The Imaginary and Its Worlds
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8 Real Toads

The real toads of my title are first and foremost the ones invented by Marianne Moore in her poem “Poetry,” living in “imaginary gardens” and, eventually, abandoned there by Moore when she cut the poem to three lines: “Poetry / I too dislike it / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine” (Moore). Real toads are obviously aligned here with the “genuine,” but the point of the poem is not, of course, to choose between them and the imaginary gardens; we might more plausibly say that we have no way of thinking about the real except in terms of its relation to the imaginary, and therefore to imagine that we could simply choose the real over the imaginary would be to make a very foolish mistake. Indeed, because of what Winfried Fluck has rightly called “the crucial role of the imaginary in social arrangements and social visions” (447), we cannot understand the reality of the real without locating it in the imaginary. So if, for example, I were to offer you as an example of a real toad the “Volcker shock” of 1979—sometimes called the “founding act of neoliberalism” (Panitch and Gindin) since it raised interest rates and drove the United States into a recession that emptied factories and broke unions—I could not possibly begin to account for its reality without locating it in its imaginary garden, even if the function of that garden was to enable me to situate myself in a way that made the toad invisible to me (that camouflaged the toad). And I don’t mean by this just the fact that there are no great Volcker shock novels. I mean that neoliberalism itself has played almost no visible role in our cultural imaginary, and that the garden we literary critics have been most interested in has been largely, at least in our construction of it, inhabited not by real but by imaginary toads.

Indeed it is only within the last year that the concept of neoliberalism has begun to make its impression on Americans and in particular on American literary historians, mainly because the current worldwide recession can at least be imagined to foreshadow an end to it, thus mak-
ing clear that for over thirty years we have been living in a historical period rather than a state of nature. And from this standpoint, just as the title of my talk is adapted from a famous poem, its subtitle ought to be an adaptation of another, almost equally famous (at least in our little garden) essay. But whereas Fredric Jameson’s essay was called “Periodizing the 60s,” mine should be called “Periodizing Everything since the Sixties.” Jameson, of course, wrote in 1984, a year that, at the time, had the double advantage of still naming a horrifying but increasingly unlikely (Orwellian) future and of looking back at what seemed recently but definitively past—the 1960s themselves. The year 2009 makes no Orwellian threats (except to those who see in Barack Obama the threat of the gulag rather than the savior of the market—and I would remind you that as an exemplary neoliberal, Obama has posed no threat to markets; indeed one of his first economic appointments was Paul Volcker of the Volcker shock). But the events of what we might call fiscal 2009—especially if we begin it a few months early—very clearly brought about the end of the boom. And even if we are inclined toward the market’s self-diagnosis (that this is essentially a financial crisis, caused by and thus curable by new forms of regulation) rather than toward a more structural account (that the various forms of speculative abuses we have witnessed are themselves only a response to the more fundamental problem of a falling rate of profit), we can nonetheless see that the self-descriptions we ourselves have preferred are no longer convincing, and that, whatever the true meaning of the crisis in the economy turns out to be, the crisis in culture makes it possible for us to imagine the end of the intellectual world that we ourselves have created and thus to periodize it.

At any rate, that’s the methodological fantasy of this essay—that neoliberalism is ending. And the non-methodological and not so fantastic desire of this essay is that even if neoliberalism does not disappear (even if, as seems more than likely, Obama and Geithner and the rest succeed in rescuing it), the culture of neoliberalism will. So that even if we don’t get a more just society, we’ll at least get better books.

For the books we’ve had have not been so good. Some of you may remember that when, back in 1989, Francis Fukuyama announced what we can now see to be the arrival of neoliberalism—he called it the end of history—he did so with mixed feelings. The good news, he thought, was that the ideological supremacy of free markets and of the political arrangement most suited to them (liberal democracy) had been established; even communists were talking about the importance of being competitive in the marketplace. The bad news was that without “the worldwide
ideological struggle” between capitalism and socialism to inspire us, we were in for “a very sad time.” In the “post-historical period,” he wrote, “there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history” (124). The end of history would be good for markets, bad for art.

Right now, of course, it’s not so clear how the good-for-markets thing is working out. But it’s still true that we don’t have any socialists. What the Obama administration wants, as I’ve already noted, is to rescue market competition, not restrain it. And, led by the kind of liberals even (or especially) bankers love, it may well succeed. But—this is my methodological fantasy—what if it doesn’t? What if what we’re seeing now is not just the end of a boom but the beginning of a new period of “ideological struggle”? If good for markets was bad for art, will bad for markets be good for art?

For, as I’ve suggested with respect to at least one art form, market triumphalism hasn’t been so great. The past twenty-five years or so have been a pretty sad time for the American novel, and a lot of the best ones have indeed been committed to historical caretaking. It’s no accident that Toni Morrison’s Beloved was proclaimed the best work of American fiction over the period by the New York Times or that prominent also-rans included Blood Meridian, Underworld, and The Plot against America. Even younger writers like Michael Chabon and Colson Whitehead have rushed to take up the burden of the past. And it’s not hard to see why. For although it’s true that books about slavery and the Middle Passage, the Holocaust and the extermination of Native Americans, are more or less definitionally sad, it’s also true that the logic by which they are produced and that makes them so attractive is an optimistic one.

Why? Because trying to overcome, say, the lingering effects of slavery doesn’t involve criticizing the primacy of markets; it just involves making sure that everyone has equal access to them. So when Beloved reminds us that we are a nation divided by race and racism (and, in case we start to forget, A Mercy reminds us again), we’re effectively being told that our problem is lingering racism—not burgeoning capitalism. And when Morrison wins the Nobel Prize and Obama is elected president, we’re being reassured that we are headed in the right direction, even if we’re not there yet.

Indeed, Morrison is such an icon of liberal culture that her very existence serves to register both the financial success and the moral superiority of those to whom the boom was good. When, for example, Drew Faust was sworn in as the new president of Harvard (endowment in 1987, the
year *Beloved* was published, $3.85 billion; endowment at Faust’s inauguration in 2007, $34.9 billion), Morrison was on hand to read from the not yet published *A Mercy* and to help attest to the fact that “even a few short years ago,” as Faust put it, people like them could not have been on that platform and thus to the fact that universities over the last half century have served as “engines of the expansion of citizenship, equality and opportunity—to blacks, women, Jews, immigrants, and others who would have been subjected to quotas or excluded altogether in an earlier era.” Thus “ours,” she said, “is a different and far better world” (Faust).

But for whom? If you look at the economic data for the “few short years” Faust has in mind, what you see is not a society in which there is greater equality but one in which there is less. In fact, in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey says that “redistributive effects [from poor to rich] and increasing social inequality have . . . been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project” (16). Thus, for example, in 1987 the top tenth of the American population made about 38 percent of the nation’s income. (The bottom fifth made about 3.8 percent.) That top figure was substantially up from the relatively egalitarian numbers that prevailed from the end of World War II until the beginning of neoliberalism around 1980, but the really big jump is the one that has taken place since. In 2006, according to the economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, the top tenth earned about half of all the money made in America, more even than in 1928, till then the highest figure since the beginning of the twentieth century. The bottom quintile got 3.4 percent. And of course, if you look at universities like Harvard, what you see is that the welcome they’ve extended to racialized minorities has been withheld from the vast economic majority: “74 percent of students at the nation’s top 146 colleges come from the richest socioeconomic quartile,” the Century Foundation reported in 2004, “and just 3 percent come from the poorest quartile” (Kahlenberg, *America’s Untapped Resource*).

The account of Faust’s inauguration in the *Harvard Crimson* includes an interview with an enthusiastic undergraduate claiming (and who would doubt her?) to have read *Beloved* twelve times. But you only have to read it once to understand the ways in which “our” world is better, and even reading it twelve times, you won’t get the slightest sense of the ways in which it’s worse.

Which is just to say that increasing inequality—less social justice rather than more—is not something that American culture, even (or especially) liberal culture, has had much to say about. Rather, the more unjust and
unequal American society has become, the more we have heard about how bad, say, the Holocaust was. And as the success of our cultural and economic elites at separating themselves from everyone else has grown more pronounced and as the actual Holocaust has begun to show the first signs of brand fatigue, enterprising writers like Philip Roth (in *The Plot against America*) and Chabon (in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*) have boldly moved beyond condemning bad things that happened in the past to condemning bad things that didn’t happen in the past: a Nazi takeover of the United States and the exile of a whole society of eastern European Jews to Alaska.

Today, however, things have finally gotten so bad that not just poor people but relatively rich people—till 2008 the boom’s beneficiaries—have begun to feel the pain. (Even Harvard’s endowment is only about six times what it was in 1987, not ten times as much.) And disapproval of holocausts is getting serious competition from fear of poverty. Which is just what the vast majority—the victims of the boom—have been worrying about all along. So maybe it’s time for us to forget about the Holocaust and focus on the free market instead, to stop congratulating ourselves on being against genocide and to start questioning what it means to be for free trade. Although it doesn’t appear anywhere on the *Times*’s best American fiction list, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* is a much better novel than most of the ones that do, and the Psycho’s self-consoling reminder—“I am rich—millions are not” (392)—has the merit of problematizing the upper middle class’s sense of its virtue rather than, like Roth and Morrison, pandering to it.

*American Psycho*, in other words, is an anti-liberal novel, committed to the idea that the wealth of the rich is extracted from the poor and therefore to the idea that there is a structural antagonism between them. That’s the meaning of all those descriptions of what the rich people wear—“a suit by Lubiam, a great-looking striped spread-collar cotton shirt from Burberry, a silk tie by Resikeio and a belt from Ralph Lauren” (87). Or, to take a more recent example, that’s the meaning of the notes the call girl Chelsea keeps on what she wears to each job (“a Michael Kors dress and shoes and La Perla lingerie underneath”) in Stephen Soderbergh’s film *The Girlfriend Experience*. The movie is set in November 2008 as Obama is about to win the election, and you can see the political point of Chelsea’s clothes (and of the Psycho’s description of everyone’s clothes) by fast-forwarding two months and comparing them to the clothes worn to the inauguration by the novelist, essayist (*Bad Mother*), and passionate Obama supporter Ayelet Waldman. When Obama won the South Caro-
lina primary, Waldman had predicted she’d see her readers “on the Mall in January,” promising, “I’ll be the one in the Women for Obama T-shirt” (“South Carolina”). By the time January came around, however (as she recounts in another blog post, “President Barack Obama”), a “fabulous Vera Wang gown” (a “loaner” from a friend) had replaced the T-shirt, supplemented by “five-inch Chloe boots” (also “fabulous,” but her own), to be worn to the concert on the Mall. Unfortunately, the Chloes weren’t so great for “dancing madly to U2,” but they, along with the Vera Wang and a cocktail dress by Lanvin and a dinner catered by Daniel Boulud, nonetheless managed to convey what is essentially the same message as the Women for Obama T-shirt.

And that message is the exact opposite of the one conveyed by Chelsea’s Michael Kors, or for that matter by the suede Yves Saint Laurent the Psycho’s girlfriend wears, also to a U2 concert (maybe a depression will at least get us better rock and roll). For the meaning of the Saint Laurent is that the wealth of the rich comes at the expense of the poor, and American Psycho’s anti-liberalism consists in its recognition of their fundamentally opposed interests. As the Psycho says to a bum he’s about to murder: “I’m sorry. It’s just that . . . I don’t have anything in common with you” (131). But the fantasy of Waldman’s Chloe boots is that the things dividing us have nothing to do with money, and therefore we needn’t be divided at all. When Waldman describes “white people and black people, Latinos and Asians,” all “chanting ‘Race Doesn’t Matter, Race Doesn’t Matter’” (“South Carolina”), she is describing a liberalism that replaces the antagonism between the rich and the poor with the alliance of the black and the white: “United. Not divided.” After all, black women can have hot shoes too (Oprah was wearing Louboutins). “Race Doesn’t Matter” is both an alternative to and a version of a slogan that can’t quite be chanted at rallies but is nonetheless what’s always being said: “Wealth Doesn’t Matter.” It can’t be chanted at rallies because, once you put the point in those terms, it might occur to someone that wealth actually does matter. But it’s being said anyway because the political vision of our liberalism is of the poor helping the rich to make a better America rather than, say, of the poor making a better America by taking away the rich’s money.

And Waldman’s autobiographical essays about being and having a mom essentially do the same political work as her Chloe boots and her husband’s (it turns out she’s married to Michael Chabon) alternative Holocaust history. For if historicist novels have been one literary way to make the reality of our social arrangements invisible, they haven’t been
the only one. It was also in 1987 that Margaret Thatcher, as canny a cultural critic as Toni Morrison, pronounced herself tired of hearing about society’s problems and, in the wake of her triumph over the National Union of Mineworkers, took a stand not just against the idea that we should worry about social problems but against the idea of society itself, proclaiming: “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (Thatcher).

Anybody looking to explain the increasing appeal of the memoir in contemporary writing need look no further. In this context, all the debates about whether memoirs really count as literature and about whether it matters if they aren’t altogether true are completely irrelevant. Every sentence in every one of them, true or false, literary or non-, tells us that there are only individuals and (most of them add) their families. Thus, for example, the proper way for workers to see themselves is not as members of political collectives (like, say, the union) or even as workers but as entrepreneurs and as husbands and wives and fathers and mothers. And if you want some sense of the absolutely contemporary relevance of Thatcher’s analysis, you can go beyond the memoir to the extraordinary success of the Broadway musical *Billy Elliot* (ten Tony Awards). It is, as its promotional materials say, “set against the backdrop” of the strike Thatcher broke, but what it’s really about is Billy’s grizzled old miner dad learning to respect his son’s desire to become not a miner but a ballet dancer, and about Billy learning to respect his best friend’s desire to cross-dress, and about all the miners learning that the union is irrelevant, and, most upliftingly, about everyone learning that, as the song says, “What we need is individuality”: “If you wanna be a dancer, dance / If you wanna be a miner, mine, if you want to dress like somebody else, / Fine!” (John and Hall).

The point here is not that memoirists or the makers of *Billy Elliot* think of themselves as cheerleaders for the free market. The point is rather that in the memoir, society (like the miner’s strike) is the “backdrop” against which—as the human capital economists who definitely *do* think of themselves as cheerleaders for the free market like to say—we either make or fail to make good choices. If you wanna be a miner, mine—but when it doesn’t work out, it’s because you made a bad choice. And if you wanna dress like somebody else, fine. . . . It’s no accident that compared to, say, card check (the Employee Free Choice Act, intended to make it easier for workers to unionize), same-sex marriage has emerged as a centerpiece of American cultural liberalism. Card check, despite its euphemistically Thatcherite name, is not about the need for individual choice. Just the op-
posite: it’s about escaping your individuality, and about the power of collective bargaining. Same-sex marriage, by contrast, is all about the rights of individuals, and especially, of course, their right to make families.

And the exemplary attraction of same-sex marriage emerges even more vividly when, as in California, it’s an alternative to domestic partnership, when, in other words, the economic issues (the only issues that matter in card check) have largely been factored out. For here, as the suit recently filed by the Republican Ted Olson and the Democrat David Boies (opposing attorneys in *Bush v. Gore* but united in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*) asserts, the harm in not being allowed to marry is “severe humiliation, emotional distress, pain, suffering, psychological harm, and stigma” (Boies and Olson 8). And of course, once you’ve described the problems as ones that have virtually nothing to do with the redistribution of wealth, you’ve also described the solution as one that has nothing to do with the redistribution of wealth. It’s these problems, described in this way, that American liberalism (and American culture more generally) loves—hence the popularity of the memoir, more or less defined, like *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, by its commitment to the primacy of emotional distress and psychological harm.

And hence also the opportunity to get rid of it. For when many people’s jobs and everybody’s investments begin to disappear, the idea that we’ll be better off if we just stop stigmatizing one another and make better choices can begin to look a little less plausible. Maybe at that moment, capitalism starts to look like a problem for which human capital does not look like a solution, and the economic arrangements of the society you live in begin to seem more important than how your parents felt about you, how you feel about your kids, or even how you feel about yourself. So maybe another upside of the collapse of a Thatcherite economy will be the disappearance of this entirely Thatcherite genre. Maybe people will lose all interest in the moving stories of the struggles of other people to overcome destructive (though sometimes seductive) parents and seductive (though always destructive) addictions, and no one will want to read memoirs. Maybe people will even lose interest in their own struggles, thus conceived, and no one will want to write them, either.

So—no memoirs, no historicist novels. What else? Actually a lot of non-historicist novels will have to go too. For sure, no more books like *The Corrections* or *Light in August*, or any of Oprah’s other choices. And no more stories about the children of immigrants trying to figure out whether or where they fit in American culture. Ethnic identity is just the family writ large, and no move is more characteristic of the neoliberal
novel than the substitution of cultural difference for (one of the things Thatcher meant to deny) class difference. What the neoliberal novel likes about cultural difference is that it sentimentalizes social conflict, hopefully presenting us with an imagined world where people care more about respect for their otherness than about money for their mortgages. But you get a better sense of the actual structure of American society even from Waldman’s boots than you do from all the accounts of people reclaiming, refusing, or repurposing their cultural identities. Just think of what it means for Touré (in the Times) to hail Colson Whitehead’s novel about upper-middle-class black kids, Sag Harbor, as a contribution toward “reshaping the iconography of blackness” (Touré). As if the crucial thing about rich black people is that they offer new ways of performing race rather than the old way of embodying class.

But it’s not just particular kinds of novels that make their contribution to the current misrepresentation of life under neoliberalism; it’s some of the things that we take to be central to the very idea of the novel. In How Fiction Works, James Wood approvingly quotes Osip Mandelstam’s claim that “the novel was perfected and strengthened over an extremely long period of time as the art form to interest the reader in the fate of the individual” (148–49), and he goes on to emphasize the importance of “psychological motivation” in producing this interest. Thus Wood himself understands “character”—the novel’s primary technology of individuality—as crucial: “to deny character,” he says, “is essentially to deny the novel” (105). It’s one thing, however, to insist on the importance of character and individuality in Russia in the 1920s, quite another in the present-day United States, where liberals and conservatives both—let’s call them neoliberals of the left and neoliberals of the right—are as unanimous in their enthusiasm for individuality as book reviewers are in their enthusiasm for character.

Thus when Michiko Kakutani (writing for the New York Times) attacks Jonathan Littell’s controversial novel The Kindly Ones because its central character, the Nazi Dr. Aue, is a “cartoonish” “monster” we can neither “sympathize” with nor “understand” (Unrepentant”), and when she applauds the “appealing” central character in Chabon’s Yiddish Policeman’s Union, in whose “plight” the reader becomes completely “absorbed” (“Looking”), we should understand that she is invoking simultaneously literary and political criteria of evaluation: good novels are defined by their interest in character, neoliberal politics by their respect for individuality. And we can go on to get some sense of what’s at stake here for ambitious fiction just by sketching out some of the similarities
and differences between the novels themselves. They both, for example, come equipped with glossaries: Chabon’s explains the meaning of Yiddish terms like *luftmensh* (dreamer) and *shveyget* (non-Jewish male); Littell’s gives you helpful explanations of the bureaucratic responsibilities of organizations like the *Hauptamt Ordnungspolizei* or “Main Office of the Order Police.” If the point of Littell’s glossary is that it familiarizes you with the institutional structure of the militarized society the book depicts, the point of Chabon’s is that it replaces a society with an ethnicity; the novel’s world is that of Detective Landsman “and his people.” And the novel’s major stylistic achievement is emblemized in the way it manages to use the ordinarily very pejorative term “yid” in the same tone and with the same inside pleasure that hip-hop culture has used the term “nigga.” You don’t exactly get “Whussup my yidz,” but you do get lots of sentences like “Seems like I’ve known a lot of chess-playing yids who used smack” (5). If the Yiddish word that is Landsman’s name had appeared in the glossary, the most plausible current translation would be “homie.” Individuals, their families, and their “people”: this is the way Chabon does neoliberalism.

By contrast, Dr. Aue’s family is almost literally the House of Atreus; *The Kindly Ones*, of course, are what the Furies become in the third play in Aeschylus’s trilogy, and Aue’s domestic life, to the extent that he has one, is all incest and matricide, without the slightest effort to achieve “psychological plausibility.” And the attraction of ethnicity—of “a people”—is reduced to nothing but the utility of racism: anti-Semites need Jews. Even more to the point, Kakutani is right: Aue himself is not at all sympathetic, and there’s a certain sense in which he is indeed a monster—not so much an unappealing character as not really a character at all. Indeed, in one of the few really smart and serious American reviews of *The Kindly Ones*, Daniel Mendelsohn describes him instead as “ideology in action” (“Transgression”), and it’s this that makes him seem monstrous—to a literary culture that wants characters instead of ideologies and to a political culture that wants the same thing.

Thus although, with respect to its subject matter, Littell’s book belongs to the genre of neoliberal historicism, it doesn’t quite deliver the desired dose of self-congratulation. Alternately a figure from Greek tragedy and a scrupulous Nazi bureaucrat, Aue images a society where individual character—good or bad—is largely beside the point, and his opening address to the reader, “Frères humains” (from Villon’s *Ballade des pendants*), suggests that we might better understand ourselves as creatures like him—entirely structured by ideology—than as the psychologically com-
plex and morally autonomous individuals our literature exists to tell us we are. Or, to put the point more precisely, we might understand our attachment to our psychological complexity and moral autonomy as itself a kind of ideological commitment, our way of imagining our world as nothing but individuals and families, markets and identities.

From this standpoint, *The Kindly Ones*, like *American Psycho*, would count as a kind of resistance to, if not as the end of, the “sad” time for art announced by Fukuyama—a return to ideology. And it would not be alone. The completely homegrown version of the American-born Littell living in Spain and writing in French would be the Baltimore-based David Simon, whose TV series *The Wire* is the most serious and ambitious American fiction of the twenty-first century so far. Unlike its more widely watched competitor *The Sopranos* (which really was about what David Chase always said it was about: “family”), *The Wire* is about institutions—unions, schools, political parties, gangs. It’s about the world that neoliberalism has actually produced rather than the world our literature pretends it’s produced. If a book like *American Psycho* looks back to the great novels of Edith Wharton—novels of manners in which what’s always at stake are the hierarchies of the social order—*The Wire* is like a way of reinventing Zola or Dreiser for a world in which the deification of the market is going out rather than coming in.

But of course the idea that the deification of the market is on the way out is no doubt false. Unemployment may have reached 9.4 percent in May 2011, but May 2011 was also the best month for hedge funds since 2000; HFR’s hedge fund index was up 5.23 percent. And, as I began by noting, it’s not as if the goal of the Obama administration was to oppose neoliberalism. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that its goal—and the goal of American liberalism more generally—is to perfect it, to get us back to the days of the booming economy, but without the pointless and expensive foreign wars, the waterboarding, the anti-immigration racism, the gay-bashing, and the propensity to appoint mainly straight white men to the Supreme Court. None of these things is good for business; some of them (the anti-immigration stuff) may even be bad for business. And American liberalism likes things that are bad for business even less than American conservatism does. That’s why when it comes, say, to reforming health care, a socialized system—not just bad but fatal for business—was not even on the agenda.

But my point here has not been to imagine ways we could get a better society; it’s just been to imagine ways we could get better fiction, and more generally, better art. Which we could still do even if the increas-
ing inequality of the last thirty years goes back to increasing. For while it’s more or less inevitably true that aesthetically ambitious books and TV shows are made by relatively rich people for an audience of other relatively rich people, it’s not inevitable that these books and TV shows must be about how virtuous (antiracist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic) rich people are.

It probably is inevitable, however, that we can’t expect much of a cultural contribution from people like me: professors. Both our teaching responsibilities, which Andrew Ross has described as “grooming radicals” but which might more plausibly be called transforming the entitled children of the upper middle class into the credentialed children of the upper middle class (if we are trying to groom radicals, we are the worst teachers ever), and our research responsibilities, which consist primarily in articulating the fundamental values of neoliberalism in a tone of voice that suggests we are deeply hostile to the current political economic order when actually our deepest desire is to imagine ourselves as its moral exemplars, require loyalty to neoliberalism so complete and so sincere that expecting something better from us would be utterly unfair.

And indeed we can see an exemplary display of this loyalty in the very small professional world of American studies, first in the overwhelming success of the race and gender research project and more recently in the proclamations about internationalizing American studies and about the status of American exceptionalism. A mobile and hence multicultural workforce is as much a structural feature of neoliberalism as increasing economic inequality is, and so it’s not surprising that, as Larry Griffin and Maria Tempenis report in “Class, Multiculturalism, and the American Quarterly,” in 1965 (the year of the Immigration Act that explicitly repudiated the racism of the 1924 law and greatly expanded Asian immigration in particular), about 20 percent of American Quarterly was devoted to what they call “multicultural themes” and the “diversity debate,” and that by the mid-seventies that number had doubled, and by the late nineties it had doubled again—to 80 percent. Indeed we might say not only that the growing focus on race and gender has helped to provide the intellectual and ethical tools needed to understand and manage the multicultural labor force, but also that the comparative disappearance of class has helped us to understand its members in exactly the terms that neoliberalism finds congenial—as individuals whose identities need to be respected.

And just as neoliberal economies require mobile workforces, they also require mobile capital. It is for this reason that markets are faster than intellectuals to lose interest in, say, the idea of an American empire.
What American studies scholars try to portray as an effort to “contest the universalism of American exceptionalism” (Kaplan 16) can be more elegantly, economically, and accurately understood if juxtaposed with what the New York Times described as the increasing market share of Swiss, German, British, and Japanese banks in the business of “taking companies public, underwriting new bonds and advising corporations on mergers and acquisitions” (Bowley). It’s one thing, in other words, to see American exceptionalism as the problem; it’s something else to see capitalism as the problem. And it’s yet another thing, when we do make the occasional effort to talk about capitalism, to lament the regional inequalities it has produced, as if a world where there were more poor people in the United States but fewer in, say, Ecuador would therefore be a more just world.

In both these cases—when we talk about it and when we don’t—we treat neoliberalism as if it were only and inevitably the garden in which we and our toads live rather than itself one of the toads. As if, in other words, economic inequality were the world in which our injustices took place rather than itself the major injustice. And for the reasons I have suggested, it can’t really make sense to count on American studies scholars to produce an alternative. But if we remind ourselves of what doctors (rather than professors) are supposed to do—above all, no harm—we might with at least some plausibility imagine a future in which, perhaps by repudiating the effort to do politically meaningful work and engaging instead in merely antiquarian historical projects, we might at least diminish the contribution we currently make to providing the neoliberal imaginary with the terms in which it happily produces its enviably good conscience.

NOTE

This is the slightly revised text of a talk I gave at the “Imagining Culture: Norms and Forms of Public Discourse in America” conference at the John-F.-Kennedy-Institut in Berlin in June 2009. A much earlier and much shorter version of it appeared in Bookforum, and a quite different version was published in The Baffler.

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