represent the full flowering of its fundamental irrationality. Indeed, private textbook companies and software developers have emerged recently as the biggest players in the transformation

of higher education via the introduction of the common core, the MOOC (Massive Open Online Classroom), and other standardization schemes. These initiatives seem less ideologically driven (although there are ideologies accompanying them) as they are just purely profit driven. It's not clear that Pearson actually believes its own rhetoric about the value of the common core. What they do believe in is the enormous profits that accrue to them from it. While there may be more idealistic belief in the MOOC vision, it too seems finally more about short-term profit than long-term vision of whatever political stripe. In both of these cases the war against teachers is reaching an end-game logic. Professors in public schools will be transformed into call-center workers, managing the interface of content that is being generated somewhere else by, if we are lucky, leading figures in the field, and, if not, by freelance content generators. Needless to say the individual attention, open dynamic of qualitative learning, and the give and take of directed class discussion that we associate with the best of the liberal arts tradition will be a thing of the past everywhere but in private universities, where it can be a luxury enjoyed by the children of the rich. In other words, if such changes are enacted, we will have an even more markedly two-tiered academic system than already exists.

This, then, is the face of austerity in higher education. As with the banking crisis, it is in moments of economic downturn that the violence produced by austerity becomes most transparent. The rhetorical framing of the market and of privatization as social goods takes a back seat to the naked drive toward asset-stripping that is central to accumulation by dispossession.

Sensuous Labor

So, given that austerity has become a defining ideology in the present, one that perhaps has an even stronger hold on the academy and the university system than it does on the general public, how do we begin to combat it? Well, for one, *pace* Bruno Latour, the work of critique is absolutely necessary in such a context. In an article that has been a touchstone for new materialist scholarship, Latour argues that the practice of critique that is central to the forms of academic scholarship that dominated during the era of social constructivism and the linguistic turn has “run out of steam.” Latour’s account of critique faults it for, among other things, promoting a kind of cynical reason in which the critic situates herself as in the superior position to those duped folks who exist within the illusion that critique is attempting to expose. This dynamic takes on a double movement: a “first movement of disbelief” which is then replaced by the “wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below” (2004, 229). He also criticizes it for a kind of disavowed idealism, in which the critic presents any kind of belief in an extant world of objects or facts as hopelessly naïve and in need of debunking by the critic. The problems with such a debunking strategy are twofold. It

not only rests on idealism, in which the critic's language is imagined as more real and powerful than the (mis)perceived reality it is debunking, but also on a political quietism in which the critic imagines himself as having solved a given issue by having provided a persuasive critique.

Latour is onto something in his critique of critique (dare we call it a meta-critique?). The dangers of idealism, cynicism, and quietism do haunt the project of critique. The exhaustion of a politics of pure debunking has been one impetus for the development of what Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe as the new materialisms, which insist, over against social construction, on forms of materiality that exceed our construction and knowledge of them (2010, 6). I will pursue these new materialist possibilities below, but right now I want to trouble a conflation that Latour's critique of critique performs. While his account of the idealism of critique persuasively takes aim at social constructivism, in his account of "causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below" he conflates Marxist forms of critique with constructivist critique. Yet the logics of these two forms of critique are distinct. Constructivist critique reveals all claims to immediacy, presence, and naturalness to be discursively constructed. Marxist forms of critique, on the other hand, work by revealing immediacy, presence, and naturalness as mediated by larger materialist dynamics and transformations of what it maps as the totality of political-economic relationships (i.e. the capitalist world-system as such.). This form of critique is distinctly not idealist when practiced with care, and it is this latter form of critique that I have attempted to employ in analyzing austerity.

Austerity fundamentally can't be understood as a social given or as even, as I've demonstrated, a particularly persuasive intellectual position. It can be understood as a powerful ideology, however, one that needs to be understood as naturalizing a larger political economic dynamic: accumulation by dispossession. The need to reveal the force of accumulation by dispossession behind the logic of austerity is justification enough for the continuing centrality of critique as a practice. Even a social constructivist approach would be preferable to any approach that would leave austerity untouched and seemingly naturalized.

Yet Latour is also right. Critique is not enough; it very easily slips into a form of intellectual quietism. One of the reasons critique is not enough is that ideologies do not entirely (or even largely) function on an intellectual level. The contrast between the intellectual paucity of austerity as an idea and its force as an ideology demonstrates as much. Instead ideologies achieve their effects as much affectively as they do cognitively. Moreover, as Slavoj Žižek demonstrates, ideologies are fundamentally fetishes that work to disavow material contradictions (1989, 23-6). An effective response to ideology then involves a change in practices and affective orientations as much as an intellectual reorientation. It is here where the new materialisms, when combined with Marxist materialism, can point us toward not only specific forms of political praxis, but what Sara Ahmed describes as a different "orientation"

and relationship to the various forms of materiality that make up our life worlds (2006, 56).

Such a reorientation can start, on the most practical of levels, in learning to revalue the materiality of the labor we produce as teachers and researchers. In this context, I want to propose one immediate form of praxis that can be taken up to combat academic austerity. In terms of political praxis, one practical response to academic austerity would be to take a page from the industrial organizing of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) in the 1930s. To fight the way in which management often pitted different kinds of workers against each other (skilled vs. unskilled, white vs. workers of color, non-immigrant vs. immigrant, etc.), the CIO championed a form of industrial unionization rather than the craft-based unionization advocated by groups like the AFL. The idea was to organize everyone in a particular industry as part of one big union to resist the pitting of “skilled” vs. “unskilled” workers against each other. Such a model of industrial organizing (especially if we move beyond the potentially stigmatizing language of skilled vs. unskilled) might prove effective in organizing tenure track and non-tenure-track instructors together in order to resist the ways in which management has used each against the other. This approach can even be effectively employed when the unions in question are nominally craft-based (as most education unions are), by producing alliances between them and between different job categories. Recent, successful job actions at both the University of Oregon and the University of Illinois at Chicago have employed this strategy. The success of both actions demonstrates the strategy’s effectiveness. For such a strategy to be taken up *en mass*, however, both non-tenure-track and, especially, tenure-track employees need to do the subjective work of changing their affective orientations to their jobs and to each other. Tenure line faculty need to disidentify with the neoliberal rhetoric of having successfully utilized their human capital to gain a job in what Mark Bousquet persuasively argues is a job market organized around manufactured scarcity. To buy into this rhetoric, and to define oneself as a success in this context, is to situate yourself against all others undertaking the material work of teaching and research in worse conditions, folks who did not benefit from the mix of chance and privilege that secures tenure-track jobs in the era of academic austerity. Similarly, non-tenure-track faculty, while positioned more readily to disidentify with neoliberal discourses of human capital and professional superiority need to also recognize that tenure-line faculty are not the enemy. Instead, both groups need to do the affective work of reorienting their struggles and demands to that they are addressed to the upper administrative, corporate and political class fractions who have pitted the groups against each other in the first place.

Such an affective reorientation would also involve a similar disidentification with the forms of guilt (the guilt of debt, but also the guilt of what Kathi Weeks describes as the post-Fordist work ethic in which traditional “distinctions between work and life are increasingly blurred” so that the former can

lay claim to all dimensions of the latter) central to the ideology of austerity (2011, 107). Rather than internalize the forms of guilt and asceticism central to austerity, we need to instead celebrate and recognize how much all of us as laborers are able to do and get done under increasingly adverse conditions of an economy whose leading edges, such as financialization, are organized less around work and more around accumulation by dispossession. This reorientation would perhaps be part of a new appreciation of the materiality of work and labor, including what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as forms of so-called “immaterial labor,” such as affect, service, and intellectual labor (2000, 29). Despite the name, this form of labor still involves and depends upon the materiality of bodies. A recognition and sensuous valuation of the materiality of the body in all forms of labor would be a necessary part of truly challenging the asceticism central to austerity, contemporary discourses of production, and to the logic of avatar fetishism.

Rethinking Sensuality

Such a rethinking of the body could become part of a larger struggle to redefine our relationship to materiality and to combat the complex mix of asceticism and overconsumption (which, as I argued above, is ironically still based on asceticism) that defines neoliberal capitalism. This struggle would achieve fewer immediate gains than the labor struggle described above, but it might be finally more important and more transformative helping to producing not only a new relationship to embodiment, but, potentially, a new set of political, economic, and ecological relationships.

Such a new conception of sensuality might reach back to what Herbert Marcuse describes as sensuous reason, which works to “reconcile the two spheres of the human existence [i.e. reason and sensuality] that were torn apart by a repressive reality principle” (1966, 179). This repressive reality principle is none other than the forms of sensual renunciation that are produced by the capitalist work ethic. In contrast to such forms of renunciation, and the forms of instrumental rationality (with its detached, “mastering,” and “domineering” approach to the material world), Marcuse’s sensuous reason would reintroduce qualities of receptivity, and openness to the material world (1966, 186). It would thus mix the active and the receptive but in a way in which the sensuousness, richness, vulnerability, and power of the material world (including our own material being) would be newly affirmed and valued.

A new conception of sensuality and a new recognition of the richness, importance and fundamental strangeness of the material world is evoked in Timothy Morton’s recently published *Hyperobjects*. Even as it reaches back to Marcuse, a new conception of sensuality could also draw upon Morton’s new materialist approach to ecology. Morton argues for a new embodied relationship to objects, especially the hyperobjects, such as global warming

and the capitalist world system, “which are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (2013, 1). Because of their massive temporal and spatial scale, their necessarily “withdrawn” qualities, in which humans can only apprehend certain aspects of them at any given time, and their uncanniness in challenging our perceptual maps of the world, hyperobjects promote a different understanding of the relationship between our sensuous embodiment and that of hyperobjects:

Hyperobjects are real whether or not someone is thinking of them. Indeed, for reasons given in this study, hyperobjects end the possibility of transcendental leaps ‘outside’ physical reality. Hyperobjects force us to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical. But this does not mean we are “embedded” in a “lifeworld.” (2013, 2)

Thus any attempt at a non-reductive apprehension of hyperobjects, forces us to recognize the ‘immanence of thinking to the physical.’ Such forms of thought, as Morton argues, do not embed the thinker in her immediate context, but do refuse the forms of ascetic abstraction that flourish under the regime of instrumental rationality that continues in our neoliberal present. In contrast to this asceticism, Morton emphasizes what he calls “interobjectivity” an enmeshed state in which objects, including the subjectified objects that we are, are all part of “the strange interconnectedness of things” (2013, 83). Objects are “enmeshed into a relationship with other objects in the mesh” (2013, 83). The mesh is Morton’s term for the “crisscrossing strands” of interrelated objects (2013, 83). What is crucial, for my purposes, in Morton’s definition of interobjectivity is the way in which it provides a sensual and corporeal basis for all interactions between objects, human or otherwise.

A new sensuality organized around sensuous reason and interobjectivity would reject the forms of asceticism that are central to neoliberal production and consumption as well as to the ideology of austerity. Instead, a new sensuality, including a sensuous understanding of our relationship to other objects and subjectified objects (such as ourselves and other animals) in the ecosystems and economy of which we are a part, would enable us to produce a more sustainable, just, and vibrant relationship to the world in which we live. Thus, the way forward is not via austerity of whatever stripe (including the forms of austerity practiced in the name of environmentalism). The way forward is instead toward a material reckoning with our sensuous being in the world and the sensuous being of all other things. To be against austerity is thus finally to be for a new materialism and a new sensuality. Such a new relationship to the world would take the form of a paradoxical abundance. In acknowledging the richness, sensuality, and vulnerability of various materialities, we also, to return to the epigraph from Marcuse with which this essay began, recognize their abundance. This is an abundance that inheres in each object and in each subjectivity. We do not need to consume abundantly, because abundance is already here in the world in which live. We begin

to perceive it once we stop adhering to the logic of debt and manufactured scarcity that is austerity's lethal legacy. Such is what it means to be against austerity.

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