

# Our Passive Society

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Sitting alone in my room watching videos on YouTube, hearing sounds from across the hall of my roommate watching Netflix, the obvious point occurs to me that a key element of the demonic genius of late capitalism is enforcing a crushing passiveness on the populace.

With social atomization comes collective passiveness—and with collective passiveness comes social atomization. The product (and cause) of this vicious circle is the dying society of the present, in which despair can seem to be the prevailing condition. With an opioid epidemic raging and, more generally, mental illness affecting 50 percent of Americans at some point in their lifetime, it's clear that the late-capitalist evisceration of civil society has also eviscerated, on a broad scale, the individual's sense of self-worth. We have become atoms, windowless monads buffeted by bureaucracies, desperately seeking entertainment as a tonic for our angst and ennui.

The old formula of the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott is as relevant as it always will be: "It is creative apperception more than anything that makes the individual feel that life is worth living." If so many have come to feel alienated from life itself, that is largely because they don't feel creative, free, or active.

We don't often consider society from this perspective, but it may be of interest to adumbrate the ways in which modern capitalism tends to stifle human capacities of creativity and individuality. This stifling can seem ironic, given that so many apologists of capitalism, or "the free market," have celebrated its liberating dynamics, its unleashing of human potential, its apotheosis of freedom and competition. In his bestseller *The Reactionary Mind* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2017) Corey Robin explains the logic of conservatives, from the nineteenth century to the present, who have seen the market as embodying the ancient agonistic ideal:

Power is demonstrated and privilege earned ... in the arduous struggle for supremacy. In that struggle, nothing matters, not inheritance, social connections, or economic resources, but one's native intelligence and innate strength. Genuine excellence is revealed and rewarded, true nobility is secured. ... Though most early conservatives were ambivalent about capitalism, their successors [came] to believe that warriors of a different kind [than soldiers] can prove their mettle in the manufacture and trade of commodities. Such men wrestle the earth's resources to and from the ground, taking for themselves what they want and thereby establishing their superiority over others.

Aside from this quasi-Nietzschean aesthetic ideal, which has attracted capitalists and intellectuals of fascist persuasion, thinkers have defended capitalism on moral grounds; most (in)famously, Milton Friedman's writings exemplify the argument that the market is "free, voluntary, and non-coercive" and thus a highly liberal, indeed libertarian, and moral institution. For ideologists like this, it would sound paradoxical to condemn capitalism and its culture as dehumanizing or as turning people into passive atoms.

We know what to think of such conservative arguments, though. They are of little intellectual or moral interest. The economist Robin Hahnel, for example, has no trouble demolishing Friedman's apologetics (*ABCs of Political Economy*, Pluto, 2002) by pointing out that the market is hardly

voluntary or non-coercive if people come to it with different amounts of capital. In a sense, yes, employees have freely chosen to work for some corporation, perhaps even in a hideous sweatshop. But they have been coerced into making that decision by their relative lack of capital. It's either rent yourself out or starve.

In general, reactionary ideologies like Friedman's or those that Robin dissects function by substituting for gritty reality, forged in the crucible of conflict-ridden material institutions, an appealing, idealistic myth. In some cases the myth is heroic: free individuals, virtually bereft of socioeconomic context, battling for supremacy, bending the earth and the masses to their will; nations or races waging a similar but more apocalyptic war; or the Nietzschean notion of masters and the rabble locked in perpetual conflict, the fate of humanity and the collective will to power at stake. In other cases the myth is ethical: the United States spreads freedom and democracy abroad by invading countries; the philanthropy of the wealthy legitimates capitalism, in Andrew Carnegie's formulation; "a rising tide lifts all boats," as the typical American liberal declares (for example, Richard Goodwin, *Remembering America*, Open Road Media, 2014); and so on. All these ideologies are merely pretty disguises of political-economic realities and can be dismissed. (For an acute analysis of the role of irrational myths in capitalist culture, see Georg Lukács's magnificent polemic *The Destruction of Reason*.)

The truth, of course, is that after two centuries of the evolution of industrial capitalism, the individual is hemmed in by gigantic bureaucratic structures of social control and economic exploitation. Starting from puny embryos in England in the late eighteenth century, industrial capital has remade the world in its own image, as Marx foresaw: the image of universal commodification, social "reification" and depersonalization, mass regulation of labor, mass markets, mass privatization, mass administration of society for the benefit of capital.

The early stages of this process have been analyzed by social historians in the tradition of E.P. Thompson, who, before Foucault (and more acutely than him), showed how "the modern subject" is a product of subjection, how workers and citizens have had to be relentlessly disciplined for the sake of capital accumulation. In his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage, 1966), Thompson reveals the Herculean efforts of early British manufacturers and their state to impose mechanical industrial rhythms on a workforce that had from time immemorial lived by the pastoral rhythms of the countryside. These "lazy" ex-peasants just could not get it through their heads that it was their sacred duty to God, country, and employer to submit to the clock and the overseer in a cotton sweatshop every day from 5:00 am to 9:00 pm. Only if they were trained from the age of six and indoctrinated en masse with a submissive Methodism that preached the blessedness of poverty and hard labor and a compensation for their miseries in the hereafter was there any hope of widespread docility—although even then it was, as always, necessary to back up indoctrination with something a little more reliable, namely state-sanctioned killing (the death penalty for Luddism, the occasional military massacre, like Peterloo, and so forth). And so it continued for many decades.

Women were subject to even more policing than men, in accordance with authorities' belief (since before ancient Greece) that female sexuality, maenadic and riotous, threatens social order. It has to be controlled. In her book "More Than Mere Amusement": Working-Class Women's Leisure in England, 1750-1914 (Northeastern UP, 2001), Catriona Parratt gives a sense of just how much energy and how many resources authorities devoted to this effort through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their task was monumental, after all—they had to kill an "almost Rabelaisian" popular culture:

Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, women were visible and vital participants in popular recreational culture. In their cottages and workshops, in urban streets and on village greens, in alehouses and on farms, they worked and socialized alongside men. In the daily

ebb and flow of labor and release from labor, and in the seasonal and annual round of celebrations, feasts, and holidays, ... they shared in an array of amusements that were gregarious and open. They gossiped and gambled, ... got drunk and got rowdy at private parties and public assemblies, ... and trekked out into open fields and onto moors to listen to ranting preachers.

Decade by decade, magistrates, justices of the peace, and new police forces got the upper hand: "Alehouses were closed, fairs were suppressed, wakes and other customary holidays were 'tamed.'" Later, middle- and upper-class women promoted the "moral elevation" of the nation in their own way, by organizing "rational recreation" schemes that channeled young working-class women's vitality into safe institutions like classes (in "domestic science"), lectures, and chaperoned dances. It was a steeply uphill battle for the forces of domestication, but by the twentieth century they had made immense progress.

In fact, they were already making significant progress by the mid-nineteenth century, and even in the less-industrialized United States. In 1840s New York, Democratic politician Mike Walsh lamented that "a gloomy, churlish, money-worshipping spirit has swept nearly all the poetry out of the poor man's sphere. Ballad-singing, street dancing, tumbling, public games, all are either prohibited or discountenanced, so that Fourth of July and election sports alone remain."<sup>1</sup> By the turn of the century, the United States was becoming the world center of pacification of the working class, which is to say, suppression of its freedoms and bacchanalian tendencies.

This campaign was carried out at least as vigorously inside the workplace as outside it. The historian David Montgomery has described the epic, decades-long struggle between skilled workers, who were proponents of workers' control within the factory (collective control over their specific productive tasks), and management, which sought to strip workers of all vestiges of control.<sup>2</sup> The businessman's goal, of course, was to increase productivity, lower wages, and in general create a more compliant workforce. The explosive labor unrest from the 1870s until after World War I was in large part a response to this crusade to deskill work, to turn management into the brain and the worker into an appendage of the machine. The working-class ethic of "mutualism," too, had to be undermined, by hiring African Americans as strikebreakers (to foment racism), giving higher wages to certain ethnicities (to foment resentment), destroying unions, planting spies in factories, and so on. Frederick Winslow Taylor's ideology of scientific management was a quintessential, and very influential, expression of all these tendencies, for by breaking down work processes into their smallest components and transferring knowledge to the ranks of management, it effectively dispossessed workers of the remnants of their autonomy. And in fact, from that time up to the present, the capitalist agenda to deskill, monitor/regulate, mechanize, and finally automate has continued almost without interruption.

The one time there was something like an interruption was when the mechanisms of the capitalist economy ground almost to a halt, during the Great Depression of the 1930s. This was a remarkable time, which we might look to for lessons about the future (about organizing the unemployed, building communal support systems, resurrecting public space, building a workers' political party, and so forth). It was the only time in the twentieth century when the drive to marketize and privatize everything, including nature and the nation-state itself, met sufficient resistance to be not only halted but even, in some respects, reversed. Because of the economic collapse, people were no longer only consumers and employees, only nodes in a network of buyers and sellers; to some extent they became actual people, with the revitalization of community, generosity, and shared struggles. Historians of that time are well aware of the glowing reminiscences of many who experienced it. Rose Chernin, for example, who was a Communist organizer in the Bronx, observed that

This struggle of people against their conditions, that is where you find the meaning in life. In the worst situations, you are together with people. If there were five apples, we cut them ten ways and

everybody ate. If somebody had a quarter, he went down to the corner and bought some bread and brought it back into the council. Life changes when you are together in this way, when you are united. You lose the fear of being alone. ... In those years I was happy.<sup>3</sup>

The labor movement saw a tremendous resurgence, and working-class culture—which was quite different from the ruling-class culture of individualism, acquisitiveness, and greed—experienced one last flowering before it was finally suppressed in the postwar and then neoliberal eras.

After World War II, mass bureaucratization and corporatization came of age. The corporate counteroffensive against the leftist legacies of the 1930s and the New Deal was remarkably successful and far-reaching, such that politics and culture as a whole became, arguably, more conservative and “regimented” than ever. The colossal industrial unions, such as the United Autoworkers and the United Steelworkers, that had been formed in the 1930s purged themselves of the radicalism that had so excited Rose Chernin and were integrated into the “corporate-liberal” political order, serving, ironically, as enforcers of properly subordinate behavior on the part of their members. The domestication of women reached new levels as working-class conditions became middle-class conditions and millions of housing units sprouted on suburban lawns, manicured and garnished with little gardens, across the country. Meanwhile, the American mind began to fall to that great instrument of atomization, pacification, and indoctrination: television.

Noam Chomsky, in the tradition of Marx, is fond of saying that technology is “neutral,”<sup>4</sup> neither beneficent nor baleful in itself but only in the context of particular social relations. But I’m inclined to think television is a partial exception to that dictum. I recall the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip ([www.geocities.ws/erbeeble/strips.html](http://www.geocities.ws/erbeeble/strips.html)) in which, while sitting in front of a TV, Calvin says,

I try to make television-watching a complete forfeiture of experience. Notice how I keep my jaw slack, so my mouth hangs open. I try not to swallow either, so I drool, and I keep my eyes half-focused, so I don’t use any muscles at all. I take a passive entertainment and extend the passivity to my entire being. I wallow in my lack of participation and response. I’m utterly inert.

Where before one might have socialized outside, gone to a play, or discussed grievances with fellow workers and strategized over how to resolve them, now one could stay at home and watch a passively entertaining sitcom that imbued one with the proper values of consumerism, wealth accumulation, status-consciousness, objectification of women, subordination to authority, lack of interest in politics, and other “bourgeois virtues.” The more one cultivated a relationship with the television, the less one cultivated relationships with people—or with one’s creative capacities, which “more than anything else make the individual feel that life is worth living.”

Television is the perfect technology for a mature capitalist society and has surely been of inestimable value in keeping the population relatively passive and obedient—distracted, idle, incurious, separated yet conformist. Doubtless in a different kind of society it could have a somewhat more elevated potential—programming could be more edifying, devoted to issues of history, philosophy, art, culture, science—but in our own society, in which television is controlled by institutions that are monomaniacally fixated on accumulating profit and discouraging critical thought (because it’s dangerous), the outcome is predictable. The average American watches about five hours of TV a day, while 60 percent of Americans have subscription services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. Sixty-five percent of homes have three or more TV sets.<sup>5</sup>

Movie-watching, too, is an inherently passive pastime. Theodor Adorno remarked, “Every visit to the cinema, despite the utmost watchfulness, leaves me dumber and worse than before.” To sit in a movie theater (or at home) with the lights out, watching electronic images flit by, hearing blaring noises from huge surround-sound speakers, is to experience a kind of sensory overload while being

almost totally inactive. And then the experience is over, and you rub your eyes and try to become active and whole again. It's different from watching a play, where the performers are present in front of you, the art is enacted right there organically and on a proper human scale, there is no sensory overload, no artificial splicing together of fleeting images, no glamorous cinematic alienation from your own mundane life.

Since the 1990s, of course, electronic media have exploded to the point of utterly dominating our lives. For example, 65 percent of U.S. households include someone who plays video games regularly.<sup>6</sup> Over three-quarters of Americans own a smartphone, which, from anecdotal observation, we know tends to occupy an immense portion of their time. The same proportion has broadband internet service at home, and 70 percent of Americans use social media. As an arch-traditionalist, I look askance at all this newfangled electronic technology (even as I use it constantly). It seems to me that electronic mediation of human relationships, and of life itself, is inherently alienating and destructive, insofar as it atomizes or isolates. There's something anti-humanistic about having one's life be determined by algorithms (algorithms invented and deployed, in many cases, by private corporations). And the effects on mental functioning are by no means benign: studies have confirmed the obvious, that "the internet may give you an addict's brain," "you may feel more lonely and jealous," and "memory problems may be more likely" (apparently because of information overload).<sup>7</sup> Such problems manifest a passive and isolated mode of experience.

But this is the mode of experience of neoliberalism, that is, hyper-capitalism. After the upsurge of protest in the 1960s and early 1970s against the corporatist regime of centrist liberalism, the most reactionary sectors of big business launched a massive counterattack to destroy organized labor and the whole New Deal system, which was eating into their profits and encouraging popular unrest. The counterattack continues in 2018, and, as we know, has been wildly successful. The union membership rate in the private sector is a mere 6.5 percent, a little less than it was on the eve of the Great Depression, and the United States spends much less on social welfare than comparable countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Such facts have had predictable effects on the cohesiveness of the social fabric.

Meanwhile, as government has become less concerned with popular well-being and business has had a freer hand in how badly it can treat employees, bureaucracy has—contrary to the predictions of conservatives—only expanded. We're told by free-marketeers that the penetration of market relations into ever more spheres of life is supposed to reduce bureaucracy and increase "efficiency." The opposite is the case (especially if "efficiency" is defined in terms of the actual well-being of people). In *The Utopia of Rules* (Melville House, 2015, 4), David Graeber states his "Iron Law of Liberalism" as follows: "Any market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs." He continues,

English liberalism [in the nineteenth century], for instance, did not lead to a reduction of state bureaucracy, but the exact opposite: an endlessly ballooning array of legal clerks, registrars, inspectors, notaries, and police officials who made the liberal dream of a world of free contract between autonomous individuals possible. It turned out that maintaining a free market economy required a thousand times more paperwork than a Louis XIV-style absolutist monarchy.

With the spread of privatization and marketization over the last generation, public and private bureaucracies, intermeshing, have hypertrophied. Graeber calls this the age of "total bureaucratization" (or alternatively, "predatory bureaucratization"). We all know from our own lives, from (the necessity of) our continual interactions with corporate and government bureaucracies, how maddening this development has been. No wonder that when an irate 75-year-old woman went

to a local Comcast office ten years ago and smashed it up with a hammer, she became something of a folk hero.<sup>8</sup>

Speaking of Graeber, his notion of “bullshit jobs” is apropos here.<sup>9</sup> The kinds of jobs that were first springing up in large numbers around the time of Taylorism in the early twentieth century, namely “administrative” jobs like human resources, public relations, and corporate law (but also, more recently, academic and health administration, financial services, telemarketing, and the like), have attained unprecedented numerical heights. Millions of people fill these positions, which seem to become more numerous every year. The tragedy is that untold numbers of these people see no point to their jobs. “How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor,” Graeber asks, “when one secretly feels one’s job should not exist?” Such a response signifies a particularly acute condition of what Marx called “alienated labor.” (One wonders how many people would identify with the central character in the movie *Office Space*, a classic expression of workplace alienation.)

In short, in less than two centuries we’ve gone from being free-spirited, unpolished, semi-rebellious plebeians and immigrants to being dutiful, docile, lonely bureaucrats administering fellow administrators who are administering the people who, obediently, do the actual productive work and get paid a pittance for it. We’ve become a society of units, a society almost perfectly “legible” to both the state and the corporate sector.<sup>10</sup> Even in our forms of entertainment, we tend to be isolated and receptive rather than creative.

The nightclub culture, for instance, plays an important function in permitting young people to let off steam from all their weekdays of repressive rule-following. So once or twice a week they stand in a line at one of various designated spots in the city where they can go inside and let loose. In the safe anonymity of darkness, pressed against hundreds of bodies, they can lose themselves in the sensory overload of drunken dance-humping to a heavy pulsing beat under booming hip-hop music interrupted only by screams in each other’s ears. There may be little or nothing wrong with this sort of mass-produced, capitalist-friendly Dionysian recreation, but, whatever it is (and I find it mysterious), it’s symptomatic.

And what of love and sex in this brave new world of ours? It turns out that the most common way to meet people is in the privacy of one’s room, with the help of algorithms written by dating websites. In 2017, online dating became the most common way that newlyweds had met one another, 19 percent of brides saying they had met their spouse online.<sup>11</sup> I don’t mean to bash internet-searching-for-soulmates, but there is something pathological about a society in which people are “together” with others when they’re physically alone and are alone when they’re in the physical presence of others. Nor is the Tinder-originated phenomenon of swiping-right and swiping-left through an endless series of faces anything but the ultimate infiltration of the consumerist mentality into the ideally most human of spheres, that of romance and sex. That sphere is becoming practically the least human—with the help of an infinite supply of internet pornography, which encourages the attitude of treating people as but vulgar means to one’s own pleasure. There is a disturbing tendency for us all to be sex objects for one another. Ours is a society of objects, not subjects.

Perhaps the most poignant expression of this state of affairs, and of the desperate loneliness that results from it, is the latest “revolution” in artificial intelligence: sex robots that can get aroused, can have orgasms, and have customizable personalities. One of them, Solana, has an app for a phone or tablet with which you can “drag her face around to make her move her head, give her commands to make her smile at you, and type in sentences for her to say.” Another one, Samantha, “is programmed to want romance first, then get comfortable before getting sexual.” She has different “modes of interaction”: romantic, family, and sexy. “The objective,” her creator says, “the final objective of the sexual mode is to give her an orgasm.” Sex-doll brothels already exist, which are proving more popular than brothels with actual women—even when the women are available for the

same price. But not all the new dolls are only for sex, we're assured: Some of them "can have conversations about anything, from history to science to politics." This capability "lends itself to bonding," another sex-doll maker says, "and I think a simulated male that you can talk to and bond with will appeal to women too." Some customers have fallen in love with their dolls and married them.<sup>12</sup>

Thus we reach the *reductio ad absurdum* of trends that began with, or perhaps long before, the British Industrial Revolution, as people have become objects and objects have become people.

In the meantime, and correlatively, humanity continues to do next to nothing (compared to what ought to be done) about climate change and the threat of nuclear holocaust, either of which may do us in sooner than we think.

What is to be done? Now that we're approaching the literal manifestation of the capitalist telos, is there any hope? Or has our collective passiveness already doomed us to moral and physical oblivion?

The only hope is that, collectively, we will act to create rather than to let happen. We have to create and expand public spaces, for there is rationality in the public and irrationality in the private. As the activists of Occupy Wall Street understood, we have to bring back sit-ins on a mass scale, on a larger scale than in the 1930s and 1960s. We have to sit in at universities, and in public parks, and in legislative chambers; we have to sit down on highways and bridges and city streets. We have to flood the centers of power with wave after wave of popular rage. We have, in short, to disrupt, for that is how change happens. We should emulate the Luddites, pioneers of a sophisticated anti-capitalism (as E.P. Thompson showed), and totally resist our final reduction to the status of appendages to the machine.

In a society of exquisite bureaucratic subservience, we become free and active by acting, as have, say, the teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona. That's how we become people, as opposed to institutional automatons programmed to serve the powerful (who themselves are automatons programmed to accumulate profit). The necessity is to act directly contrary to every norm of privatization, which is always in the interest of reactionaries.

But protest isn't enough. Nor is it enough to force governments to pursue more progressive policies. In the long run, it's necessary to create a new system of social relations, starting with new economic relations. I've addressed this matter in *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States* (Booklocker, 2014), and can't go into any depth here. Suffice it to say that a new, sustainable world will have to be grounded in economic democracy, which is to say cooperatives of all types, public ownership and control of major industries, public banking, divestment from the military sector and massive investment in public works and public education, and in general a "socialistic" transformation of the nation-state system. The vision embodied in the British Labour Party's manifesto ([labour.org.uk/manifesto/](http://labour.org.uk/manifesto/)) is an excellent place to start, for, with modifications, it can apply to every country that has had capitalism foisted on it.

In the coming years, the opportunity to seize our humanity again will present itself. The crisis of the old regime will lead to the birth of the new.<sup>13</sup> Institutional breakdown will open up the space for radical experimentation in new modes of production and politics, modes responsive to the popular will. And it will become possible for the disenfranchised to take the initiative again.

There is indeed hope. We have only to reject despair in order to realize that hope.

## Footnotes

### Notes

1. David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge UP, 1993), 58.
2. Montgomery.
3. "Organizing the Unemployed in the Bronx in the 1930s," 1949.
4. George Veletsianos, "On Noam Chomsky and Technology's Neutrality," Jan. 23, 2014.
5. See here.
6. See Pew, "Evolution of Technology."
7. "Shocking Ways," *Huffington Post*.
8. Neely Tucker, "Taking a Whack Against Comcast," *Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 2007.
9. David Graeber, "Bull Shit Jobs."
10. Venkatesh Rao, "A Big Little Idea Called Legibility," July 26, 2010.
11. See here.
12. Jon Rogers, "Sex robot who can ORGASM and remember YOUR favourite position now available," *Express*, Aug. 5, 2017; Zeynep Yenisey, "This Ultra-Realistic New Sex Robot Not Only Has a Personality, She's Also Customizable," *Maxim*, Jan. 12, 2018; David Moye, "Engineer Creates Sex Robot that Needs to Be Romanced First," *Huffpost*, March 17, 2017; Cy LeClercq, "AI Sex Dolls Are Just Around the Corner," Nov. 25, 2017; George Harrison, "Sex robot makers claim lonely customers are marrying their dolls," *NY Post*, Aug. 6, 2017.
13. See my "Optimism in the Face of Crisis: How the Left Will Win," *Truthout*, July 02, 2017.