

It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism

In one of the key scenes in Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men*, Clive Owen's character, Theo, visits a friend at Battersea Power Station, which is now some combination of government building and private collection. Cultural treasures – Michelangelo's *David*, Picasso's *Guernica*, Pink Floyd's inflatable pig – are preserved in a building that is itself a refurbished heritage artifact. This is our only glimpse into the lives of the elite, holed up against the effects of a catastrophe which has caused mass sterility: no children have been born for a generation. Theo asks the question, 'how all this can matter if there will be no-one to see it?' The alibi can no longer be future generations, since there will be none. The response is nihilistic hedonism: 'I try not to think about it'.

What is unique about the dystopia in *Children of Men* is that it is specific to late capitalism. This isn't the familiar totalitarian scenario routinely trotted out in cinematic dystopias (see, for example, James McTeigue's 2005 *V for Vendetta*). In the P.D. James novel on which the film is based, democracy is suspended and the country is ruled over by a self-appointed Warden, but, wisely, the film downplays all this. For all that we know, the authoritarian measures that are everywhere in place could have been implemented within a political structure that remains, notionally, democratic. The War on Terror has prepared us for such a development: the normalization of crisis produces a situation in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable (when will the war be over?)

Watching *Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it. Once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination – the disasters they depicted acting as narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living. Not so in *Children of Men*. The world that it projects seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it. In its world, as in ours, ultra-authoritarianism and Capital are by no means incompatible: internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist. In *Children of Men*, public space is abandoned, given over to uncollected garbage and stalking animals (one especially resonant scene takes place inside a derelict school, through which a deer runs). Neoliberals, the capitalist realists par excellence, have celebrated the destruction of public space but, contrary to their official hopes, there is no withering away of the state in *Children of Men*, only a stripping back of the state to its core military and police functions (I say 'official' hopes since neoliberalism surreptitiously relied on the state even while it has ideologically excoriated it. This was made spectacularly clear during the banking crisis of 2008, when, at the invitation of neoliberal ideologues, the state rushed in to shore up the banking system.)

The catastrophe in *Children of Men* is neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened. Rather, it is being lived through. There is no punctual moment of disaster; the world doesn't end with a bang, it winks out, unravels, gradually falls apart. What caused the catastrophe to occur, who knows; its cause lies long in the past, so absolutely detached from the present as to seem like the caprice of a malign being: a negative miracle, a malediction which no penitence can ameliorate. Such a

blight can only be eased by an intervention that can no more be anticipated than was the onset of the curse in the first place. Action is pointless; only senseless hope makes sense. Superstition and religion, the first resorts of the helpless, proliferate.

But what of the catastrophe itself? It is evident that the theme of sterility must be read metaphorically, as the displacement of another kind of anxiety. I want to argue this anxiety cries out to be read in cultural terms, and the question the film poses is: how long can a culture persist without the new? What happens if the young are no longer capable of producing surprises?

Children of Men connects with the suspicion that the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation. Could it be that there are no breaks, no 'shocks of the new' to come? Such anxieties tend to result in a bi-polar oscillation: the 'weak messianic' hope that there must be something new on the way lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen. The focus shifts from the Next Big Thing to the last big thing – how long ago did it happen and just how big was it?

T.S. Eliot looms in the background of *Children of Men*, which, after all, inherits the theme of sterility from *The Waste Land*. The film's closing epigraph 'shantih shantih shantih' has more to do with Eliot's fragmentary pieces than the Upanishads' peace. Perhaps it is possible to see the concerns of another Eliot – the Eliot of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' – ciphered in *Children of Men*. It was in this essay that Eliot, in anticipation of Harold Bloom, described the reciprocal relationship between the canonical and the new. The new defines itself in response to what is already established; at the same time, the established has to reconfigure itself in response to the new. Eliot's claim was that the exhaustion of the future does not even leave us with the past. Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all.

The fate of Picasso's *Guernica* in the film – once a howl of anguish and outrage against Fascist atrocities, now a wall-hanging – is exemplary. Like its Battersea hanging space in the film, the painting is accorded 'iconic' status only when it is deprived of any possible function or context. No cultural object can retain its power when there are no longer new eyes to see it.

We do not need to wait for *Children of Men's* near-future to arrive to see this transformation of culture into museum pieces. The power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence' which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value. Walk around the British Museum, where you see objects torn from their lifeworlds and assembled as if on the deck of some Predator spacecraft, and you have a powerful image of this process at work. In the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are objectively ironized, transformed into *artifacts*. Capitalist realism is therefore not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself. As Marx and Engels themselves observed in *The Communist Manifesto*,

[Capital] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, 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. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics.

Yet this turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship, is held to be one of the virtues of capitalist realism. In claiming, as Badiou puts it, to have 'delivered us from the "fatal abstractions" inspired by the "ideologies of the past"', capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself. The attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism. 'We live in a contradiction,' Badiou has observed:

a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian – where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone – is presented to us as ideal. To justify their conservatism, the partisans of the established order cannot really call it ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible. Sure, they say, we may not live in a condition of perfect Goodness. But we're lucky that we don't live in a condition of Evil. Our democracy is not perfect. But it's better than the bloody dictatorships. Capitalism is unjust. But it's not criminal like Stalinism. We let millions of Africans die of AIDS, but we don't make racist nationalist declarations like Milosevic. We kill Iraqis with our airplanes, but we don't cut their throats with machetes like they do in Rwanda, etc.

The 'realism' here is analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion.

In their account of capitalism, surely the most impressive since Marx's, Deleuze and Guattari describe capitalism as a kind of dark potentiality which haunted all previous social systems. Capital, they argue, is the 'unnamable Thing', the abomination,

which primitive and feudal societies 'warded off in advance'. When it actually arrives, capitalism brings with it a massive desacralization of culture. It is a system which is no longer governed by any transcendent Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to re-install them on an *ad hoc* basis. The limits of capitalism are not fixed by fiat, but defined (and re-defined) pragmatically and improvisationally. This makes capitalism very much like the Thing in John Carpenter's film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact. Capital, Deleuze and Guattari says, is a 'motley painting of everything that ever was'; a strange hybrid of the ultra-modern and the archaic. In the years since Deleuze and Guattari wrote the two volumes of their *Capitalism And Schizophrenia*, it has seemed as if the deterritorializing impulses of capitalism have been confined to finance, leaving culture presided over by the forces of reterritorialization.

This malaise, the feeling that there is nothing new, is itself nothing new of course. We find ourselves at the notorious 'end of history' trumpeted by Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Fukuyama's thesis that history has climaxed with liberal capitalism may have been widely derided, but it is accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious. It should be remembered, though, that even when Fukuyama advanced it, the idea that history had reached a 'terminal beach' was not merely triumphalist. Fukuyama warned that his radiant city would be haunted, but he thought its specters would be Nietzschean rather than Marxian. Some of Nietzsche's most prescient pages are those in which he describes the 'oversaturation of an age with history'. 'It leads an age into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself', he wrote in *Untimely Meditations*, 'and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism', in which 'cosmopolitan fingering', a detached spectatorialism, replaces engagement and involvement. This is

the condition of Nietzsche's Last Man, who has seen everything, but is decadently enfeebled precisely by this excess of (self) awareness.

Fukuyama's position is in some ways a mirror image of Fredric Jameson's. Jameson famously claimed that postmodernism is the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. He argued that the failure of the future was constitutive of a postmodern cultural scene which, as he correctly prophesied, would become dominated by pastiche and revivalism. Given that Jameson has made a convincing case for the relationship between postmodern culture and certain tendencies in consumer (or post-Fordist) capitalism, it could appear that there is no need for the concept of capitalist realism at all. In some ways, this is true. What I'm calling capitalist realism can be subsumed under the rubric of postmodernism as theorized by Jameson. Yet, despite Jameson's heroic work of clarification, postmodernism remains a hugely contested term, its meanings, appropriately but unhelpfully, unsettled and multiple. More importantly, I would want to argue that some of the processes which Jameson described and analyzed have now become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind.

Ultimately, there are three reasons that I prefer the term capitalist realism to postmodernism. In the 1980s, when Jameson first advanced his thesis about postmodernism, there were still, in name at least, political alternatives to capitalism. What we are dealing with now, however, is a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility. In the 80s, 'Really Existing Socialism' still persisted, albeit in its final phase of collapse. In Britain, the fault lines of class antagonism were fully exposed in an event like the Miners' Strike of 1984-1985, and the defeat of the miners was an important moment in the development of capitalist realism, at least as significant in its symbolic dimension as in its practical effects. The closure of pits was defended precisely on the grounds that keeping them open

was not 'economically realistic', and the miners were cast in the role of the last actors in a doomed proletarian romance. The 80s were the period when capitalist realism was fought for and established, when Margaret Thatcher's doctrine that 'there is no alternative' – as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for – became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy.

Secondly, postmodernism involved some relationship to modernism. Jameson's work on postmodernism began with an interrogation of the idea, cherished by the likes of Adorno, that modernism possessed revolutionary potentials by virtue of its formal innovations alone. What Jameson saw happening instead was the incorporation of modernist motifs into popular culture (suddenly, for example, Surrealist techniques would appear in advertising). At the same time as particular modernist forms were absorbed and commodified, modernism's credos – its supposed belief in elitism and its monological, top-down model of culture – were challenged and rejected in the name of 'difference', 'diversity' and 'multiplicity'. Capitalist realism no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism. On the contrary, it takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted: modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living.

Thirdly, a whole generation has passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism had to face the problem of how to contain and absorb energies from outside. It now, in fact, has the opposite problem; having all-too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate? For most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. Jameson used to report in horror about the ways that capitalism had seeped into the very unconscious; now, the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is

no longer worthy of comment. It would be dangerous and misleading to imagine that the near past was some prelapsarian state rife with political potentials, so it's as well to remember the role that commodification played in the production of culture throughout the twentieth century. Yet the old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture. Witness, for instance, the establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' cultural zones, which endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. 'Alternative' and 'independent' don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream. No-one embodied (and struggled with) this deadlock more than Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened. Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché. The impasse that paralyzed Cobain is precisely the one that Jameson described: like postmodern culture in general, Cobain found himself in 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum'. Here, even success meant failure, since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed. But the high existential angst of Nirvana and Cobain belongs to an older moment; what succeeded them

was a pastiche-rock which reproduced the forms of the past without anxiety.

Cobain's death confirmed the defeat and incorporation of rock's utopian and promethean ambitions. When he died, rock was already being eclipsed by hip hop, whose global success has presupposed just the kind of precorporation by capital which I alluded to above. For much hip hop, any 'naïve' hope that youth culture could change anything has been replaced by the hard-headed embracing of a brutally reductive version of 'reality'. 'In hip hop', Simon Reynolds pointed out in a 1996 essay in *The Wire* magazine,

'real' has two meanings. First, it means authentic, uncompromised music that refuses to sell out to the music industry and soften its message for crossover. 'Real' also signifies that the music reflects a 'reality' constituted by late capitalist economic instability, institutionalized racism, and increased surveillance and harassment of youth by the police. 'Real' means the death of the social: it means corporations who respond to increased profits not by raising pay or improving benefits but by downsizing (the laying-off the permanent workforce in order to create a floating employment pool of part-time and freelance workers without benefits or job security).

In the end, it was precisely hip hop's performance of this first version of the real – 'the uncompromising' – that enabled its easy absorption into the second, the reality of late capitalist economic instability, where such authenticity has proven highly marketable. Gangster rap neither merely reflects pre-existing social conditions, as many of its advocates claim, nor does it simply cause those conditions, as its critics argue – rather the circuit whereby hip hop and the late capitalist social field feed into each other is one of the means by which capitalist realism transforms itself into a kind of anti-mythical myth. The affinity

between hip hop and gangster movies such as *Scarface*, *The Godfather* films, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Goodfellas* and *Pulp Fiction* arises from their common claim to have stripped the world of sentimental illusions and seen it for 'what it really is': a Hobbesian war of all against all, a system of perpetual exploitation and generalized criminality. In hip hop, Reynolds writes, 'To "get real" is to confront a state-of-nature where dog eats dog, where you're either a winner or a loser, and where most will be losers'.

The same neo-noir worldview can be found in the comic books of Frank Miller and in the novels of James Ellroy. There is a kind of machismo of demythologization in Miller and Ellroy's works. They pose as unflinching observers who refuse to prettify the world so that it can be fitted into the supposedly simple ethical binaries of the superhero comic and the traditional crime novel. The 'realism' here is somehow underscored, rather than undercut, by their fixation on the luridly venal – even though the hyperbolic insistence on cruelty, betrayal and savagery in both writers quickly becomes pantomimic. 'In his pitch blackness', Mike Davis wrote of Ellroy in 1992, 'there is no light left to cast shadows and evil becomes a forensic banality. The result feels very much like the actual moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era: a supersaturation of corruption that fails any longer to outrage or even interest'. Yet this very desensitization serves a function for capitalist realism: Davis hypothesized that 'the role of L.A. *noir*' may have been 'to endorse the emergence of *homo reaganus*'.

What if you held a protest and everyone came?

In the cases of gangster rap and Ellroy, capitalist realism takes the form of a kind of super-identification with capital at its most pitilessly predatory, but this need not be the case. In fact, capitalist realism is very far from precluding a certain anti-capitalism. After all, and as Žižek has provocatively pointed out, anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism. Time after time, the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the 'evil corporation'. Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it. Take Disney/Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008). The film shows an earth so despoiled that human beings are no longer capable of inhabiting it. We're left in no doubt that consumer capitalism and corporations – or rather one mega-corporation, Buy n Large – is responsible for this depredation; and when we see eventually see the human beings in offworld exile, they are infantile and obese, interacting via screen interfaces, carried around in large motorized chairs, and supping indeterminate slop from cups. What we have here is a vision of control and communication much as Jean Baudrillard understood it, in which subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate. It seems that the cinema audience is itself the object of this satire, which prompted some right wing observers to recoil in disgust, condemning Disney/Pixar for attacking its own audience. But this kind of irony feeds rather than challenges capitalist realism. A film like *Wall-E* exemplifies what Robert Pfaller has called 'interpassivity': the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity. The role of capitalist ideology is not to make an

explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief. It is impossible to conceive of fascism or Stalinism without propaganda – but capitalism can proceed perfectly well, in some ways better, without anyone making a case for it. Žižek's counsel here remains invaluable. 'If the concept of ideology is the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge', he argues,

then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way ... to blind ourselves to the structural power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.*

Capitalist ideology in general, Žižek maintains, consists precisely in the overvaluing of belief – in the sense of inner subjective attitude – at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behavior. So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange. According to Žižek, capitalism in general relies on this structure of disavowal. We believe that money is only a meaningless token of no intrinsic worth, yet we *act* as if it has a holy value. Moreover, this behavior precisely depends upon the prior disavowal – we are able to fetishize money in our actions only because we have already taken an ironic distance towards money in our heads.

Corporate anti-capitalism wouldn't matter if it could be differentiated from an authentic anti-capitalist movement. Yet, even before its momentum was stalled by the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, the so called anti-capitalist movement seemed also to have conceded too much to capitalist realism. Since it was unable to posit a coherent alternative political-economic model to capitalism, the suspicion was that the actual aim was not to replace capitalism but to mitigate its worst excesses; and, since the form of its activities tended to be the staging of protests rather than political organization, there was a sense that the anti-capitalism movement consisted of making a series of hysterical demands which it didn't expect to be met. Protests have formed a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism, and the anti-capitalist protests share rather too much with hyper-corporate events like 2005's Live 8, with their exorbitant demands that politicians legislate away poverty.

Live 8 was a strange kind of protest; a protest that everyone could agree with: who is it who actually wants poverty? And it is not that Live 8 was a 'degraded' form of protest. On the contrary, it was in Live 8 that the logic of the protest was revealed in its purest form. The protest impulse of the 60s posited a malevolent Father, the harbinger of a reality principle that (supposedly) cruelly and arbitrarily denies the 'right' to total enjoyment. This Father has unlimited access to resources, but he selfishly - and senselessly - hoards them. Yet it is not capitalism but protest itself which depends upon this figuration of the Father; and one of the successes of the current global elite has been their avoidance of identification with the figure of the hoarding Father, even though the 'reality' they impose on the young is *substantially harsher* than the conditions they protested against in the 60s. Indeed, it was of course the global elite itself - in the form of entertainers such as Richard Curtis and Bono - which organized the Live 8 event.

To reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital. What is being disavowed in the abjection of evil and ignorance onto fantasmatic Others is our own complicity in planetary networks of oppression. What needs to be kept in mind is *both* that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* that it would be nothing without our co-operation. The most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us. There is a sense in which it simply is the case that the political elite *are* our servants; the miserable service they provide from us is to launder our libidos, to obligingly re-present for us our disavowed desires as if they had nothing to do with us.

The ideological blackmail that has been in place since the original Live Aid concerts in 1985 has insisted that 'caring individuals' could end famine directly, without the need for any kind of political solution or systemic reorganization. It is necessary to act straight away, we were told; politics has to be suspended in the name of ethical immediacy. Bono's Product Red brand wanted to dispense even with the philanthropic intermediary. 'Philanthropy is like hippy music, holding hands', Bono proclaimed. 'Red is more like punk rock, hip hop, this should feel like hard commerce'. The point was not to offer an alternative to capitalism – on the contrary, Product Red's 'punk rock' or 'hip hop' character consisted in its 'realistic' acceptance that capitalism is the only game in town. No, the aim was only to ensure that some of the proceeds of particular transactions went to good causes. The fantasy being that western consumerism, far from being intrinsically implicated in systemic global inequalities, could itself solve them. All we have to do is buy the right products.

Capitalism and the Real

'Capitalist realism' is not an original coinage. It was used as far back as the 1960s by a group of German Pop artists and by Michael Schudson in his 1984 book *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, both of whom were making parodic references to socialist realism. What is new about my use of the term is the more expansive – even exorbitant – meaning that I ascribe to it. Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.

If capitalist realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance are so hopeless and impotent, where can an effective challenge come from? A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort.

Needless to say, what counts as 'realistic', what seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations. An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact. Accordingly, neoliberalism has sought to eliminate the very

category of value in the ethical sense. Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of radical theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable. It is worth recalling that what is currently called realistic was itself once 'impossible': the slew of privatizations that took place since the 1980s would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier, and the current political-economic landscape (with unions in abeyance, utilities and railways denationalized) could scarcely have been imagined in 1975. Conversely, what was once eminently possible is now deemed unrealistic. 'Modernization', Badiou bitterly observes, 'is the name for a strict and servile definition of the possible. These 'reforms' invariably aim at making impossible what used to be practicable (for the largest number), and making profitable (for the dominant oligarchy) what did not used to be so'.

At this point, it is perhaps worth introducing an elementary theoretical distinction from Lacanian psychoanalysis which Žižek has done so much to give contemporary currency: the difference between the Real and reality. As Alenka Zupancic explains, psychoanalysis's positing of a reality *principle* invites us to be suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural. 'The reality principle', Zupancic writes,

is not some kind of natural way associated with how things are ... The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact (or biological, economic...) necessity (and that we tend to

perceive as non-ideological). It is precisely here that we should be most alert to the functioning of ideology.

For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us.

Environmental catastrophe is one such Real. At one level, to be sure, it might look as if Green issues are very far from being 'unrepresentable voids' for capitalist culture. Climate change and the threat of resource-depletion are not being repressed so much as incorporated into advertising and marketing. What this treatment of environmental catastrophe illustrates is the fantasy structure on which capitalist realism depends: a presupposition that resources are infinite, that the earth itself is merely a husk which capital can at a certain point slough off like a used skin, and that any problem can be solved by the market (In the end, *Wall-E* presents a version of this fantasy – the idea that the infinite expansion of capital is possible, that capital can proliferate without labor – on the off world ship, Axiom, all labor is performed by robots; that the burning up of Earth's resources is only a temporary glitch, and that, after a suitable period of recovery, capital can terraform the planet and recolonize it). Yet environmental catastrophe features in late capitalist culture only as a kind of simulacra, its real implications for capitalism too traumatic to be assimilated into the system. The significance of Green critiques is that they suggest that, far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment. The relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental: capital's 'need of a constantly expanding market', its 'growth

fetish', mean that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability.

But Green issues are already a contested zone, already a site where politicization is being fought for. In what follows, I want to stress two other aporias in capitalist realism, which are not yet politicized to anything like the same degree. The first is mental health. Mental health, in fact, is a paradigm case of how capitalist realism operates. Capitalist realism insists on treating mental health as if it were a natural fact, like weather (but, then again, weather is no longer a natural fact so much as a political-economic effect). In the 1960s and 1970s, radical theory and politics (Laing, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, etc.) coalesced around extreme mental conditions such as schizophrenia, arguing, for instance, that madness was not a natural, but a political, category. But what is needed now is a politicization of much more common disorders. Indeed, it is their very commonness which is the issue: in Britain, depression is now the condition that is most treated by the NHS. In his book *The Selfish Capitalist*, Oliver James has convincingly posited a correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism practiced in countries like Britain, the USA and Australia. In line with James's claims, I want to argue that it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The 'mental health plague' in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.

The other phenomenon I want to highlight is bureaucracy. In making their case against socialism, neoliberal ideologues often

excoriated the top-down bureaucracy which supposedly led to institutional sclerosis and inefficiency in command economies. With the triumph of neoliberalism, bureaucracy was supposed to have been made obsolete; a relic of an unlamented Stalinist past. Yet this is at odds with the experiences of most people working and living in late capitalism, for whom bureaucracy remains very much a part of everyday life. Instead of disappearing, bureaucracy has changed its form; and this new, decentralized, form has allowed it to proliferate. The persistence of bureaucracy in late capitalism does not in itself indicate that capitalism does not work – rather, what it suggests is that the way in which capitalism does actually work is very different from the picture presented by capitalist realism.

In part, I have chosen to focus on mental health problems and bureaucracy because they both feature heavily in an area of culture which has becoming increasingly dominated by the imperatives of capitalist realism: education. Through most of the current decade, I worked as a lecturer in a Further Education college, and in what follows, I will draw extensively on my experiences there. In Britain, Further Education colleges used to be places which students, often from working class backgrounds, were drawn to if they wanted an alternative to more formal state educational institutions. Ever since Further Education colleges were removed from local authority control in the early 1990s, they have become subject both to 'market' pressures and to government-imposed targets. They have been at the vanguard of changes that would be rolled out through the rest of the education system and public services – a kind of lab in which neoliberal 'reforms' of education have been trialed, and as such, they are the perfect place to begin an analysis of the effects of capitalist realism.

Reflexive impotence, immobilization and liberal communism

By contrast with their forebears in the 1960s and 1970s, British students today appear to be politically disengaged. While French students can still be found on the streets protesting against neoliberalism, British students, whose situation is incomparably worse, seem resigned to their fate. But this, I want to argue, is a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism, but of *reflexive impotence*. They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it. But that 'knowledge', that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reflexive impotence amounts to an unstated worldview amongst the British young, and it has its correlate in widespread pathologies. Many of the teenagers I worked with had mental health problems or learning difficulties. Depression is endemic. It is the condition most dealt with by the National Health Service, and is afflicting people at increasingly younger ages. The number of students who have some variant of dyslexia is astonishing. It is not an exaggeration to say that being a teenager in late capitalist Britain is now close to being reclassified as a sickness. This pathologization already forecloses any possibility of politicization. By privatizing these problems – treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual's neurology and/or by their family background – any question of social systemic causation is ruled out.

Many of the teenage students I encountered seemed to be in a state of what I would call depressive hedonia. Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition

I'm referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing' – but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle. In large part this is a consequence of students' ambiguous structural position, stranded between their old role as subjects of disciplinary institutions and their new status as consumers of services. In his crucial essay 'Postscript on Societies of Control', Deleuze distinguishes between the disciplinary societies described by Foucault, which were organized around the enclosed spaces of the factory, the school and the prison, and the new control societies, in which all institutions are embedded in a dispersed corporation.

Deleuze is right to argue that Kafka is the prophet of distributed, cybernetic power that is typical of Control societies. In *The Trial*, Kafka importantly distinguishes between two types of acquittal available to the accused. Definite acquittal is no longer possible, if it ever was ('we have only legendary accounts of ancient cases [which] provide instances of acquittal'). The two remaining options, then, are (1) 'Ostensible acquittal', in which the accused is to all and intents and purposes acquitted, but may later, at some unspecified time, face the charges in full, or (2) 'Indefinite postponement', in which the accused engages in (what they hope is an infinitely) protracted process of legal wrangling, so that the dreaded ultimate judgment is unlikely to be forthcoming. Deleuze observes that the Control societies delineated by Kafka himself, but also by Foucault and Burroughs, operate using indefinite postponement: Education as a lifelong process... Training that persists for as long as your working life continues... Work you take home with you... Working from home, homing from work. A consequence of this 'indefinite' mode of power is that external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing. Control only works if you are complicit with it. Hence the Burroughs figure of the 'Control Addict': the one who is addicted

to control, but also, inevitably, the one who has been taken over, possessed by Control.

Walk into almost any class at the college where I taught and you will immediately appreciate that you are in a post-disciplinary framework. Foucault painstakingly enumerated the way in which discipline was installed through the imposition of rigid body postures. During lessons at our college, however, students will be found slumped on desk, talking almost constantly, snacking incessantly (or even, on occasions, eating full meals). The old disciplinary segmentation of time is breaking down. The carceral regime of discipline is being eroded by the technologies of control, with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development.

The system by which the college is funded means that it literally cannot afford to exclude students, even if it wanted to. Resources are allocated to colleges on the basis of how successfully they meet targets on achievement (exam results), attendance and retention of students. This combination of market imperatives with bureaucratically-defined 'targets' is typical of the 'market Stalinist' initiatives which now regulate public services. The lack of an effective disciplinary system has not, to say the least, been compensated for by an increase in student self-motivation. Students are aware that if they don't attend for weeks on end, and/or if they don't produce any work, they will not face any meaningful sanction. They typically respond to this freedom not by pursuing projects but by falling into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana.

Ask students to read for more than a couple of sentences and many – and these are A-level students mind you – will protest that they *can't do it*. The most frequent complaint teachers hear is that *it's boring*. It is not so much the content of the written material that is at issue here; it is the act of reading itself that is deemed to be 'boring'. What we are facing here is not just time-

honored teenage torpor, but the mismatch between a post-literate 'New Flesh' that is 'too wired to concentrate' and the confining, concentrational logics of decaying disciplinary systems. To be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand. Some students want Nietzsche in the same way that they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp – and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension – that the indigestibility, the difficulty *is* Nietzsche.

An illustration: I challenged one student about why he always wore headphones in class. He replied that it didn't matter, because he wasn't actually playing any music. In another lesson, he was playing music at very low volume through the headphones, without wearing them. When I asked him to switch it off, he replied that even he couldn't hear it. Why wear the headphones without playing music or play music without wearing the headphones? Because the presence of the phones on the ears or the knowledge that the music is playing (even if he couldn't hear it) was a reassurance that the matrix was *still there*, within reach. Besides, in a classic example of interpassivity, if the music was still playing, even if he couldn't hear it, then the player could still enjoy it on his behalf. The use of headphones is significant here – pop is experienced not as something which could have impacts upon public space, but as a retreat into private 'OedIpod' consumer bliss, a walling up against the social.

The consequence of being hooked into the entertainment matrix is twitchy, agitated interpassivity, an inability to concentrate or focus. Students' incapacity to connect current lack of focus with future failure, their inability to synthesize time into any coherent narrative, is symptomatic of more than mere demotivation. It is, in fact, eerily reminiscent of Jameson's analysis in 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'. Jameson observed there that Lacan's theory of schizophrenia offered a

'suggestive aesthetic model' for understanding the fragmenting of subjectivity in the face of the emerging entertainment-industrial complex. 'With the breakdown of the signifying chain', Jameson summarized, 'the Lacanian schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time'. Jameson was writing in the late 1980s – i.e. the period in which most of my students were born. What we in the classroom are now facing is a generation born into that ahistorical, anti-mnemonic blip culture – a generation, that is to say, for whom time has always come ready-cut into digital micro-slices.

If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict. Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users; William Gibson recognized that in *Neuromancer* when he had Case and the other cyberspace cowboys feeling insects-under-the-skin strung out when they unplugged from the matrix (Case's amphetamine habit is plainly the substitute for an addiction to a far more abstract speed). If, then, something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is a pathology of late capitalism – a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture. Similarly, what is called dyslexia may in many cases amount to a *post-lexia*. Teenagers process capital's image-dense data very effectively without any need to read – slogan-recognition is sufficient to navigate the net-mobile-magazine informational plane. 'Writing has never been capitalism's thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate', Deleuze and Guattari argued in *Anti-Oedipus*. 'Electric language does not go by way of the voice or writing: data processing does without them both'. Hence the reason that many successful business people are dyslexic (but is their post-lexical efficiency a cause or effect of their success?)

Teachers are now put under intolerable pressure to mediate between the post-literate subjectivity of the late capitalist

consumer and the demands of the disciplinary regime (to pass examinations etc). This is one way in which education, far from being in some ivory tower safely inured from the 'real world', is the engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field. Teachers are caught between being facilitator-entertainers and disciplinarian-authoritarians. Teachers want to help students to pass the exams; they want us to be authority figures who tell them what to do. Teachers being interpellated by students as authority figures exacerbates the 'boredom' problem, since isn't anything that comes from the place of authority a priori boring? Ironically, the role of disciplinarian is demanded of educators more than ever at precisely the time when disciplinary structures are breaking down in institutions. With families buckling under the pressure of a capitalism which requires both parents to work, teachers are now increasingly required to act as surrogate parents, instilling the most basic behavioral protocols in students and providing pastoral and emotional support for teenagers who are in some cases only minimally socialized.

It is worth stressing that none of the students I taught had any legal obligation to be at college. They could leave if they wanted to. But the lack of any meaningful employment opportunities, together with cynical encouragement from government means that college seems to be the easier, safer option. Deleuze says that Control societies are based on debt rather than enclosure; but there is a way in which the current education system both indebts *and* encloses students. Pay for your own exploitation, the logic insists – get into debt so you can get the same McJob you could have walked into if you'd left school at sixteen...

Jameson observed that 'the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases [the] present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis'. But nostalgia for the context in which the old types of praxis operated is plainly useless. That is why French students don't in

the end constitute an alternative to British reflexive impotence. That the neoliberal *Economist* would deride French opposition to capitalism is hardly surprising, yet its mockery of French 'immobilization' had a point. 'Certainly the students who kicked off the latest protests seemed to think they were re-enacting the events of May 1968 their parents sprang on Charles de Gaulle', it wrote in its lead article of March 30, 2006.

They have borrowed its slogans ('Beneath the cobblestones, the beach!') and hijacked its symbols (the Sorbonne university). In this sense, the revolt appears to be the natural sequel to [2005]'s suburban riots, which prompted the government to impose a state of emergency. Then it was the jobless, ethnic underclass that rebelled against a system that excluded them. Yet the striking feature of the latest protest movement is that this time the rebellious forces are on the side of conservatism. Unlike the rioting youths in the *banlieues*, the objective of the students and public-sector trade unions is to prevent change, and to keep France the way it is.

It's striking how the practice of many of the immobilizers is a kind of inversion of that of another group who also count themselves heirs of 68: the so called 'liberal communists' such as George Soros and Bill Gates who combine rapacious pursuit of profit with the rhetoric of ecological concern and social responsibility. Alongside their social concern, liberal communists believe that work practices should be (post) modernized, in line with the concept of 'being smart'. As Žižek explains,

Being smart means being dynamic and nomadic, and against centralized bureaucracy; believing in dialogue and co-operation as against central authority; in flexibility as against routine; culture and knowledge as against industrial production; in spontaneous interaction and autopoiesis as

against fixed hierarchy.

Taken together, the immobilizers, with their implicit concession that capitalism can only be resisted, never overcome, and the liberal communists, who maintain that the amoral excesses of capitalism must be offset by charity, give a sense of the way in which capitalist realism circumscribes current political possibilities. Whereas the immobilizers retain the form of 68-style protest but in the name of resistance to change, liberal communists energetically embrace newness. Žižek is right to argue that, far from constituting any kind of progressive corrective to official capitalist ideology, liberal communism constitutes the dominant ideology of capitalism now. ‘Flexibility’, ‘nomadism’ and ‘spontaneity’ are the very hallmarks of management in a post-Fordist, Control society. But the problem is that any opposition to flexibility and decentralization risks being self-defeating, since calls for inflexibility and centralization are, to say the least, not likely to be very galvanizing.

In any case, resistance to the ‘new’ is not a cause that the left can or should rally around. Capital thought very carefully about how to break labor; yet there has still not yet been enough thought about what tactics will work against capital in conditions of post-Fordism, and what *new language* can be innovated to deal with those conditions. It is important to contest capitalism’s appropriation of ‘the new’, but to reclaim the ‘new’ can’t be a matter of adapting to the conditions in which we find ourselves – we’ve done that rather too well, and ‘successful adaptation’ is the strategy of managerialism par excellence.

The persistent association of neoliberalism with the term ‘Restoration’, favored by both Badiou and David Harvey, is an important corrective to the association of capital with novelty. For Harvey and Badiou, neoliberal politics are not about the new, but a *return* of class power and privilege. ‘[I]n France,’ Badiou has said, ‘“Restoration” refers to the period of the return of the King,

in 1815, after the Revolution and Napoleon. We are in such a period. Today we see liberal capitalism and its political system, parliamentarianism, as the only natural and acceptable solutions'. Harvey argues that neoliberalization is best conceived of as a '*political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites'. Harvey demonstrates that, in an era popularly described as 'post-political', class war has continued to be fought, but only by one side: the wealthy. 'After the implementation of neoliberal policies in the late 1970s,' Harvey reveals,

the share of national income of the top 1 per cent of income earners soared, to reach 15 per cent ... by the end of the century. The top 0.1 per cent of income earners in the US increased their share of the national income from 2 per cent in 1978 to over 6 per cent by 1999, while the ratio of the median compensation of workers to the salaries of CEOs increased from just over 30 to 1 in 1970 to nearly 500 to 1 by 2000. ... The US is not alone in this: the top 1 per cent of income earners in Britain have doubled their share of the national income from 6.5 per cent to 13 per cent since 1982.

As Harvey shows, neoliberals were more Leninist than the Leninists, using think-tanks as the intellectual vanguard to create the ideological climate in which capitalist realism could flourish.

The immobilization model – which amounts to a demand to retain the Fordist/disciplinary regime – could not work in Britain or the other countries in which neoliberalism has already taken a hold. Fordism has definitively collapsed in Britain, and with it the sites around which the old politics were organized. At the end of the control essay, Deleuze wonders what new forms an anti-control politics might take:

One of the most important questions will concern the

ineptitude of the unions: tied to the whole of their history of struggle against the disciplines or within the spaces of enclosure, will they be able to adapt themselves or will they give way to new forms of resistance against the societies of control? Can we already grasp the rough outlines of the coming forms, capable of threatening the joys of marketing? Many young people strangely boast of being “motivated”; they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training. It’s up to them to discover what they’re being made to serve, just as their elders discovered, not without difficulty, the telos of the disciplines.

What must be discovered is a way out of the motivation/demotivation binary, so that disidentification from the control program registers as something other than dejected apathy. One strategy would be to shift the political terrain – to move away from the unions’ traditional focus on pay and onto forms of discontent specific to post-Fordism. Before we analyse that further, we must consider in more depth what post-Fordism actually is.