Virtue Hoarders
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Conclusion

Marx’s *Capital* was a world teeming with raw materials and active agents fighting and working with each other, engaged in the processes of production to wrest wealth from raw materials like gold, iron, wool, and cotton: for Marx, these workers would make history when they revolted against capitalism. PMC elite workers also see themselves as the makers of history. They labor in a world of floating signifiers, statistics, analytics, projections, predictions and identity performativity, virtue signaling, and affectual production. Their loves and lives are both virtual and disembodied. Their work continues unabated despite the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. People trained in this regime of symbolic manipulation love to weaponize outrage to fuel moral panics, but they are unable and unwilling to face their identity as a class. In the liberal professions, they police each other to enforce the sort of social and intellectual conformity required by their class, one that is fundamentally fragmented by competition and individualism. All PMC-approved policies about inequality, racism, and bias circle back to strengthening their sense of political agency and cultural and moral superiority. In a viciously competitive market environment, they have abandoned once cherished professional standards of research while fetishizing transgression, or better yet, the performance of transgression.
Despite its veneer of detached sophistication, the PMC embraces melodrama and sentimentality when dealing with inequality, imagining powerless people as innocent victims who it alone is uniquely able to “help.” The PMC desperately wants to be a gender-neutral Atticus Finch. For Marx, the unique industrial processes of labor formed the vanguard class of industrial capitalism. Managers and professionals were unfortunately never part of that class, but their complicity with capital is something they want to disguise as “resilience” and “flexibility,” qualities that working-class losers do not possess in the PMC worldview. Workers remade the industrial world, but today’s PMC elites resent the revolutionary power of the leftism of the past. They want to manage social change and a possible revolution even as their own functions are constrained by the ideological demands of the ruling class. Even though they understand the futility of their own work, they do not believe in the systemic changes necessary to remake economic systems that would allow the many to find rewarding work and lead meaningful lives of dignity and economic security.

In historicizing the PMC’s ideological investments, I am not simply trying to “understand” its identity to add to a precious repository of scholastic knowledge. I am interested in criticizing its values in order to abandon its politics. To build a socialist future, we have to engage in a constant struggle to overcome the political paralysis to which both centrist and pseudo-radicalism lead. Across the world, ordinary people without college degrees have rejected PMC technocracy in favor of populist authoritarianism because they no longer believe in the dominant neoliberal narrative about austerity and competition. To the majority of non-college-educated people, the PMC increasingly appear as pedantic, hypocritical, and punishing: in authoritarian, science denying conservative leaders, they recognize their own helpless rage and ignorance. In angry demagogues, they find the embod-
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... of a sovereignty they have been denied. Of course, their support for billionaire populists and their minions is entirely reactionary, but the political answer to populism is not liberal reformism or moderate centrim. It is committed socialism. If the PMC still insists that a little bit of economic redistribution should be managed carefully by corporate friendly “experts,” socialists have to demand a different order of politics and a different calculation of political engagement, one which aims at building solidarity in the shadow of a distant revolutionary horizon.

Dear reader, you are probably like me, a member of the PMC, or at least you have been educated in its institutions. I hope that this short introduction to the false consciousness of a class that still wants to believe itself a heroic and virtuous political actor will strengthen the reader’s resolve to reject PMC politics while building on this critique of its reactionary class positions. Having been imbued with its ethos and its ideology, we all have to work to undo the effects of PMC propaganda to join the class war from below. This brief introduction serves as a guide to identifying PMC values in ourselves, the better to liquidate them. Because of the ideological distortions of leftist politics by PMC values, self-criticism must be the beginning of all political engagement. We have to abandon the way the PMC wants us to think about success, intelligence, racism, violence, children, reading, health care, well-being, pleasure, and sex. We have to reject making a virtue out of taste and consumption habits. We have to understand ourselves as the universal subject of a history dominated by capitalism’s dynamic, exploitative, and punishing powers. It will not be easy, because PMC elites control so much of our lives and quietly threaten us with exclusion if we do not follow their sanctioned lines of milquetoast politics.

The PMC would have us forget that as a class, it has served capitalism and the profit motive very well: tragically, it has also been hugely successful at monopolizing the language of pro-
gressive and enlightened politics, even as it has abandoned the best aspects of liberal professionalism and the democratic culture in which such ideas of intellectual autonomy can thrive. The values of professionalism, with its disinterested call for accountability and respect of truths arrived at by a community of researchers, are critical to building socialism. Professionalism is not the enemy of solidarity. Professionalism and its disciplinary limits are necessary for nurturing socialist specialists who will be needed to oversee massive economic redistribution and the strengthening of public infrastructure and public goods that will be necessary for the environmental survival of the planet and the political survival of democracy.

I am finishing this manuscript in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. The economic and public health disaster that we are experiencing in the United States is directly linked to the power of for-profit health care interests and corporations in hollowing out public services and public health. The fact that the Biden–Harris administration is opposed to national health care, or Medicare for All, is very revealing. Rather than promoting national health care, a phalanx of centrist experts will promote individual actions, such as mask wearing, as the new “virtues.” Yes, we should wear masks, but we should demand free COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, free vaccines along with the rebuilding of public health institutions to serve public health and not the profit motive. If times go back to normal, and your boss or health insurer tries to sell you on the commodification of your health as a “wellness” protocol, remember that health care is part of public infrastructure, not a commodity. Just as provision for quality childcare for every family should be part of public infrastructure, so should the care of the elderly and the sick be priority areas of public investment. My goal is simple: help normalize socialist economics and politics in the face of the concerted demonization of its vision of what is
collectively possible. Socialism itself is neither glamorous nor innovative: it does not sprinkle its agendas with new pronouns or fancy neologisms. Its signifiers do not float on air or ether: its policies should be tethered to good statistics, objective reality, and the power and uncertainty of scientific method and reason. A socialist intellectual should refuse to wear the cloaks of virtue, erudition, and detachment: she should be prepared to enter the field of class struggle on the side of workers and the exploited. Conservative and progressive PMC elites and the institutions they control are actively hostile to worker power and socialism as such. Therefore solidarity and organization are more critical than ever to long-term political struggle. Affect-driven protests, raucous crowds, and violent rioting may provide the political openings for social change, but political transformation at the scale we need demands discipline of the kind the academic Left is used to condemning. While a mixed economy may be the short-term reality that we dare hope for, let’s strengthen the hand of the socialist aspects of that hybrid system. While the PMC promotes the hoarding of capital and virtue, we must detach ourselves from its crypto-Puritanical regulation of human appetites and human relations. We must be heretics. We should blaspheme.

The PMC elite has refused to name the economic system that has ruined our planet, undermined our trust in public institutions, destroyed public health, diminished our childhoods, and litigated our pleasures. Neither evil nor virtuous, the PMC is a secular and material antagonist. In calling out capitalism as the enemy of the people, we must also name our enemy’s most assiduous courtier and sycophant: the professional managerial class.