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“Prisoner’s Dilemma” vs. William S. Burroughs’s “Controller’s Dilemma”: A Discursive Motif in the Repression of Working-Class Self-Organization

Manuel Yang (University of Toledo)

They said, we'd be artistically free
When we signed that bit of paper
They meant, let's make a lot of money
Worry about it later

Ohohoh, I'll never understand
Ohohoh, complete control
Let me see your other hand

I don't trust you
Why do you trust me?
Huh?

All over news spread fast
They're dirty, they're filthy
They ain't no gonna last

Total (this is Joe public speaking)
C-O-N control (I'm controlled in the body, I'm controlled in the mind)
Total (and this is the punk rockers)
C-O-N control (we're controlled in the price of the hard drugs we can find)
Total
C-O-N control
Total (remote control!)
C-O-N control

We're gonna plug it! Gonna play it! Gonna fuck it! Gonna rock it!
C-O-N control
And that means you!

Clash, “Complete Control” (1977)

Noam Chomsky’s 1966 *Cartesian Linguistics*, an exploration of the origin of modern linguistics, defined linguistic freedom as freedom from “stimulus control”: “We have seen that the Cartesian view...is that in its normal use, human language is free from stimulus control and does not serve a merely communicative function, but is rather an instrument for the free expression of thought and for appropriate response to new situations” (*Cartesian* 13). Commenting on the book, Jacques Derrida stated that “[i]nterest in the origin of linguistics is awakened when the problems of the origin of language cease to be proscribed (as they had been from the end of the nineteenth century), and when a certain geneticism -- or a certain

generativism -- comes back into its own” and that “this is not a chance encounter” (139).

Derrida argued that Jean-Jacques Rousseau ought to have been accorded “a more important and original place...in such a history of philosophy and linguistics” than Chomsky allowed for, noting that he, Derrida, was less concerned “with comparing the content of doctrines, the wealth of positive knowledge” but: “rather, with discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and of certain directive questions. And then, on this basis, of formulating questions...But questions too about a certain closure of concepts; about metaphysics in linguistics, or, as you will, about the linguistics in metaphysics” (153).

To declare that the refusal to proscribe the “problems of the origin of language” and the affirmation of “geneticism -- or a certain generativism” are “not chance encounters” imply a certain historical determination, namely that such demystification of origin and conceptualization of “geneticism” were occurring in relation to -- though *not* generated by or generating -- the crisis of Keynesian world capitalism in the late 1960s when Chomsky and Derrida were both writing. Such determination is premised on a historical search for origins -- although Derrida and Chomsky’s subject is linguistics, we may substitute it with the self-organization of the working class, whose multilateral struggles made possible that global crisis to begin with -- necessitates us to advance a theory of generation (“a certain geneticism -- or a certain generativism”), a succession of historical links and relationships that connect one form of revolutionary working-class self-organization to another. And, just as Derrida proposed the way in which Rousseau problematizes the origin of linguistics as Chomsky recounted it in *Cartesian Linguistics*, we can propose the way in which the revolutionary commons problematizes the origin of the workers’ councils as, for instance, theorized by Sergio Bologna’s “Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin of the Workers’ Council Movement”, a seminal article published in 1972.

1972 was the year of the Watergate scandal and Nixon-Kissinger Christmas bombing of North Vietnam. Those two momentous scandals of American state power are organically connected to each other: in order to illegally (from the narrow perspective of bourgeois-democratic legitimacy) facilitate the clandestine Christmas bombings, the Nixon administration had to resort to a cornucopia of illegal harassments, repressions, and surveillance, culminating domestically in the wire-tapping of the rival capitalist political party and, with the aid of the COINTELPRO operations, the fratricidal implosion of the Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, and the armed-struggle wing of the radical student movement. Preceding these

symptomatic signs of the hegemonic capitalist state's legitimation crisis, discussions were already underway among ruling-class ideologues concerning the means to contain it. At the onset of the first Cold War the policy of containment was crystallized in the formulation of Melvin Dresher and Merrill Flood's "prisoner's dilemma". At the time of Chomsky (whom Nixon had placed on his enemy list) and Derrida's writing, when the crisis of the American state expressed itself at the level of international relations through détente and imminent closure of the first Cold War (to be reconstituted later in the "second time as farce" new Cold War under the Reagan administration), the American ecologist Garret Hardin offered a solution to the crisis of Keynesian capitalism in the form of "the tragedy of the commons".

Capitalist Control of Proletarian Chance

Two years after the publication of *Cartesian Linguistics*, when Derrida was presenting his comments as a lecture at a London colloquium on Rousseau, Garret Hardin formulated on the pages of *Science* an influential response to this capitalist crisis and christened it "the tragedy of the commons". On "the day of reckoning, that is the day when the desired goal of social stability becomes a reality," Hardin wrote:

each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons...is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit -- in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all (1244).

Like Samuel L Popkin's notion of the "rational peasant", Hardin's "rational herdsman" is a gross anachronistic superimposition of the capitalist Homo Economicus upon the historical herdsmen, peasants, and commoners, whose traditional conception of the commons did not assume the Hardinian principle of unlimited market growth but, in fact, made careful stipulations to regulate and limit growth, price, and market forces. Historically, as opposed to Hardin's imaginary thought-experiment, it was precisely the capitalist market "stimulus-control" and its ruling-class endorsers that had, by legal chicanery and violence, enclosed the commons and thrown off those who subsisted on them into becoming vagrants, criminals, and other types of proletarians. Hardin was, in short, proscribing us to rationally perceive and wrestle with the problems of the historical origin of capitalist enclosures and destruction of the commons.

The problem that concerned Hardin was how to control the danger of unpredictable chance that the proletarian "population" posed to the market. Michel Foucault pointed out that

modern population studies, demography, and science of population control (which, in the twentieth century, extends to corporate propaganda and counterinsurgency programs) emerged as a new kind of “biopolitics”, i.e., political uses of control mechanisms, along with the modern asylum, penal institution, and medical system, which were aimed to discipline the unruly power of the proletarian multitudes at the most intimate, vulnerable sources of their energy (life and death of the body) and turn it into a docilely efficient labor-power. “This bio-power was without a question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes.” “The mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures”, a “technology of power over ‘the’ population as such, over men insofar as they are living beings” which “consists in making live and letting die” (*History of Sexuality* 140-141; “*Society Must Be Defended*” 246, 247).

The “tragedy of the commons” is usually treated as a social application of “prisoner’s dilemma” in game theory, the most celebrated contemporary branch of applied mathematics that studies probability theory for the purpose of biopolitical “forecasts, statistics, and overall estimates”. Formulated by the American mathematicians Melvin Dresher and Merrill Flood in 1950 for RAND -- the premier military-industrial-complex think tank which the US Army Air Force set up in 1946 and which Donald Rumsfeld chaired between 1981 and 1986 -- and godfathered by Princeton mathematician Albert W. Tucker, the “prisoner’s dilemma” game served as a theoretical pivot for nuclear policy-making, management science, and other forms of population control in postwar Keynesian capitalism. The “prisoner’s dilemma” devises a hypothetical situation in which two prisoners, not knowing what the other person is going to do, are faced with the “dilemma” of whether or not they are to collaborate with and confess to authority. If both of them demonstrate their solidarity by refusing to collaborate, they get the minimum sentence of six months; if the two collaborate, both receive two years; and if one collaborates and the other doesn’t, the first goes free while the latter gets ten years. Even though it is usually treated as a “non-zero-sum-game” problem that focuses on the conflict between individual and group “rational self-interests”, the “prisoner’s dilemma” is essentially a game theory version of the Benthamite panopticon: how to break solidarity among prisoners, make them confess, and work against each other? And the panopticon is the utilitarian dream of

controlling the unpredictable variations of chance that the prisoners and, by extension, all workers represent.

The “prisoner’s dilemma” developed out of the context of institutional “dilemmas” inherent in Keynesian capitalism, which was also premised on the “non-zero-sum-game” principle that viewed wages not as cost but as consumer impetus to accumulation. FDR’s New Deal policies succeeded in establishing this Keynesian principle by controlling the unpredictably insurgent volatility of workers’ power (as seen, for example, in the Toledo Auto-Lite, Minneapolis truck drivers, and San Francisco general strikes, to name only three of the most well-known strikes among a couple of thousands which occurred in 1934) through social contract and security, business unionism, and world war. Flood, one of the “prisoner’s dilemma” originators, worked in the Works Progress Administration, which the New Deal had set up in 1934 to absorb the great mass of unemployed workers who were acting as the most insurgent source of this economic unpredictability. Working in “Trenton on a WPA project studying prisons and mental health,” Flood “directed about 40 people there, including studies of murderers in prisons, inmates in psychiatric institutes, and all sorts of things for the other public institutions for the State of New Jersey” (Tucker). In short, an overdetermined bio-political figure to boot!

Note that, in its original formulation, the “prisoner’s dilemma” did not involve prisoners conspiring to escape their captors, let alone organizing a strike or a riot and possibly burning down the prison wall. Such choices were unthinkable in 1949-50, when the game was conceived and the unreasoning logic of anticommunism widely promulgated in the United States. After the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act cracked down on the autonomy of labor unions, any independent electoral challenge to Cold War foreign policy and to retrenched segregationist politics was thwarted with the defeat of the Progressive Party’s Henry Wallace presidential campaign the year after. In 1949, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the international crux of Cold War unreason, was established, the Congress of Industrial Organizations kicked out those unions refusing to purge Communists from their membership. In 1950, as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were both charged with treason for passing off classified information on atomic bombs to the Soviet Union, Joseph McCarthy initiated his campaign against alleged Communists in the State Department and the larger civil society. Capitalist control of proletarian bodies had been secured under the terror of the Keynesian, anticommunist pact.

In its initial application, the “prisoner’s dilemma” is said have rationalized the irrational theory of nuclear deterrence that pitted the Capitalist United States against the Communist Soviet Union as prisoners who were, to recast Hardin’s phrase, “locked into a system that compels” each “to increase” its nuclear armament “without limit”. But, of course, it is nonsensical to consider the US and USSR as fellow prisoners in dithers over the dilemma of whether to cooperate with each other (peaceful co-existence) or to collaborate with an unnamed, ineffectual outside authority (United Nations). Both the US and the USSR *were* the authority, the hegemonic warden, of their respective spheres of influence, with whom the workers of both countries were forced to make a deal. Even if the Manichean international system did display genuinely irrational signs of what C. Wright Mills dubbed “crackpot realism” (wherein “power elites” of both regions used the “military metaphysic” to justify “their fumbling control and their competition over the enlarged and centralized means of violence, production, and administration”), the function of nuclear arms production, along with anticommunist/anti-American propaganda, was very simple: to terrify Soviet and US workers in order to control them more effectively for reasons of Communist state and liberal capitalist labor-discipline (Mills 91). This was the same point that Chomsky also made in the first years of the post-Cold-War American imperial hegemony: “In crucial respects, then, the Cold War was a kind of tacit arrangement between the Soviet Union and the United States under which the US conducted its wars against the Third World and controlled its allies in Europe, while the Soviet rulers kept an iron grip on their own internal empire and their satellites in Eastern Europe -- each side using the other to justify repression and violence in its own domains” (*What Uncle Sam*).

Burroughs’s “Controller’s Dilemma” and “Orwell’s Problem”

Williams S. Burroughs, who viewed “Communism...as a reaction against 19th century *laissez faire* capitalism, to oppose an economic and political system that no longer exists today”, lived in Mexico City in the years 1948-1950, writing *Junky* and “attending Mexico City College on the G.I. Bill, studying Mayan and Aztec history and Mayan language” (10). He posited an alternative “prisoner’s dilemma” that cut more realistically to the heart of post-Keynesian ruling-class dilemma to regain control over the increasingly rebellious global working class:

Consider a control situation: ten people in a lifeboat. Two armed self-appointed leaders force the other eight to do the rowing while they dispose of the food and water, keeping most of it for themselves and doling out enough to keep the other eight rowing. The two leaders now *need* to exercise control to maintain an advantageous position which they could not hold without it. Here the method

of control is force -- the possession of guns. Decontrol would be accomplished by overpowering the leaders and taking their guns. This effected, it would be advantageous to kill them at once. So once embarked on a policy of control, the leaders must continue the policy as a matter of self-preservation...

Now examine the reasons by which control is exercised in the lifeboat scenario: The two leaders are armed, let's say, with a .38 revolvers -- twelve shots and eight potential opponents. They can take turns sleeping. However, they must still exercise care not to let the eight rowers know that they intend to kill them when land is sighted. Even in this primitive situation force is supplemented with deception and persuasion. The leaders will disembark at point A, leaving the others sufficient food to reach point B, they explain. They have the compass and they are contributing their navigational skills. In short, they will endeavour to convince the others that this is a cooperative enterprise in which they are all working for the same goal. They may also make concessions: increase food and water rations. A concession of course means the retention of control -- that is, the disposition of the food and water supplies. By persuasions and by concessions they hope to prevent a concerted attack by the eight rowers.

Actually they intend to poison the drinking water as soon as they leave the boat. If all the rowers knew this they would attack, no matter what the odds. We can now see that another essential factor in control is to conceal from the controlled the actual intentions of the controllers. Extending the lifeboat analogy to the Ship of State, few existing governments could withstand a sudden, all-out attack by all their underprivileged citizens, and such an attack might well occur if the intentions of certain existing governments were unequivocally apparent. Suppose the lifeboat leaders had built a barricade and could withstand a concerted attack and kill all eight of the rowers if necessary. They would then have to do the rowing themselves and neither would be safe from the other. Similarly, a modern government armed with heavy weapons and prepared for attack could wipe out ninety-five percent of its citizens. But who would do the work, and who would protect them from the soldiers and technicians needed to make and man the weapons? Successful control means achieving a balance and avoiding a showdown where all-out force would be necessary. This is achieved through various techniques of psychological control, also balanced. The techniques of both force and psychological control are constantly improved and refined, and yet worldwide dissent has never been so widespread or so dangerous to the present controllers (117-119).

This "controller's dilemma" straightforwardly summarizes the essential ingredients necessary in preventing revolt and achieving the objectives of power, a dilemma that became very acute during the period of Keynesian capitalist crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Keynesian welfare capitalism could no longer sustain its "non-zero-sum-game" principle as anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam and the antiwar movements throughout the war escalated the cost of the war for the controllers, as students refused the "human capital" development of educational institutions and utilized their social wage for activities inimical to accumulation, and as workers in the industrial sectors demanded higher wages while refusing the Faustian bargain of labor-

discipline and automation. Class struggle once more became the ineradicable minus sign, forcing back Keynesianism, originally a stratagem of controlling workers, into a new type of “zero-sum game” to which economists later gave the nomenclature of “stagflation”, wherein wages rose as fast as inflation and unemployment while capital suffered from a continuous profit squeeze.

Prisoners themselves revolted, as they did in Attica Correctional Facility on September 9, 1971, demanding basic rights of hygiene, education, uncensored mail and unrestricted visitors. No longer were the capitalist concessions to retain control (the social compact of the wage-productivity deal) working and “worldwide dissent”, “widespread” and “so dangerous to the present controllers”, had turned the “prisoner’s dilemma” on its head and was drilling conspicuous holes in the Ship of State. Eight years after the brutal repression of the Attica strikers by New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller (leading to the slaughter of ten hostages and twenty-nine inmates), Peter Linebaugh, historian of social crime and capital punishment, taught courses on “The History of Mankind, Including Women, from the Beginning to the Present” and “The American Worker” for the Attica inmates. In *The London Hanged*, Linebaugh uncovered the origin of the Benthamite panopticon (which was aimed to resolve “the problems of controlling a large, insubordinate workforce”) to not lie with Jeremy Bentham but with his brother Samuel. Samuel Bentham conceived the panopticon in 1779 to help the Russian Prince Potemkin transform the wild, drunken, and insubordinate Krichev shipyard workers, consisting largely of serfs and Carron armament factory workers, into a model proletariat, to make them forget their customary practices and commonist origins and accept the rationalized, quantified punishment of the wage-form (Linebaugh 372-373). As Foucault well understood, next to the mental asylum and hospital, modern capitalism had made prisons into an integral component of the social factory to control the unruly bio-power of the reserved army of labor (US prisoners are, for example, frequently used for medical experiments, exploited as cheap labor, and proffered as a threat to workers outside the prison system). Prison riot and revolt, as seen in Attica, therefore, indicate a serious breakdown in this central disciplinary mechanism of the social factory (if capital cannot control the most “dangerous”, undisciplined, and criminalized sections of the working class, then the very survival of the system is at risk).

What emerged subsequently, partially prefigured in Hardin’s strategy of “the tragedy of the commons”, was neoliberal rollback: to progressively enclose the commons of the “social wage” on the basis of a refurbished laissez-faire “zero-sum game” doctrine in which once again

wage was viewed as a “minus sign” to profit and the market was ideologically restored to its original kingly status by supply-side economics, monetarism, and other theoretical hydras from the Chicago School of economics. This is one reason why the economist Edward S. Herman, Chomsky’s collaborator in corporate media analysis who was primarily responsible for devising the “propaganda model” that critically evaluates the institutional performance of the US media, called the emerging neoliberal return to the “zero-sum game” in social and economic policy “neo-mercantilist”.¹ Invoking “the tragedy of the commons” at this particular juncture, therefore, meant that if global capital were not to go to rack and ruin, it needed to implement new enclosures.

The fact that the “controller’s dilemma” was articulated during the period of the breakdown of the Keynesian system and the formation of an emergent neoliberal dispensation is not without significance. The social subject that threw global capital into crisis failed to recognize itself as a class-for-itself and, under the barrage of assaults, ranging from COINELPRO, academic and electoral co-optation, as well as debt-centered structural-adjustment policies (whose domestic corollary in the United States included union-busting, downsizing, and attacks on welfare), subsequently experienced fragmentation into the disconnected single-issue-oriented “new social movements”. The power elites made sure such a “crisis of democracy”, as the Trilateral Commission described the excessively democratic “worldwide dissent” that broke Keynesianism’s back, never occurred again. They did this by refining their technique of mass persuasion through the emerging information technology. Such technology also functioned as a weapon of economic liberalization, massively expanding the power of financial capital to expedite capital flight and drain resources away from “real” to speculative investments, even at the risk of destabilizing the long-term security of its global system. Social scientists began to expound on the preeminence of “information capital” and “cyber-capitalism” in this “post-Fordist” regime of flexible accumulation, as consumer debt expanded at an exponential rate. In this context, any critical reformulation of capitalist control would have naturally gravitated toward a focus on the mass media.

As necessarily useful as such reformulation was, however, its limitation lay in leaving undeciphered the means of reconnecting and interweaving the fragmented social subject for the renewed composition of a new global proletariat. How do we not only prevent the real “tragedy of the commons” facing violent expropriation under the structural-adjustment “New Enclosures” -- veiled increasingly under the hyper-virtuality of “information capital”-- but also make these

globally diverse commonages the language and practice of our new class? That question -- recast from the “tragedy” to the “necessity” of the commons -- boomeranged in the 1994 Zapatista Uprising and coterminous indigenous and peasant struggles for land and autonomy throughout the world, and flashed up briefly in the North as the 1999 Battle of Seattle and subsequent anti-neoliberal-globalization struggles. It is true that the controllers were raising their ante by gambling on new forms of persuasion to rationalize the withdrawal of concessions from the rowers. But these rowers also could speak a dialect and recite songs that were foreign to the controllers and that the rowers in other boats understood. The commons was one such dialect, one such song.

Chance, Origins, Capitalism

In spite of his study of the Mayan language and history (which form the cultural core of the Zapatista struggle), Burroughs did not register this song and dialect. Instead, he saw in the Mayan ancient society an undeveloped mirror of the modern capitalist control system: “[i]n the Mayan control system, where the priests kept the all-important Book of seasons and gods, the Calendar was predicated on the illiteracy of the workers” while “[m]odern control systems are predicated on universal literacy since they operate through the mass media -- a very two-edged control, as Watergate has shown” (117). After the Watergate scandal, a brief window of opportunity did emerge for critical journalists who worked in the mainstream media to print news that tried to pull out a few hedges from the corporate enclosure of public information. However, being more skeptical about the epistemological nature of language in population control than such dissident journalists, Burroughs viewed language as “a virus that uses the human body as a host,” constituting “the most powerful form of control”. He sought to resist this control -- rooted in “capitalism’s constitutive dialectic, which liquidates the singularity of the individual as well as the connections of the community in order to produce the false universality of profit” -- by “destroying the linguistic control system of syntax and by simultaneously abolishing the dialectical form of the Law” (Murphy 4).

The Burroughsian assault on “the linguistic control system of syntax” of capitalist Culture Industry had eminent predecessors among the Dadaists and Surrealists, both avant-garde movements that originally intended to radically rout the “control system of syntax” of the capitalist war machine of the Great War and its aftermath. One may observe that Dadaism, whose florescence overlaps with the rise and fall of the postwar 1918-22 German revolution,

considerably owes its anti-linguistic revolutionary energy to this epochal moment when German workers and soldiers struck against the state and temporarily forged their version of the workers' council (apart from the Rumanian Tristan Tzara, the most prominent members of Dadaism, such as Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Hanna Höch, Geroge Grosz, and Richard Huelsenbeck, were Germans). The Gallic origination of Surrealism -- at a time when France emerged a victor from the conflagration of the first global total war -- made it more prone to recreate a new genealogy and structure of chance-based syntax, as opposed to Dada's annihilating anti-aesthetics. At its creative apex, Surrealism was able to articulate, in Walter Benjamin's words, the first "radical concept of freedom" since the nineteenth Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's, being "the first to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom" (215). For André Breton, the leading Surrealist theoretician and impresario, chance, as exemplified in his notion of *hasard objectif*, embodied an antithesis of regularized capitalist labor-discipline: "In the search for chance and its coincidences, which was to become under his guidance one of the primary activities of surrealism, the most formidable obstacle is the routine of life itself. The young Breton's opposition to earning a living arose therefore out of an antipathy not to work itself but to regular activity in the pursuit of economic security; it cut off, he thought, the most precious hours and years of a man's discovery of self" (Balakian 42).

The most politically fruitful avant-garde inheritors of Dada and Surrealism in the 1950s-60s were the Situationists, who radically adapted their predecessors' ideas for a meliorist age of Gaullist political stability and consumer capitalist growth. The latter two-pronged logic of French Keynesianism was temporarily halted in the events of May 1968 in which the Situationists played an actively incendiary role. What politically links the historical experience of the Dada with that of the Situationists is the workers' councils, which the Hungarian workers reconstituted in 1956 and French workers in May 1968. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (published in 1967, the same year in which Derrida's "The Linguistic Circle of Geneva", cited at the beginning, appeared in *Revue internationale de philosophie*), a central Situationist document that theorized the commodifying power of the image in modern consumer society, affirmed in the last instance the revolutionary self-organization of the workers' councils against the reifying gaze of the spectacle: "Self-emancipation in our time" "can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but -- only and always -- by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes, subjecting all power to the disalienating form of a realized democracy -- to councils in which practical theory

exercises control over itself and surveys its own action” (154). Debord derived the essential elements of his thinking from Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, published soon after the suppression of the previous council experience in the early 1920s, and “[a]round 1920, Lukács too was sympathetic with the idea of workers’ councils, having participated in the Hungarian Council Republic (or Commune) of 1919” (Jappe 30).

Like Debord, Chomsky also wove the fabric of his politically formative years from the thread of ideas that the European workers' councils had spun, avidly reading in the late 1940s the council communist periodical *Living Marxism* (originally *International Council Correspondence* and later *New Essays*), edited by Paul Mattick, with significant contributions from Karl Korsch: “A perusal of a single issue of *Living Marxism* provides insight into what Chomsky was reading in his teens; it is even possible to trace, in this magazine, some of the theoretical foundations for opinions that he would later come to hold” (Barsky). Both Korsch and Mattick had been in the thick of the 1918-22 German Revolution. Korsch, who tutored Bertolt Brecht and the Frankfurt School founder Felix Weil in their Marxism, wrote on practical methods to spread the workers' council throughout Germany and was a Communist Minister of Justice in the 1923 United Front KPD (Communist Party of Germany)-USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) government in Thuringia. During the same period, the teenage Mattick was elected as an apprentices’ delegate to the workers’ council at Siemens and became a KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany) and AAU (Autonomous Organization of Workers) organizer. After emigrating to the United States in 1926, Mattick joined the Industrial Workers of the World, drafting a theoretically Marxist program for the Wobblies in 1933 (Chomsky’s father was also briefly a Wobbly), thus corroborating Sergio Bologna's point that it was “its international character that constituted the revolutionary feature of the workers’ council movement” and that the “IWW is the direct link from Marx's First International to the post-communist era”.²

The point here is not to draw a comparison between the commons, in their traditional and innovative particularities throughout the world, and the origin of the workers’ councils but, as Derrida noted, in “discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and of certain directive questions” and, on this basis, in formulating questions about “metaphysics” in working-class self-organization, or, as you will, about the working-class self-organization in “metaphysics”. I do not deny that the “commons” itself is pervious to such conceptual recuperation but, without critically indicating the limits of existing and failed working-class organizations -- be they the political party, labor union, affinity group,

and even the workers' council -- through this historically pregnant term (while simultaneously questioning some of its essential presuppositions), we are doomed to suffer the interminable Sisyphusian labor of capitalist recuperation and of self-defeating revolutionary ideologies and strategies. In other words, what is demanded of us is a more productive labor of repetition with a difference: to continuously analyze, from the historical vantage point of suppressed origin (commons), the contemporary capitalist notions of control and chance while formulating questions that directly touch upon the very epistemological basis of such an analysis. Chomsky, too, has expressed a similar view in a different register: "it is improper to pretend to understand what we know nothing of, though there is great merit in pressing to the limits the intellectual capacities that we so far only barely understand" (*Language* 54).

Even though there are much that we do not understand about the origin of capitalism and how to overthrow it without reproducing its duplicitous control mechanisms that on the one hand force workers to chance their livelihoods in the cruelly uncertain operations of the market, while on the other carefully protect capital from the same, we can at least demystify its ideological "nursery tale" about its origin (Lockean or, for that matter, Rousseau origin myths of private property, Hardinian "tragedy of the commons") or functions (ideological fantasies concerning the utopian workings of the free market or the inherent benevolence of the state), reminding others, as Marx did in *Capital*, of its "actual history... a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part" (874). And, even as we do this, to scrutinize facile anti-capitalist programs and discourses that "pretend to understand what we know nothing of", "pressing to the limits" our "intellectual capacities" to formulate critical questions about our respective commitments.

In *The Demons*, a novel that revolves around an anarcho-nihilist circle whose original model was partly inspired by Bakunin and Sergey Nechayev, Dostoevsky powerfully interrogated some of these critical questions concerning metaphysics and radical political commitments, albeit from a conservative, though imaginatively realistic perspective (failing at the same time, it should be added, to take into account the far more nihilistically egregious butchery exercised by the ruling class, such as the massacre of over 30,000 Parisian Communards which occurred the year before the novel's publication). A year before the first edition of *Das Kapital* went into press, Dostoevsky wrote in *The Gambler*: "There are two sorts of gambling, one for the gentlemen and the other for plebeians -- the scum plays for profit" (29). Exactly one hundred and forty years later, there is no gentleman left among our rulers. The

scum, no longer plebeian but almost entirely corporate, is still playing for profit and doing its best to control the chance of their winning by setting the prisoners against each other (Communist boogeyman replaced by the Islamic terrorist boogeyman, the smoke screens of gay marriage and Christian fundamentalism), shooting down some of the imprisoned rowers for demonstration effect (bombing Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon) to discipline other rowers, and continuously trying to persuade the population with the lie of “the tragedy of the commons” (because human population is increasing and using up resources, low wages and high unemployment rate are “natural”, workers’ concession to the company is necessary to prevent capital flight, and immigration control must be implemented to avoid future 9-11s and depletion of jobs).

Burroughs said, “Force, once brought in, subverts the power of money. This is another impasse of control: protection from the protectors” and Marx: “Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power” (Burroughs 119; Marx 916). Both were right, and perhaps the only thing standing between the chance of our annihilation as a species and controlling the unbridled neoliberal capitalism that makes possible this apocalyptic chance is the possibility of turning the force of the latter against itself.

Even at the risk of losing the world and only gaining the soul of the commons. .

¹Notes

“NAFTA and its cousins are more akin to ‘mercantilism’ than ‘internationalism.’ That is, each country is seeking to advance its external position by bargaining for trade and investment access abroad while protecting its own turf as much as it can get away with; each seeks ‘competitiveness’ by keeping down internal labor costs; and the dominant and powerful interests whose prospective gains drive the expansion process have successfully identified theirs as the ‘national interest’ and established that the external-expansion route is the only feasible policy option for system growth. [...] In the neo-mercantilist system today, if workers bargain successfully and wage rates increase, this is read as a troubling development threatening the national interest (‘Wall Street scores the new GM contract as a plus for the union and ‘cave-in’ by the auto maker’). As unemployment grows and ordinary citizens become increasingly insecure, this is perceived as a bit worrisome, but with its positive sides: firms are getting more ‘lean’ and ‘competitive,’ and there is a braking effect on wages” (Herman 29).

² However, Bologna’s thesis that Maoism -- whose impact on the 1968 May Parisian upheaval was no less critical than the Situationists’ -- “has gone further than” the council by “conceiving of the class as the party, the party as the majority of the people, the party as social majority, and by moving the ground of insurrection from the brief coup d’etat to long-range war” was politically premature. It partook of a revolutionary myth of a period and was unsubstantiated by historical facts. It requires a radical reexamination in relation to the generally catastrophic effects that the Chinese Cultural Revolution, then in full swing, exerted upon the Chinese working-class self-organizations and the traditional commonages of the country.

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