

The Problem of Utopia: Capitalism, Depression, and Representation

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ABSTRACT *Contemporary globalized capital presents particular difficulties when it comes to mapping its dynamics, such that imagining what might lie beyond it becomes even more challenging than in earlier stages of capitalist development. For instance, one of the tendencies of contemporary capital is to “stall” a certain perceptual-representational faculty on the part of the collective subject that would otherwise encourage the enunciation of a collective identity-for-itself and a utopian imaginary of a formation “beyond capitalism”—one of the ingredients for social transformation.*

KEYWORDS *Capitalism; Utopia; Representation; Collective subject; Jameson*

RÉSUMÉ *Le capital mondial contemporain soulève des problèmes particuliers quand il s'agit de comprendre sa dynamique, à tel point qu'imaginer ce qui surviendrait au-delà devient encore plus difficile que lors d'étapes antérieures du capitalisme. À ce titre, une des tendances du capital contemporain est d'affaiblir une certaine faculté perceptuelle/représentationnelle de la part du sujet collectif. Cette faculté, si elle demeurait forte, pourrait mener à une identité-pour-soi collective et un imaginaire utopien permettant d'entrevoir un au-delà pour le capitalisme, jetant ainsi les bases d'une transformation sociale.*

MOTS CLÉS *Capitalisme; Utopie; Représentation; Sujet collectif; Jameson*

Introduction: The problem of utopia

Surveying the postmodern mediascape of Northern consumer societies as an index of the popular imagination, one is inclined to reiterate Fredric Jameson's claim that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson, 1994). For those radical activists and thinkers compelled by the two-part project of imagining an end to capitalism and imagining an alternative social formation to capitalism, the global economic crisis of 2008 dealt a double blow: first, through the pervasive precipitation of material hardship (job loss, loss of savings and pensions, loss of property, paralyzing debt and bankruptcy, homelessness, hunger, and so on); and second, through the apparent failure of an anti-capitalist “spirit”¹ to seize the day—to offer engaging visions and explanations and, most significantly, a plan that could ignite desire, quell fear, and simply make another way of living in the world seem possible enough to mobilize the building of it. If not now, then when?

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What ingredients must be added to the mix, what obstacles must be eradicated before even the vague outline of a postcapitalist society can appear on the horizon? Is the recent example of the failure to realize the opportunity latent in this (and every) social crisis the “fault” of we “bearers” of the social formation to sufficiently picture, narrate, or grasp for ourselves what is possible and what is at stake? Or is it the “fault” of capitalism itself for being just too resilient, too mystifying, and too entrenched, while somehow simultaneously fluid and ever-changing?

These questions have long animated what Jameson calls “the Utopian problem,” the problem of realizing a postrevolutionary society (Jameson, 1988, p. 355). The utopian problem was a problem long before Marx, although his recalibration of it has likely been the most significant and impactful one to date. However, after Marx, by the early- to mid-twentieth century, the utopian problem took on a characteristically “modernist” orientation. In its articulation in the work of the “Western Marxists” (primarily Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School critical theorists), the problem became one of positing a “vision that could grip the masses” (Jameson, 1988, p. 355); in other words, it was recast as a perceptual problem and a problem of representation—a situation that can be transcoded into the growing imperative of the question of ideology across the twentieth century. Since then, the utopian problem is, for the most part, no longer animated by debates concerning the mechanics of an alternative society or mode of production, but by debates around why visions of an alternative society seem to have stalled altogether or, at least, gone underground, or why they can be detected only in allegorical forms such as science fiction that can travel incognito as “entertainment.” The popular media narrative of the economic crisis is that it was the fault of some greedy, ruthless capitalists along with some dopey political leaders who were either asleep at the wheel or in the pocket of said greedy capitalists. A more adequate reading of the situation calls for a more “ideological” analysis, that is, both a more structural and more historical account.

Jameson calls for a new aesthetic response to the latest articulation of the utopian problem, a new form of exercising the social imagination that he calls cognitive mapping (Jameson, 1988). For Jameson, cognitive mapping is a specifically spatial and totalizing imaginative operation that addresses what is specifically “newly spatial and totalizing” about the dynamics of postmodern capitalism. The goal of the exercise, however, is common to all utopian thought in the Marxian tradition: to map the social world in such a way as to not only reveal its constitutive contradictions, but reveal how they might be poised to propel capitalism beyond itself, to turn capitalism into the substance of a new mode of production. The theme of cognitive mapping, and the goal it shares with Marxian utopian thought more generally, underwrites the present discussion. More precisely, I want to suggest some reasons why cognitive mapping—as the production of a “vision that grips the masses”—is so *difficult*, why it so readily stalls in the era of advanced global capitalism.

Contemporary globalized capital presents particular difficulties when it comes to mapping its dynamics and limits, such that imagining what might lie beyond it becomes even more challenging than in earlier stages of capitalist development. I am suggesting that, today more than ever, capitalism designates a certain regime of *repre-*

sentation as much as it does a regime of accumulation, that it constitutes a particular mode of *perception* as much as it does a mode of production. This argument is not new; both Marx and the Western Marxists argued that capitalism produces specific kinds of subjects who develop certain faculties over others and, more importantly, a specific kind of collective subject that inhabits the world through a certain collective perceptual modality (one whose tendency is to image the collective subject as an aggregate of individuals, for example). My analysis is informed by this body of work, with one significant addition to the roster. In an attempt to express the way that capital's mode of perception arrests a collective representational faculty, I found it useful to make an allegory of Julia Kristeva's model of the psychic condition of depression. In Kristeva's analysis, the psychic condition of depression is an expression of the stalling of a representational function in the individual psychic subject. This symbolic breakdown refers to the subject's inability to represent the lost object of desire. Kristeva's narrative of the representational economy of depression serves as an evocative allegory for the stalling of a different perceptual and representational faculty on the part of the collective subject in advanced capitalist societies.

My goal here is simply to *qualify* the "failure" that I alluded to at the start, the failure of an anti-capitalist spirit to seize the day's revolutionary openings. The blame for this failure does not lie with the subjects of contemporary capitalist societies, even though the responsibility for social change can lie nowhere else (that is, with "us"). The cause is to be found in that pseudo-objective, always moving and evolving, historical structure-process we call capitalism, so long as we avoid reinstalling the mystifying opposition between agency and structure by recognizing that the structure, in this case, is a product of "our" collective agency, or, to use Hegel's phraseology, that it is simply the externalization of the subject through productive activity. This recognition of the identity between subject and object, intended by Hegel as an affront to the liberal empiricist concept of their irreconcilable division, is Marx's answer to the historical state of alienation. Alienation, reconfigured and re-signified later by Marx as the more structural process of *fetishization*, speaks to the subject's inability to recognize his/her own agency as the creative source of the object world that otherwise oppresses him/her. For both Hegel and Marx, this simple shift in perspective initiates the transformation of an identity/class-in-itself to an identity/class-for-itself. For Hegel, this transformation is a condition for an adequate knowledge of the world; for Marx it is a condition for changing it with a *plan*, in other words, for intentional, political action, or praxis. For Marx, acknowledging that human beings make history but they do not make it under conditions of their own choosing, which is to say that even the "best" intentions can take unexpected turns or lead to undesirable ends, did not invalidate the political work of organizing, planning, envisaging, or generally that which he calls praxis. Unfortunately, the dismissal of the category of "intentionality" as a symptom of an unacceptable logocentrism has now become an obstacle to theoretical work in this area. One idea that motivates this analysis is that it may be time to reintroduce, with all its warning labels in plain sight, the category of intentionality into radical social and cultural analysis.

Praxis is supported by a certain perceptual-representational faculty on the part of the collective subject that encourages the transcendence of the apparent subject-

object opposition, the enunciation of a collective identity-for-itself, and a utopian imaginary of a formation “beyond capitalism”—one of the ingredients for social transformation. The stalling of this perceptual-representational faculty is one aspect of what Marx refers to as fetishization (and a situation that Lukács will call reification). To offer an analysis of this historically determined “stalling” and of why, as one of capitalism’s intrinsic tendencies, it is intensified in the context of global capital is the goal of the following discussion.

Capitalism’s representational economy

Speaking of the history of the Great Depression, John Steinbeck once remarked that the reason social revolution never took place in the United States was that the poor did not see themselves as poor, or exploited, or oppressed, but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. In broad terms, the way in which a population mentally maps the social world will play a large part in either its endurance or its transformation, whether the latter is an abrupt overturning or an incremental evolution. The relative long-term stability of traditional (pre-modern) society in the West was characterized by a relatively stable set of social representations: narratives, explanations, depictions of the world and the cosmos and the dynamic between them. The emergence of modern society is most often depicted by scholars as a collective “re-mapping” (literally and figuratively) of the world—as the social production of new images, new narratives, and new explanations of virtually every dimension of human society and beyond.

If we think of capitalism as a historical process wherein market exchange (and its corresponding forms, such as wage labour) comes to represent the predominant, as opposed to occasional, mode of producing-distributing a society’s resources, then the conventionalizing of a particular collective mode of seeing, understanding, and explaining the social world is one dimension of this historical process. In traditional society, human survival is organized in the imagination of its members as a collective endeavour. Here, collectivity may be organized and thus conceptualized in various ways—tribe, clan, family, protectorate of the lord or monarch, Kingdom of God, the Great Chain of Being—but it is the fundamental unit of social meaning, organization, production, and survival. The emergence of capitalism *necessarily* entails (among other things) the displacing of the image of the collectivity at the centre of the collective imaginary by the new “modern” image of the individual at the centre of the collective imaginary.

In *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx describes the way in which the activity of market exchange produces, for the first time, human beings who are able to perceive themselves as independent from—as not intrinsically tethered to—one another and an “original” collectivity. The process of conventionalizing the activity of exchanging labour-power for a wage releases human beings both materially and conceptually from the feudal (tribal, familial, communal, that is, explicitly social) bonds that were, at one time, the only means of their reproduction. The wage relation is a mode of production, but it is also a mode of perception. It is the social production of the modern category of the autonomous individual: commodity owners tacitly agree to treat each other “as the private owners of ... alienable things, and, precisely for that reason, as

persons who are independent of each other” (Marx, 1976, p. 182). This is the wonderful, terrible gift of the bourgeois revolution that Marx and Engels describe in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 475)

The stabilizing of market society requires, as one of its elements, that the new subjects of “economy” (commodity owners and wage labourers), as this new abstracted sphere of activity will be called, conventionalize the perception-understanding of their mutual relationship as one of “reciprocal isolation and foreignness” (Marx, 1976, p. 182), as opposed to kinship or moral or religious obligation. Among other possible designations, this is the perceptual modality (or ideology) of the “free-worker,” and as Marx argues, world history unfurls from this one important recalibration of the collective imaginary: “[Capital] arises only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence finds the free-worker available, on the market, as the seller of his own labour-power. And this one historical pre-condition comprises a world history” (Marx, 1976, p. 274).

However, the historical process of the free-worker—the social production of the atomized individual—has a counterpart, namely, universal material interdependence:

The owners of commodities therefore find out that the same division of labour which turns them into independent private producers also makes the social process of production and the relations of the independent producers to each other within that process independent of the producers themselves; *they also find out that the independence of the individuals from each other has as its counterpart and supplement a system of all-round material dependence.* (Marx, 1976, p. 202, emphasis added)

The production of the free-worker and the process of the social division of labour—a “system of all-round material dependence”—call each other into existence. The social division of labour entails that each free-worker is inserted into, and thus becomes entirely dependent upon, a system of production that vastly exceeds him/her, geographically, temporally, spatially, and so on:

[S]eparate individuals have, with the broadening of their activity into world-historical activity, become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them (a pressure which they have conceived of as a dirty trick on the part of the so-called universal spirit, etc.), a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the *world market.* (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 163, emphasis in original)

The world market, for Marx, is a totalizing dynamic: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 476). As a mode of production, the world market intrinsically poses a representational dilemma to a collective imaginary organized on the category of the isolated individual. The social division of labour, or the totalizing-decentring force of capitalist production, initiates a situation that is today exceedingly banal and yet equally as *unmappable* as it was in the early nineteenth century—in fact, more so given the greater complexity of capital’s nexus: “our insertion as individual subjects into a multi-dimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentring of global capital itself” (Jameson, 1988, p. 351). According to Jameson, the consequent unmappability of the social totality—what he calls the “problems of figuration”—does not become particularly visible (or symptomatic) until the passage from market to monopoly capital—capital’s “imperialism stage”—where capital’s networks are increasingly global and the contradiction between the possible “phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience” becomes even more exaggerated (Jameson, 1988, p. 349). Even the phenomenal experience of some people today of relatively easy international travel does not come close to approximating the material reality of the spatial and temporal dimensions of the global circuits of capital that are engaged when the average consumer in the North makes breakfast. The truth of the experience has long since ceased to bear any resemblance to its phenomenal forms—to its existential time and place:

[T]hose structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.

There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience. It is evident that this new situation poses tremendous and crippling problems for a work of art [or for critical explanations-representations of the social world, or for utopian imaginaries]. (Jameson, 1988, p. 349)

It is not a matter of an intrinsic perceptual deficiency on the part of the subjects of economy (“us”), nor is this an argument about human nature. For Marx, human nature is ultimately historical: “every society constructs its own” (Jameson, 2004, p. 37). As is Marx’s analysis in *Capital*, this is a *structural* historicist diagnosis and, therefore, unlike a kind of functionalism for which it might also be mistaken, it hinges on what Marx calls a “tendency.” The notion of a tendency can cause discomfort to those more inclined to non-contradictory thinking (where if something is A, it cannot also be B) or to those who do not take Hegel’s point that it is the exception that proves the rule instead of disproving it. Marx describes a tendency as a characteristic movement of capital that is generalized and pervasive but, as such, cannot be either adequately captured or contradicted by any single occasion (any single capitalist enterprise, for instance). Some of capital’s tendencies identified by Marx are the tendency for private

enterprise to expand, for real wages to decline, for a greater mechanization of production, and for capital to move toward crisis. These tendencies may not necessarily characterize the dynamic of every capitalist enterprise, but they will characterize most enterprises, most of the time, and the moment they do not, we will have brought about, either intentionally or not, a different mode of production.

The stalling of a certain collective perceptual-representational faculty is a tendency in capitalism: less as a mechanical or functional response and more in Raymond Williams' sense of a structure of feeling, where the consequence of a particular historical organization of society is a matter of setting limits and exerting pressures, in this case, on the collective imagination. What limits, for instance, prevent the popular narrativizing of full employment? What pressures arrest the popular demand for socializing the banks and failing automobile and insurance industries that were recently bailed out? The possibility of letting these industries fail—a vision thoroughly consistent with a competitive-individualist market ideology—was called for in the streets, en masse, but the idea of their social control was not popularly entertained: a telling situation, where popular imagination lagged significantly behind real, material conditions for social transformation. In fact, I propose that the most stubborn obstacle to social change in the global North is not an absence of the social-technical know-how to build a society “beyond capitalism,” but the absence of the general desire to do so, even on the part of those whose most basic material needs are not addressed by the status quo. Dallas Smythe's observation in *Dependency Road* is still valid: “a dominated class can make a successful revolution only when it has first created public opinion to support it” (Smythe, 1981, p. 271). Smythe also says in this text that “whatever new political directions popular consciousness ... embraces, when it does, the role of the mass media will be central and crucial to the struggle then to take place” (p. 286). This is as true today, in the age of the Internet, as it was then.

Jameson regards the stalling of a utopian representational faculty as one symptom (one that requires “diagnosis and a more effective therapy”!) of the more general condition of postmodernity (the ideological or cultural form of advanced capitalism), also characterized by a waning of history, or the weakening of a generalized historical sensibility (Jameson, 2004, p. 36). The waning of a collective sense of history is, for Jameson, the companion to an inability to imagine a “beyond capitalism.” While reviving this faculty does not guarantee social change, it is difficult to imagine the materialization of social change without it:

that weakening of the sense of history and of the imagination of historical difference which characterizes postmodernity is, paradoxically, intertwined with the loss of that place beyond all history (or after its end) which we call utopia. For another, it is difficult enough to imagine any radical political programme today without the conception of systematic otherness, of an alternative society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive, however feebly. This clearly does not mean that, even if we succeed in reviving utopia itself, the outlines of a new and effective practical politics for the era of globalization will at once become visible; but only that we will never come to one without it. (Jameson, 2004, p. 36)

If we can code the stalling of a utopian perceptual faculty as a collective weakening of a sense of history, as Jameson suggests, we can also code it as a weakening of a sense of “totality,” as in the sense of the social world as an overdetermined causal structure (à la Althusser, 1969), or of the essential interconnectedness of the various distinct moments of a living-moving system. The concept of totality has not widely “recovered” from its dismissal in the postinterpretive turn in critical theory in the 1980s. Totality, in Marx’s appropriation of the Hegelian category, designates the interrelationship of the diverse elements of an organic system or structure. Marx deploys the concept to capture how the movement of the historical and social process of capital can only proceed through a *heterogeneity* of expressive forms. However, since the 1980s in particular, totality has been misconstrued as a category of incorporation and homogenization, and rejected as a “universalizing grand narrative.” This is unfortunate and particularly untimely, since the category remains pivotal to demystifying the movement of capitalism’s reproduction, now more than ever, in light of capital’s highly protracted global configuration, where the mediating channels of its disparate forms are more complex and abstracted than at any other time. The stalling of a *totalizing* mapping faculty expresses itself in the tendency for subjects in capitalism to generate fragmented or atomized social maps—a tendency that intensifies with capital’s current global configuration. In this way, we could refer to a totalizing sense of the essential interconnectedness of the social world as capitalism’s lost object.

Capitalism’s lost object

Following Marx, this theme was to become more explicit in the work of the Western Marxists: capital’s tendency is to generate fragmented (or *abstracted*) self-representations that veil the “bigger picture,” that obfuscate a more adequate portrait of capital’s intrinsic systematicity and nature as a moving process. In other words, the conventionalizing of a certain vantage point that encourages compartmentalized representations of the social world’s various moments is one of capital’s ideological formations—one of the ways in which capital “sets limits and exerts pressures.” The kind of utopian exercise that would therefore confront this perceptual modality—that would go against the grain, so to speak—would be one that explicitly maps the interconnections between capitalism’s various moments, between its apparently discrete or atomized fields of social production. Whether we refer to these fields as the economy, culture, or politics, or whether we choose more “specialized” (that is, more highly abstracted and “reified”) designations—the state, civil society, the media, the public sphere, government, health care, the military, education, the arts, science, technology, the family, and so on—mapping their complex mediations in the mode of production is a fundamental dimension of the project of positing a “beyond capitalism.” The development from a point of view of the class-in-itself to a point of view of the class-for-itself is, for Marx, one way of describing this collective shift in perceptual modality. For Lukács, the revolutionary potential of the proletariat is linked to a potential systematic perceptual modality that he called “class consciousness”: “The superior strength of true, practical class consciousness lies in the ability to look beyond the divisive symptoms of the economic process to the unity of the total social system underlying it. In the age of capitalism it is not possible for the total system to

become directly visible in external phenomena” (Lukács, 1971, p. 74). The kind of representations (or explanations of the social world) that generate for individuals the sensation of their *non-individuality*—of their fundamentally collective orientation—we can refer to as “totalizing” representations. Again, I have invoked the “old-fashioned” figure of a totalizing representational strategy intentionally. The notion of a totalizing representational practice is marked by a highly productive contradiction: it is a practice of *abstraction* that allows the concrete dimensions (that is, the mediated, relational, or *negative* dimensions) of the object to be revealed. As Lukács points out emphatically in *History and Class Consciousness*, another name for a totalizing representational strategy is *dialectical* thinking. Submitted to the renaming strategies of Adorno and, later, Althusser, it also refers to what we now more conventionally call “theory.”

But why does capitalism *necessarily* generate fragmented self-representations? According to Marx’s analysis throughout *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* (1973), one of the historical conditions for capital’s eventual hegemony in the nineteenth century is the generalized appearance that market exchange, as a formal and hence non-coercive social mechanism, replaces direct coercive control (founded on religious bond, feudal obligation, or absolutist prerogative) over the production and distribution of the material means of life. In other words, markets appear to signify the evacuation of what we today call *politics* from social production. The truth, for Marx, of capitalism’s inherently exploitative movement—that capital is by definition the private appropriation of the value of the proletariat’s surplus labour by the bourgeoisie—signals a constitutive contradiction between capital’s essential dynamic and its *necessary*, self-legitimizing appearance. In more contemporary theoretical language, the “equality of exchange sutures over class exploitation” (Madra quoted in Byrne & Healy, 2006, p. 256).

This means that for capitalism to be systematically reproduced, politics must appear as a completely separate and distinct sphere of activity from the “private” sphere of market activity (producing, buying, selling, and so on). The emergence of this discrete sphere of market activity (or “civil society”) simultaneously calls into existence the state as an autonomous sphere of political activity. What Marx refers to as the “abstraction of the state” is the process of the state’s emerging appearance of autonomy from civil society, its hegemonic identity as an overseer of the economy, as the arena for negotiating the incidental mutuality of freely interacting, mutually indifferent agents of the wage contract. The appearance of a separate and autonomous state contradicts its essential character as an expression itself of the relations of capital, as an extension of capital in the form of a supporting and stabilizing mechanism. While the state and civil society are expressions of the same historical process, capitalism requires the relatively stable, collective (mis)recognition of their fundamental atomization. As the totalizing movement of market exchange (commodification) proceeds to bring ever more traditional forms and spaces of social production into its orbit, it continues to generate the appearance of a social world that is fundamentally an aggregate of autonomous spheres of activity, identification (collective and individual), and production (material and symbolic): religion, the arts, public education, the family, and so on. Lukács makes this same point:

[In the development of capitalist society,] various aspects of the economy are expanded and intensified, so that the “totality” becomes ever more closely knit and substantial. ... As a result of the objective structure of this ... system, the surface of capitalism appears to “disintegrate” into a series of elements all driven towards independence. Obviously this must be reflected in the consciousness of the men who live in this society. ... (Lukács, 1977, pp. 31-32)

One of capitalism’s fundamental contradictions is that it is a social process that must represent itself as the contrary of what it essentially is. That which Marx recognized as the distinction between capitalism’s essence and its necessary appearances defers the transcendence of capitalist social relations by suspending the contradiction between subject and object. The popular perception of capitalism as an integrated and historical structure—as the *product* (continuity, extension) of its agents’ own labour and activity—can, therefore, in the specific historical context of capital, be described as a “lost object.” The popular retrieval of this lost object will be one necessary element of any revolutionary project.

Julia Kristeva’s representational economy of depression

If we think of the integrated social totality as an object that is increasingly lost to the collective imagination in the course of the ever-protracting development of global capitalism—as Althusser’s “absent cause,” detectable only in its effects—then Julia Kristeva’s narrative of the role of the lost object in the psychic condition of depression provides a useful allegory for the stalling of the collective representational faculty in capitalism.

In some psychoanalytic narratives, psychic development is structured around the foundational event of the “lost object”; for Kristeva, it is the loss of the maternal object of desire. In her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), Kristeva characterizes the psychic condition of depression as a subject’s particular “intolerance for object loss,” where the signifier has failed to resolve the subject’s subsequent state of withdrawal. In other words, with the depressive condition, the signifier fails to do its job of enacting the symbolic recovery of the lost object. Kristeva argues that normal psychic maturation involves resolving or negating this loss—this initial experience of abandonment—through *symbolic* activity, through the process of developing language and through representational practices. While the subject cannot retrieve the original lost object, she or he can capture it symbolically, or signify it, allowing normal psychic development to proceed. According to Kristeva, depression is a psychic state that refers to subjects for whom, and for whatever reason, the original loss of the maternal object is especially traumatic or intolerable and is subsequently disavowed, arresting the process of its mourning and deferring its symbolic recovery. Kristeva describes depression as a condition of “asymbolia,” or the breakdown in the function of representation, in the subject’s ability to utilize language as compensation for the lost object, resulting in withdrawal and inaction.

We can think of Kristeva’s formulation of the condition of asymbolia as an allegory for the condition of the collective subject in global capitalism. Like Kristeva’s depressive subject, the collective subject experiences a breakdown in the signifying function, in the possibility of representing and articulating the social world in a holistic way. The

stalling of this representational function is accompanied by a withdrawal from public activity, the thwarting of organized collective agency, a popular inarticulateness, and a sense of powerlessness and paralysis in the face of an unimaginable, unmappable, and oppressive objectivity—an objectivity that is so banal that it is not recognized as oppressive, but simply as “everyday life.” In Kristeva’s model of the depressive psychic state, the stalling of the subject’s capacity for signification expresses itself as a “psychomotor retardation” or “language retardation”—the literal slowing down and exhaustion of the subject’s speech or linguistic activity (1989, p. 33). The speech of the depressive person becomes slow, repetitive, and monotonous: the depressive person utters “sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases ... cannot [be] formulate[d]” (p. 34).

The idea of language retardation is significant in two ways when allegorizing the collective subject in capitalism. First, Kristeva argues that language retardation results in a skewed sense of time. As Kristeva argues, because the “time in which we live is the time of our discourse,” the subject does not develop a sense of temporal continuity, a sense of before and after, or a sense of a movement from the “past towards a [future] goal” (1989, p. 60). Instead, the subject’s sense of time is that of a series of exploded moments, which locks the subject into the past (a nostalgic, stationary past) and blocks out a perspective of the future (p. 61). Kristeva argues that the lost object is, therefore, not a place or a thing but a particular sense and experience of *time* (p. 61). The subject’s disjointed sense of temporality is accompanied by the breakdown of the subject’s faculty of signification. This situation recollects that of the collective subject in capitalism: the breakdown in the capacity to perceive, picture, represent the social totality also describes the popular, collective submersion of a *historical* sensibility—the ability to perceive and represent historical continuity, the imperative connection between then, now, and that which may be.

As mentioned earlier, for Jameson, discourses of postmodernism—those symptomatic expressions of late-twentieth-century capitalism—tend to submerge the category of history. The result is the aesthetic and conceptual collapsing of history into a series of synchronic moments, the rendering of the past into a “vast collection of images, [into] a multitudinous photographic simulacrum,” and finally the realizing of Guy Debord’s vision of a “society bereft of all historicity, whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles” (Jameson, 1984, p. 66). Within postmodernism, history becomes *imagistic*; it becomes, in Kristeva’s words, a “series of exploded moments.” In the postmodern era, the proliferation of historical images, an index of the evacuation of the popular perception of history as a material force, is accompanied by a decline in the popular and collective ability to represent—to *grasp, categorically*—history as a continuum, as a set of social relations transferred from one generation to the next. Kristeva’s description of the psychic movement of depression bears a striking similarity to Jameson’s description of what happens when a sense of history is submerged in the cultural (that is, aesthetic, ideological, philosophical, et cetera) forms of late capitalism:

[T]his mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experi-

encing history in some active way: it cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but merely to demonstrate ... the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience. (Jameson, 1984, p. 68)

Second, Kristeva argues that language retardation amounts to a “learned helplessness” on the part of the depressive subject, which also recollects the conventional perception of a lack of agency on the part of the collective subject in capitalism. Kristeva describes the state of learned helplessness as such: “when all escape routes are blocked, animals as well as men learn to withdraw rather than flee or fight. The retardation or inactivity, which one might call depressive, would thus constitute a learned defense reaction to a dead-end situation and unavoidable shocks” (1989, p. 34). The capitalist mode of production produces a similar type of retardation and arrested development in the social subject.² A further analogy between Kristeva’s depressive subject and the social subject in capitalism can be drawn in terms of the concept of “affect.” Kristeva states, “Unbelieving in language, the depressive persons are affectionate, wounded to be sure, but prisoners of affect. The affect is their thing” (p. 14). Bertolt Brecht argued that the bourgeoisie internalized the sense of danger that complex, historical thought represented with respect to their interests in capitalist society. This potential danger was expressed by the collective submersion of complex and historical thinking by transforming it into something less threatening: “The bourgeoisie was obliged to liquidate its purely intellectual exertions in a period when the pleasures of thinking were likely to involve immediate risks for its economic interests. Where thought was not completely turned off, it became ever more culinary. Use was still made of the classics, but an ever more culinary use” (Brecht in Jameson, 1998, p. 37). Jameson’s commentary on Brecht is likewise an effort to map a relationship between a certain socio-economic context and a type of subjective economy:

There is here the suggestion, not of outright censorship, but of an instinctive self-repression of real thought, of an all-too-knowing turning away from anything that might lead you to unpleasant truths and to ideas of action which either promise guilt or ask you to change your life. This is not, I think, a “vulgar Marxist” analysis. ... On the contrary, it would seem to have its affinities with Freud’s view of the patient he called the Rat Man, who had to make himself stupid, to stop himself from thinking, in order not to confront the unwanted and thereby unconscious realities of his own existence. Consumer society today, in the United States and increasingly elsewhere, faces a similar dilemma and a similar block when it comes to thinking about the end results of its socioeconomic system; and has certainly sacrificed its classics to far more elaborate culinary distractions. (Jameson, 1998, p. 37)

Social pathologies of late capitalism

While Kristeva focuses on the individual psychic subject, she suggests that her analysis also has significance for the social subject. Observing depressive “symptoms” on the social level, Kristeva argues that crises of thought, speech, and representation

emerge in societies in response to large-scale, violent social traumas, such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, World Wars, et cetera. She argues, “[w]hat those monstrous and painful sights do damage to are our systems of perception and representation. As if overtaxed or destroyed by too powerful a breaker, our symbolic means find themselves hollowed out, nearly wiped out, paralyzed” (1989, p. 223). The results of such traumas are a collective “illogicality and silence” and a preoccupation with an *apocalyptic* rhetoric “carried out in two seemingly opposite, extreme fashions that complement each other: a wealth of images and a holding back of words” (p. 222). Contemporary consumer-capitalist societies appear to substantiate Kristeva’s analysis: the crisis of signification—the breakdown in the popular and collective faculty of representing, to ourselves, the complexity and historical dimensions of the social world—is, indeed, accompanied by the proliferation and predominance of images in the public sphere—images which, as recognized by Guy Debord, assume the role of the perfect, idealized commodity. The prerogative of the image is a defining characteristic and index of postmodern capitalism.

Kristeva’s argument suggests there may be something like a collective depressive psychopathology symptomatic of postmodern capitalism. But what happens if we choose not to respect the conventional conceptual distinction between the individual and the collectivity in the first place? What if an easy distinction between the individual and the social subject is really just one of those reifications generated by the dominant bourgeois perceptual modality? If so, then what we call “the individual” is as much an expression of larger social, cultural, and historical processes as it is a unique psyche, physiology, personality, temperament, history, and so on, and “individual psychopathologies” will have social conditions of manifestation as much as they express a personal traumatic narrative. As such, we would need to displace a more conventional reified conception of a clear distinction between individual pathology and collective modality with the recognition of a mediated continuity between them. This is the conceptual tack taken by David Michael Levin (1987) in his study “Clinical Stories: A Modern Self in the Fury of Being.” Here, Levin argues that the difference between the individual depressive pathology and the “normal” modality of the modern collective subject is more a difference of degree than a difference of kind. In other words, an individual instance of psychopathology should be considered an extreme or concentrated instance of a more diffuse, generalized tendency in the wider collectivity:

In truth, what we are calling individual “psychopathology,” and are treating as such, are only the more extreme cases of a collective suffering in which we all take part in accordance with our individual constitution and character. The “normal” is merely that which prevails and holds sway; but this could be, after all, collective delusion, collective madness. We are therefore concerned not only with a relatively small number of unfortunates, of “cases.” We are also concerned, as in a dialectical sense we must be, with our forms of social organization and their historical culture. (Levin, 1987, p. 482)

Levin’s analysis is one in an anthology of studies called *Pathologies of the Modern Self: Postmodern Studies on Narcissism, Schizophrenia, and Depression*. These studies situate what the contributors argue is a growing instance (some use the term “epi-

demical”) of these psychopathologies in contemporary society. Levin, in particular, posits a dialectically mediated relationship between these pathologies and the process of modernity itself, arguing that a pervasive nihilism constituting a kind of structure of feeling in Western society (and which expresses itself as a collective narcissism and an epidemic of clinical depressions) has manifested as the dialectical reversal of an early modern humanism and concurrent secularization:

I contend that the three configurations of pathology examined in this book [depression, narcissism, and schizophrenia] are historically interconnected in a vicious epidemiological cycle. After the first and glorious phase of modernity, when Western culture broke away from its mediaeval past and basked in the sun of a healthy self-affirmation, an “excessive” pride, a cultural narcissism elevated Man to the position occupied by God. In many ways, this new spirit was good; but the historical forms the inflation eventually assumed have slowly wounded our pride and created social and cultural conditions within which a generalized collective depression has taken hold. Our collective narcissistic defenses against these conditions have not only failed as defenses; they have *intensified* the pathogenic conditions, contributing to a life-world in which the modern Self finds itself deeply troubled by fragmentation and disintegration.

These pathologies are not just psychological; nor are they just individual. They need to be understood as social and cultural phenomena. (Levin, 1987, p. 485)

The idea that the historical process of modernity is experienced by its agents as an infliction, as a sort of social trauma, is not a recent idea; it begins to emerge in various articulations as far back as the period of transition from traditional to modern society itself. The experience of industrialism (the revolution of labour, production, and re-organization of time-space) and of the emergence of capitalism, in particular, have been theorized as a re-ordering of the senses, as a severing and compartmentalization of mental and physical faculties, and a re-scripting of human personality and psychology requiring enormous and rapid physical, emotional, and intellectual adaptation.

Levin begins his paper by quoting Adorno in *Minima Moralia*: “If such a thing as a psycho-analysis of today’s prototypical culture were possible ... such an investigation would need to show the sickness proper to the time to consist precisely in normality” (Adorno quoted in Levin, 1987, p. 479). The breakdown in the collective faculty for representing the articulated social object is, I argue, one way of describing the pervasive “sickness proper to the time.” It is what Levin calls the “collective madness” which constitutes normality; it is a historically conditioned “collective delusion” (p. 482). For instance, is it not a “normalized,” and consequently largely unrecognized, collective “sickness” of the social subject to have adapted to the consumption of so rich a daily diet of logically contradictory social representations and narratives without it producing a violent, immediate, and systemic rejection of these inconsistent legitimizing narratives by the social body—that is, without triggering a collective impulse to expel such narratives, which aggressively contradict the social body’s interests, experiences, and even means of survival?

Our collective television-viewing habits in North America suggest as much. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on a Nielsen study that found the average U.S. household watched TV for eight hours and eighteen minutes each day from September 2007 to September 2008 (*Los Angeles Times*, 2008). Certain highly standardized and dependable myths underwrite the vast bulk of commercial television content, both fictional and non-fictional. I would argue that the most hegemonic myth circumscribing television content—everything from soap operas to sport spectacles, from crime dramas to the evening news—involves the portrayal of the interests of capital (“industry,” the business sector, the economic and political elite) as continuous with the interests of the general collectivity or citizenry (“the people,” the nation, “our national interests,” consumers, “Main Street,” and so on). Even after the 2008 economic crisis, it is still difficult to find narratives on commercial television that contradict this long empirically refuted “trickle-down” interpretation of the flow of society’s wealth from top to bottom. Few other myths today are so thoroughly naturalized while being, at the same time, so consistently contradicted by historical evidence. Once this contradiction is symbolically erased, for all intents and purposes, from the popular imaginary, a vast array of subsequent contradictions can be portrayed as commonsensical. The securing of increasingly greater profits for industry—coded as “productivity”—can be portrayed as a necessary justification for countless violations of the social body that could not otherwise be legitimated: the decimation of labour forces either through termination or piecemeal through wage reductions, benefit elimination, contract work, and other strategies of labour flexibility; environmental devastation and the absence of political will to address long-term environmental concerns and sustainability; the dismantling of welfare programs; increasing poverty and homelessness; advertising and promotional campaigns in schools; a reduction in public spending on the institutions of education and health care; the poisoning of the global food supply with chemicals that are toxic to human beings but increase productivity, shelf-life, and salability; the conventionalizing of devastating labour conditions and environmental standards in the global South; and illegal territorial expansion, occupation, and war.

Conclusion: Representing the lost object

Can we imagine a resolution of the depressive modality of the collective subject in capitalism? For Kristeva, the effects of the emotional trauma that structures the psyche in the depressive individual are not intransigent. Kristeva identifies a mode of transcending the depressive state, a mode she characterizes as an aesthetic and symbolic exercise. She refers to this exercise as *sublimation*:

The melancholy Thing ... prevents working out the loss within the psyche. How can one approach ... [a resolution]? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole “container” seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing. (Kristeva, 1989, p. 14)

Kristeva uses the example of literary production as a gesture (usually unconscious) on the part of the subject to confront object loss, to cease the denial of separation of subject and object, and to engage in the symbolic recovery of the object. The

literary representation enacts for the subject the sentiment of “no, I haven’t lost; I evoke, I signify through the artifice of signs and for myself what has been parted from me’... [ensuring] the subject’s entrance into the universe of signs and creation” (p. 23). The aesthetic gesture is more cathartic in character than elaborational, and it facilitates “a survival, a resurrection” (or “rebirth”) of the psychic subject. On a different register, Jameson suggests something similar about the sublimatory political potential of the representational exercise he calls cognitive mapping:

[A] new [totalizing] political art—if it is indeed possible at all—will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale. (Jameson, 1984, p. 92)

Jameson’s argument, expressed more bluntly elsewhere, is “that without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible” (Jameson, 1988, p. 355). But Marx also reminds us that ushering in a “beyond capitalism” is not a matter of mentally projecting outside our time and place, but of taking up the opportunities offered by the present moment—a practice that consequently results in *obsolescing* the present moment: “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence” (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 162). For Marx, then, sublimation may be a symbolic act, but the emphasis is on the *act*. Utopia is not a positive vision of something outside of capital, but a negative force internal to capital—something we could call its structural opening to a radical otherness—mobilized in the present.

Notes

1. I mean “spirit” in the renewed Hegelian sense of a social collectivity (cf. Jameson, 2010).
2. A historical connection can be traced between this concept of affect, on the level of the individual psyche, and Negri & Hardt’s observation in their book *Empire* (2000) that production in the contemporary historical conjuncture is characterized by the predominance of what they call “affective labour.” I explore this argument in an article called “Fredric Jameson, Notwithstanding: The Dialectic of Affect” (Best, 2011) in *Rethinking Marxism*.

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