

# **When Transformation is Not Change: Theorizing Social Turmoil in Late Modern Capitalism**

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## **Introduction**

This essay explores a central tension in the workings of modern-day capitalism: the extent to which its transformational potential no longer leads to substantial change for the vast majority of the people who live it, on the one hand, and the persistence of optimistic beliefs in progress and development, on the other. For this purpose, I'm not especially concerned with whether capitalism ever *actually* possessed the characteristics its defenders claim for it, although the undeniable rise in living standards in many parts of the world over the past few centuries certainly could be attributed to this mode of production. Of greater interest are the kinds of cultural attachments that grow out of the stories told about capitalism and which capitalism tells about itself. These stories are sufficiently well-known as to have been personified in the name of Horatio Alger. According to the tale, a combination of pluck, good fortune, and (above all) hard work should enable modern humans to fundamentally alter their circumstances for the better. Foundational to this belief is another, more serious conviction: namely, that existence is amenable to human intervention, and that the arc of human history bends in our favor. It cannot be the case, so this second belief maintains, that modern humans got to where they are by accident. Progress and development are in some sense interwoven into the fabric of existence, ever-ready to be advanced by the industry, innovation, and dedication of human beings.

Though obviously a critic of capitalism, Karl Marx is also a good example of someone who sees capitalism as having unleashed human productive capacities in ways never before seen. It is truly a revolutionary mode of production, one that thrives on eliminating the old in favor of the new and which is more or less guaranteed to render obsolete any and all institutions that do not comport with its unique requirements. It is on this basis that Marx can appreciate what the bourgeoisie have brought into being. After all, “The bourgeoisie, during its scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. What earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?” (Marx, 1978: 477). Of course, Marx was also an optimist insofar as he also believed this productive force would eventually lead to the overthrow of capitalism and the arrival of communism. The point for the moment is that even capitalism’s harshest critic believed that within this mode of production was found the means for both personal and societal transformation and that this transformation was progressive and thus promised a better future. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers in the United States translated this optimism into the American Dream and the belief that economic prosperity and advancement were here to stay. Later Marxist critics such as Marshall Berman (1988: 94) concurred at least in part with this assessment by saying of the bourgeoisie that “They have produced vivid new images and paradigms of the good life as a life of action. They have proved that it is possible, through organized and concerted action, to really change the world.”

My claim here is not that these beliefs are categorically incorrect but that the conditions out of which they arose have changed sufficiently as to render them obsolete. This, of course, is as we should expect given the centrality of change to the capitalist mode of production. But it’s also the case that the nature of change under capitalism has morphed away from the

revolutionary transformation first identified by Marx and later lauded by Berman and toward stagnation and decline. This is partly due to some of the requirements internal to capitalism, in particular the profit motive, the concentration of capital, and the need to exploit existing markets or create new ones, and partly due to craven government policies designed at the very least to protect an unequal status quo. Regardless of specific causes, the results are increasingly clear. Circumstances get worse for a lot of people, better for the select few, and stay implacably the same for the vast majority. Whatever change occurs is change to no apparent effect, and for no apparent reason. While there are undeniably some benefits from technology, they come with a price that includes increased state and private sector surveillance, risk of data and identity theft, decreased attention spans, and the loss of interpersonal skills with which anyone who teaches millennials is familiar. Alongside the progressive arc of capitalism claimed by its apologists is a tragic one, in which capitalism “will be melted by the heat of its own incandescent energies” (Berman, 1988: 97).

My argument is that, given the extent to which transformation no longer leads to change, the kinds of optimistic attitudes and the faith in progress to which they give rise may well be harmful dispositions. Optimism in the face of decline runs the risk of generating the kinds of frustration and resentment that occur when expectations go unmet or when one finally realizes the playing field was never level to begin with. When the incessant sameness of a situation is its most salient feature, as I argue is increasingly the case under modern capitalism, faith in the ability of human effort to effect substantial change begins to feel misplaced and inappropriate, even childlike in some ways. In response, I suggest that philosophical pessimism might offer a preferable alternative. This is not the attitude so often caricatured in modern parlance as belonging to someone who just can't look on the bright side or who is downcast and moody.

Instead, it is a centuries-old position that looks skeptically on the notion of a progressive direction to history, questions seriously whether the human condition is in fact improvable, and suggests that the absurdity of human life might be its most salient characteristic. Pessimism therefore asks us to change our orientation to circumstance accordingly. In particular, by asking us to expect nothing, pessimism opens us up to instances of newness not dependent on attributions of progress or assumptions about the direction of change. In this way, our orientation to existence can be refined in a manner more commensurate with circumstances of non-change.

### **Change for the Sake of Change: Development in Late-Modern Capitalism**

Karl Marx's insights into the workings of capitalism vividly call attention to the transformational nature of its development. As economic power morphed from control over land to control over capital, the bourgeoisie was compelled to devise ever new means for the accumulation of raw materials, the creation of new markets, and the improvements in productivity required to boost profit margins. The accompanying superstructural changes, including massive population movements from country to city, the shift from agriculture to industry, and the abolition of feudal and other premodern social relations all became characteristic of the capitalist age. In contrast to prior modes of production, in which the conservation of existing productive forces was "the first condition of existence" (Marx, 1978: 476), capitalism was marked not simply by the fact but also the requirement of ceaseless change, a circumstance fueled by the need for new markets. The tale is a familiar one and can be boiled down to a few crucial points: as populations increased and global exploration began to occur in earnest, new markets emerged for which previous modes of production were no longer sufficient. Once these markets were saturated, profit margins began to suffer, thus leading to the need for

new markets which themselves required new modes of production. These new modes altered society in ways that created new needs, the satisfaction of which created yet new modes of production. This cycle of innovation, stagnation, and renewal became a self-reinforcing feedback loop with all the superstructural consequences with which we are now so familiar.

Though obviously a critic of capitalism, Marx was prepared to acknowledge certain benefits of this state of affairs. At the very least, capitalism unleashed a torrent of human productive and creative energy, thus heralding the possibility of ending material want for millions around the globe. It also signaled the end of stifling social relations based on one's station at birth rather than one's accomplishments. But the central point so far as this argument is concerned is that change emerges as a crucial ingredient in the capitalist mode of production, the thing that keeps the machine running even as it occasionally leads it to the brink of destruction. Change is the precursor to the opening up of new horizons of possibility which are themselves fueled by the imperatives of the quest for new markets, increased capital, and larger profits. While we are wise to remain skeptical about the imminent arrival of a revolution like the one Marx had in mind, we can still follow him in acknowledging the emancipatory possibilities lurking within the otherwise alienating forces of capitalist production. In other words, by virtue of its capacity to render obsolete all that has come before it, capitalism creates conditions in which even the most apparently permanent and stable institutions are subject to modification or even elimination.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as Marshall Berman (1988) points out, capitalism's revolutionary potential resides in the forms of personal development available to people in a world in which nothing remains stable for long. If all that is solid melts into air eventually, then that must mean the situation in which one finds oneself at the moment is guaranteed not to last.

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<sup>1</sup> Including capitalism itself, or so Marx argued. That capitalism has proved to be so resilient in the face of its own restless transformational energy tacitly confirms the argument being advanced here.

Still more, one could conclude not only that change is inevitable but that capitalism itself furnishes the resources for the kinds of transformative development that has become the hallmark of modernity.

Berman's analysis is sufficiently compelling as to warrant detailed discussion here, in part because he extends the logic of Marx's analysis of change under capitalism and in part because he opens up ways of thinking about the cultural attachments (about which more later) that emanate from capitalism's transformational potential. These insights emerge with particular clarity in Berman's analysis of Goethe's *Faust*, wherein the protagonist, as he nears the end of his life, focuses his energy on changing "not only his own life but everyone else's as well. Now he finds a way to act effectively against the feudal and patriarchal world: to construct a radically new social environment that will empty the old world out or break it down" (1988: 61). This effort takes the form of an audacious development project that would seem well-nigh impossible were it not for the fact that humans have been dreaming and building on a gigantic scale for centuries. Faust imagines huge projects to harness the energy of the sea, including harbors, canals, and dams, along with new settlements, towns, and cities upon the formerly barren wasteland (62). His work upon the land is a literal act of transformation, but one with a powerful metaphorical analogue so far as Faust himself is concerned. As Berman writes,

The romantic quest for self-development, which has carried Faust so far, is working itself out through a new form of romance through the titanic work of economic development. Faust is transforming himself into a new kind of man, to suit himself to a new occupation. In his new work, he will work out some of the most creative and some of the most destructive potentialities of modern life; he will be the consummate wrecker and creator, the dark and deeply ambiguous figure that our age has come to call "the developer" (1988: 62-3).

What enables Faust here (aside from Mephisto, of course) is a quintessentially modern sense of limitless possibility accompanied by the belief that the resources required for

transformation reside within the self. Consequently, Faust appears literally unable to imagine a circumstance under which even his most grandiose schemes could encounter a limitation.

Anything he can dream he can create: “He has finally achieved a synthesis of thought and action, used his mind to transform the world” (65). Anticipating Marx, Faust’s endeavor “show[s] what man’s activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades” (Marx, 1978: 476). Along the way, Faust evinces no concern for the verities of the past or the virtues of the present. No mere fetters, these verities and virtues mock the sensibility of his age by tacitly suggesting that some things might be exempted from modernity’s transformative logic. That Faust sees in material development a way out of the prison of history reveals much about the modern relationship to the past. In other words, for Faust the past is a both a metaphor for the sort of stasis that would impede his grand ambitions and a suggestion that some things cannot be changed. Yet Faust sees it as a spur to action. How could we know what must be changed (read: developed) were it not for the existence of the aged, the old, and the that-which-has-been? Rather than seek to eliminate the past, Faust regards it as a condition of possibility for the developmental activity that regards the past as little more than the raw materials of a new future.

For Faust, this activity doubles as a form of freedom that would have been impossible under feudal economic relations. This is the freedom to do, to work, and to create. As a result, “He has replaced a barren, sterile economy with a dynamic new one that will ‘open up space for many millions / To live, not securely, but free for action.’ It is a physical and natural space, but one that has been created through social organization and action” (Berman, 1988: 65). To be free for action: few phrases better capture the Lockean-liberal sensibility concerning the relationship

between personal effort and the resulting material circumstances. Faust simultaneously embodies the necessity of change integral to capitalism and the modern inclination to regard work as the route to economic independence and personal development. It is for these reasons that “Goethe sees the modernization of the material world as a sublime spiritual achievement; Goethe’s Faust, in his activity as ‘the developer’ who puts the world on its new path, is an archetypal modern hero” (Berman, 1988: 66). This heroism is not in service of the chivalric values of yesteryear but a positive redirection of human energies toward a future regarded as eminently susceptible to the transformative power of human labor.

This revolutionary energy caught Marx’s attention as well and it forms the centerpiece of his admiration for, and his critique of, the bourgeoisie. Although they were unwittingly producing their own gravediggers, Berman points out that Marx “sees in the dynamics of capitalist development—both the development of each individual and of society as a whole—a new image of the good life: not a life of definitive perfection, not the embodiment of prescribed static essences, but a process of continual, restless, open-ended, unbounded growth” (1988: 98). If in Faust’s case the developmental project required the assistance of a supernatural entity like Mephisto, by the time of Marx’s analysis these developmental forces have become a permanent feature of society. Planned obsolescence, a bewildering pace of change, and the need for constant innovation all turn out to be a deliberate part of the plan rather than a flaw in the design. The forces of change are so fundamental to the functioning of capitalism that even the periodic crises and upheavals which Marx believed prefigured the death of capitalism emerge as integral to its logic rather than as departures from it. One consequence of this is that “anyone who does not actively change on his own will become a passive victim of changes draconically imposed by those who dominate the market” (Berman, 1988: 94). Indeed, “Our lives are controlled by a



ruling class with vested interests not merely in change but in crisis and chaos” (95). And yet this can actually be a good thing, insofar as “Catastrophes are transformed into lucrative opportunities for redevelopment and renewal; disintegration works as a mobilizing and hence an integrating force” (95). Berman concludes that “for all Marx’s invective against the bourgeois economy, he enthusiastically embraces the personality structure this economy has produced” (96). Akin to Faust’s, that personality is recognizably modern in its appetite for, and ability to withstand, the maelstrom of transformational development brought into being by the productive activity of the bourgeoisie. It follows, then, that “What matters to [Marx] is the processes, the powers, the expressions of human life and energy: men working, moving, cultivating, communicating, organizing and reorganizing nature and themselves—the new and endlessly renewed modes of activity that the bourgeoisie brings into being” (Berman, 1988: 93).

### **Optimism and Progress, Stagnation and Decline**

Given the transformative potential internal to capitalism, it comes as little surprise that the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were characterized by optimism about the future and faith in the capacity of humans to bring that future into existence. Nowhere was this more true than in the United States, where paeans to the inevitability of an improved future read as if they had been penned by Faust himself. On the one hand, much of the faith in progress was articulated in the destinarian terms that had been common to the American style of imagining community since the arrival of the Pilgrims. Herbert Croly remarked in 1909 that “Americans were always ‘anticipating and projecting a better future’” (in Shafer, 1950: 430). Though “This faith might falter . . . from 1865 down to 1940 neither war nor depression stilled the belief that the future would be better. The mood of literate Americans was generally voiced in Lincoln’s hope at the

gloomiest moment of the Civil War that the American nation would witness a ‘new birth of freedom,’ and they would add of a new birth of almost everything else” (Shafer, 1950: 430).

Walt Whitman exclaimed that the United States was creating a “race of perfect men, women, and children grandly developed in body, emotions, heroism and intellect—not a class so developed but the general population” (in Shafer, 1950: 433). Woodrow Wilson in 1912 believed the United States was going “to climb the slow road to . . . an upland where the air is fresher . . . whence, looking back . . . we shall see at last that we have fulfilled our promise to mankind” (in Shafer, 1950: 435).

On the other hand, destinarian sentiments such as these don’t fully convey the sense in which direct human intervention in the making of the future also animated the American belief in progress. It was not, in other words, mere coincidence, that the United States was also the home of some of the most impressive feats ever accomplished by the bourgeoisie. From a certain point of view, the entire American experience could be read as one long confirmation of the transformative potential of human labor power embodied by Faust. In the United States, “Material plenty, product of science and technology, meant rising spirals of prosperity and of national power. Here, in the triumph of industrial capitalism, was progress that could be measured, in miles of railroad built, in tons of steel forged, in billions of dollars accumulated. Machines—‘engines of democracy’—became symbols of America’s advance” (Chambers, 1958: 199). Along with such advances came the sense of duty to lead, and such leadership was readily viewed as an extension of the arc of progress via work. Accordingly, “The American mission to lead the world in the paths of progress seemed to be justified by the good works of nineteenth-century America” (Chambers, 1958: 200). Growth and improvement were not only natural and within the ambit of human ability, they also found divine sanction. In the words of an early 20<sup>th</sup>-

century social gospel leader, “Man is called in the providence of God to build on earth the city of God. There are no necessary evils. There are no insoluble problems. Whatever is wrong cannot be eternal, and whatever is right cannot be impossible” (in Chambers, 1958: 200).

The result was a happy marriage of the economic, the political, and the supernatural. Because progress was a transcendent force, transformation could be viewed as always trending in a positive direction. Setbacks like the Depression were not only temporary but aberrant, a momentary jolt to the system whose origins owed nothing to the nature of the system itself. From this arose a belief in the virtues of staying the course, specifically with respect to the capitalist mode of production which by the 19<sup>th</sup> century had become a global force. Consequent upon this logic was the belief that “Evil arose, not out of technology, but out of the failure of man to keep pace with accelerating changes in the economic sphere” (Chambers, 1958: 216). Said technology “guaranteed that the ‘monstrous offenses’ of ‘plague, famines, mass hysteria, superstitions, fanaticisms’ would be dispelled [and] gave assurance of a ‘decent life, a life of air and light and chosen food and education and recreation and length of years’” (Chambers, 1958: 215). Only from within this logic can we make sense of a public opinion poll in *Fortune Magazine* at the end of the 1930s which revealed that “72 per cent of the American people still thought that the great age of economic opportunity and expansion lay ahead and only 13 per cent thought such an age was past” (Shafer, 1950: 449).

And so we come face to face with one of the central paradoxes of capitalism. On the one hand, the relentless forces of upheaval and transformation force everyone to innovate simply to stay in business and threaten to undermine tomorrow whatever was accomplished today. As Berman points out, “Our lives are controlled by a ruling class with vested interests not merely in change but in crisis and chaos” (1988: 95). On the other, the great liberatory potential of these

upheavals insofar as they reflect but also invite the unleashing of human productive energy in a way that frees modern humans from the fetters of the past. Because of this “Catastrophes are transformed into lucrative opportunities for development and renewal; disintegration works as a mobilizing and hence an integrative force” (Berman, 1988: 95). This latter circumstance leads to the aforementioned optimism and to the faith in the power of human industry to remake the future in our own image. As is well known, Marx himself was an optimist insofar as he thought this remaking of the future would ultimately spell the end of capitalism as the “spectre of Communism” was progressively made real by the revolutionary energy of the proletariat.

Marshall Berman captures the sentiment when he observes that

The one specter that really haunts the modern ruling class, and that really endangers the world it has created in its image, is the one thing that traditional elites (and, for that matter, traditional masses) have always yearned for: prolonged social stability. In this world, stability can only mean entropy, slow death, while our sense of progress and growth is our only way of knowing for sure that we are alive. To say that our society is falling apart is only to say that it is alive and well (1988: 95).

From this point of view, prolonged stability represents the victory of the past over the future in a manner at odds with some of the most basic premises and promises of modern life.

Yet perhaps things are not quite as Faust, Marx, and Berman would have them. Perhaps the incessant transformation wrought by the bourgeoisie does not, in fact, generate the kinds of dramatic change envisioned by Marx. Maybe the optimism generated by the belief in constant change is but one more palliative upon which moderns rely as a means of coping with a yet more basic fact: that for all of capitalism’s transformative energy, very little about the fundamental nature of capitalist society ever actually changes. The state, for example, remains “but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,” just as Marx pointed out in the *Communist Manifesto* all the way back in 1848 (Marx, 1978: 475). The concentration of capital, wherein small producers are absorbed by their larger and more efficient competitors,

continues apace. Ownership of the means of production retains its distinguishing characteristic as well: a few own, the vast majority work. Finally, the extraction of surplus value in the form of profit and wealth accumulation proceeds as it ever has, with the result that the ruling economic class of one country bears striking resemblance not only to its counterpart in another but to its predecessors stretching back generations.<sup>2</sup> Rather than melting into air, all that is solid actually continues to solidify.

I thus wish to argue that just as not all change represents a step in the direction of the downfall of the bourgeoisie (*pace* Marx), not all transformation is indicative of, or leads to, changes in the material circumstances of those who undergo it. In fact, many of the transformations we see nowadays are of a sort also identified by Marx, i.e., change for change's sake. This characterization oversimplifies things somewhat given that economic development has the ulterior motive of exploiting existing markets or creating new ones. But therein lies the point: the restless and transformative energy of capitalism so lauded by Berman occurs almost entirely in the superstructure as a consequence of requirements within the base that have now been in place for at least two centuries and which show no signs of going away. Among the many of these requirements that could be singled out, surely the profit motive must rank as the most important. The vast revolutions in personal computing, handheld technology, and social media that have occurred over the past thirty years or so have indeed been transformative. But no one, apart perhaps from a few technology evangelists here and there, believes these innovations were pursued with any intent apart from their profit-making possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Things remain as ever they have been, and are even getting worse given what we know about income inequality in the

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<sup>2</sup> According the Economic Mobility Project, “43 percent of Americans raised at the bottom of the income ladder remain stuck there as adults, and 70 percent never even make it to the middle” (“Moving On Up,” 1).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the iPhone. The story of the invention of the iPhone is long and has been told many times. The short version—and one that highlights the importance of market forces—is Manjoo (2012).

United States. As Berman correctly points out, capitalism has much revolutionary *potential*. But even he somewhat misses the point when he asks rhetorically “If the good life is a life of action, why should the range of human activities be limited to those that are profitable?” (1988: 94). The answer is because capitalism recognizes as legitimate no activities other than those which generate profit. Because of this, whatever revolutionary potential capitalism may possess, it is far from revolutionizing the lives of the vast majority of those who must live it.

A brief look at some of the data gives a sense of the situation. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Economic Mobility Project, most Americans born at the bottom of the income ladder never reach the middle rung. Specifically, “66% percent of those raised in the bottom of the wealth ladder remain on the bottom two rungs themselves, and 66% of those raised in the top of the wealth ladder remain on the top two rungs.” In addition, “only 4% of Americans make it all the way from the bottom to the top, while only 8% ever fall from the top all the way to the bottom” (“Pursuing the American Dream,” 2). While the Great Recession of 2007-2009 took a significant toll on virtually everyone, the wealthy have had a far better time of it as the world’s economy has begun to recover. Between 2009 and 2011, “the mean net worth of households in the upper 7% of the wealth distribution rose by an estimated 28%, while the mean net worth of households in the lower 93% dropped by 4%” (“An Uneven Recovery, 2009-2011,” 1). Those same households in the upper 7% also “saw their aggregate share of the nation’s overall household wealth pie rise to 63% in 2011, up from 56% in 2009” (“An Uneven Recovery, 2009-2011,” 2). Perhaps even more distressing, “The total stock of wealth in the U.S. increased \$5.0 trillion from 2009 (\$35.2 trillion) to 2011 (\$40.2 trillion); *all of these aggregate gains, and more, went to households in the upper 7%*” (“An Uneven Recovery, 2009-2011,” 8; emphasis mine). Part of this rise in wealth inequality is attributable to where the wealthy keep their money,

namely in stocks and bonds whose values increased substantially as markets recovered, compared to where the non-wealthy keep their wealth, namely in the still-anemic housing market. Therein lies part of the point insofar as the members of Marx's infamous bourgeoisie are not just owners of the means of production but monopolists over the fruits of that production in the form of passive income-generating assets such as stocks and bonds. As they ever have been, the bourgeoisie between 2009 and 2011 "were much more likely to own the assets that rose the most in value" ("An Uneven Recovery, 2009-2011," 9).

The American Political Science Association weighed in on the issue of wealth and income inequality in a manner that bears on the argument being advanced here. Their 2004 Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy noted that "Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow" ("American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality," 1). This circumstance calls to mind Marx's earlier-cited claim concerning the state's role as manager of the affairs of the bourgeoisie. According to APSA, "Recent research strikingly documents that the votes of U.S. Senators far more closely correspond with the policy preferences of each senator's rich constituents than with the preferences of the senator's less-privileged constituents. Wealthier constituents from the top of the income distribution appear to have had almost three times more influence on their senators' votes than those near the bottom" ("American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality," 14). The upshot, they concluded, is that "Our government is becoming less democratic, responsive mainly to the privileged and not a powerful instrument to correct disadvantages or to look out for the majority" ("American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality," 18). Since the publication of APSA's report, the Supreme Court, in its *Citizens*

*United* decision of 2010, lifted restrictions on independent campaign expenditures by both non-profit and for-profit corporations, labor unions, and other associations. To the surprise of no one, the 2014 mid-term elections were not only the most expensive in American history but also saw the record levels of independent campaign contributions and the presence of so-called “dark money,” or contributions by organizations not required to disclose the identity of their contributors (OpenSecrets.org).

The “transformation” that is the recovery from the Great Recession is therefore not “change” for the vast majority. Or, to be somewhat more accurate, the change that has occurred has almost exclusively benefitted those at the top of the income distribution. According to the Economic Policy Institute, “from 2009 to 2012, the top 1 percent’s incomes grew faster than the incomes of the bottom 99 percent in every state except West Virginia. In 39 states, the majority of income gains after the Great Recession accrued to the top 1 percent. And in 17 of these states, the top 1 percent captured 100 percent of income growth” (Price, 2015). In addition, “Even in the 10 states with the smallest income gaps, the top 1 percent earned between 14 and 19 times the income of the bottom 99 percent in 2012” (Price, 2015). Given the zero-sum logic of capitalist accumulation, the capture of the fruits of the economic recovery by those at the top of the income distribution had to come at the expense of those in the lower- and middle-income brackets. And sure enough, “Since the late 1970s, wages for the bottom 70 percent of earners have been essentially stagnant, and between 2009 and 2013, real wages fell for the entire bottom 90 percent of the wage distribution. Even wages for the bottom 70 percent of four-year college graduates have been flat since 2000, and wages in most STEM occupations have grown anemically over the past decade” (Mishel, 2015). Conversely, the top one percent of earners saw their average annual pay increase by 137 percent between 1979 and 2013, while pay for the bottom 90 percent



of earners increased a mere 15 percent during the same time period (Economic Policy Institute, 2015). Wages for young college graduates are essentially where they were in 1989, while CEO pay is now almost 300 times greater than the workers they manage (Economic Policy Institute, 2015).

In light of data such as these, it would be surprising if the optimism that has characterized the American temperament for so long was not at least somewhat negatively impacted. Such has begun to be the case recently, as evinced by public opinion surveys that show a noticeable transformation in Americans' perceptions of the economy and of their own economic prospects. In 2011, for example, 59 percent of respondents thought it would be harder for their children to climb the economic ladder, up thirteen percent from 2009. The percentage of parents who believed their kids' standard of living would be higher than their own declined from 62 percent to 47 percent in the same period (Mellman Group, 2011: 2). A *New York Times* poll in December of 2014 found that only 64 percent of respondents said they still believed in the American Dream, the lowest percentage in almost twenty years. Despite measurable improvements in the economy as a whole, nearly six in ten respondents reported their own household financial situation as staying the same. More than seventy-five percent said they were worried about having enough money for retirement (Sorkin, 2014). They have good reason to be. As reported by the *New York Times* in January of 2015, the American middle class has been shrinking for almost fifty years. Specifically, the percentage of American households earning between \$35,000 and \$100,000 annually has declined from 53 percent in the 1960s to 43 percent today. Until 2000, this reduction occurred because families were moving up the income distribution ladder. But since then, the opposite reason has prevailed: more American households have moved downward (Searcey, 2015).

## **Pessimism: Coping with Non-Change in an Era of Stagnation**

As a philosophical position, pessimism has suffered from misunderstandings based either on colloquial definitions of the word in which the pessimist is taken to be the moody, glass-half-full type, or on certain well-known philosophers whose version of pessimism ended in a weary resignation from the world (Arthur Schopenhauer is typically the example here). But pessimism has a whole other meaning and history that uniquely qualify it as a response to the conditions of late-modern capitalism as described in this essay. If political and economic stagnation is indeed the rule for the vast majority, and if the transformative energy of capitalism exhausts itself on superstructural change designed to enable the few to extract surplus value from the many, then perhaps the optimism of the American Dream and various other faiths in the meliorability of the human condition are both a hindrance and a symptom. A hindrance in the sense of diverting attention from structural economic forces which cause the very stagnation and exploitation to which the optimistic outlook is supposedly a response, and a symptom insofar as optimism betrays a faith in the power of human activity to effect the sort of changes so prized by Faust and so well analyzed by Marx and Berman. Pessimism does not so much deny this power as ask us to take seriously the possibility that optimism on its behalf may have been rendered illegitimate by the economic forces that this activity brought into being. Perhaps we have reached a stage in the development of capitalism wherein a different orientation to our circumstances would be more appropriate. My claim is that pessimism is that orientation.

So far as rescuing pessimism from colloquial definitions and weary philosophers is concerned, the work of Joshua Dienstag (2006) stands out. As he puts it, “the pessimists have been concerned to locate the best path toward freedom in a political environment that presents

the individual with a landscape whose basic features are well beyond his or her control” (2006: *xi*). As this essay has tried to demonstrate, that absence of control is one of the hallmarks of the present age and thus a situation in which optimism may no longer be the appropriate response. Pessimism asks us to abandon the liberal faith in a gradual improvement of the human condition and to “grapple with the possibility that such a melioration cannot be expected.” Instead, “we must make do with who and what we are” (2006, *xi*). The pessimistic conception of who and what we are differs significantly from accounts of the human condition common to liberalism, socialism, and pragmatism and thus offers the beginnings of an explanation as to how pessimism constitutes a response to the conditions of late-modern capitalism.

As indicated, one of the hallmarks of the optimistic outlook is a faith in progress, a faith that may be as old as philosophy itself given its indebtedness to Socrates and Plato. As Nietzsche argues, “Socrates is the archetype of the theoretical optimist whose belief that the nature of things can be discovered leads him to attribute to knowledge and understanding the power of a panacea, and who understands error to be inherently evil” (1999: 74). The link here between the human ability to understand the nature of things *and* the ability to improve those things is clear. For once we know how things work, we can engineer them for the better. Implied here is a subsidiary belief: that the application of human reason is not responsible for making things worse. Things may get worse, but they do so of their own accord. If they improve, from Socrates’ point of view at least, then that can be attributed to the use of human reason (and if things stay the same that’s fine too since reason is its own reward).<sup>4</sup> Socrates’ dedication to the examined life is structured by the assumption is that “there *must be* an answer to our fundamental questions, even if we have not found it yet, and that this answer will deliver us from suffering”

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<sup>4</sup> Of course not all theories of progress are indebted to the application of human reason. Hegel’s dialectic of history, for example, proceeds quite independently of what anyone thinks about it.

(Dienstag, 2006: 34). To believe anything less is to succumb to the superstition occasioned by custom, the instincts, or Sophistry.

Pessimism counters this faith not with predictions of doom and decline but instead with a different set of expectations. Which is to say, pessimism “does not simply tell us to expect less. It tells us, in fact, to expect nothing” (Dienstag, 2006: 5). This is not the expectation of nothing that proceeds from a desire not to be disappointed when our hopes are thwarted. It is instead “the negation, and not the opposite, of theories of progress,” one that proceeds from a disenchanting view of the philosophical bases upon which faith in progress rests (Dienstag, 2006: 18). One of the most important of these bases is a linear conception of time, which Dienstag convincingly shows to be a distinctively modern understanding of time but also one upon which notions of progress and optimism are heavily dependent. For if it were the case that time proceeded cyclically, the sorts of innovations that are taken as evidence of progress in the optimistic spirit would in principle be limited by the nature of whatever force led to the endless repetition of events. For example, because of his (comparatively) circular view of time, “When Aristotle gave an inventory of the various possible political regimes, he did not expect that new ones might appear in the future, as someone who lists the four seasons does not expect to learn of a fifth” (Dienstag, 2006: 10). Repetition more likely begets more of the same rather than the sorts of change to which theories of optimism are so beholden.

It should be underscored that pessimism does not simply reject a linear notion of time in favor of a cyclical one. Pessimism is just as much a child of modernity as is optimism. The difference, as aforesaid, concerns the nature of the expectations that proceed from a linear accounting of time. As Dienstag (2006: 18) points out, “Unlike a cyclical account, where the pattern of history is essentially pre-given, pessimism is historical in the modern sense: change

occurs, human nature and society may be profoundly altered over time, *just not permanently for the better*” (emphasis mine). It is, we might say, a longer-term view of history that acknowledges that every era sees itself as the pinnacle of historical development but yet lacks the yardstick by which it could definitively claim its superiority over all others. Pessimism acknowledges that much has *changed*, but remains skeptical that change can be as readily assimilated to progress as its promoters would have us believe. Perhaps, in paraphrase of Shakespeare, “the history of humanity is but an aimless story, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing more than an inexhaustible source of restless energy and ambition” (Portis, 2008: 73). If that’s the case—and we can surely admit that there is much evidence to suggest it to be so—then an ethic of optimistic progress is bound to be ill-suited to the task of coping with a world in which the things of greatest significance to our lives are mired in stasis. In other words, the thing that distinguishes us from the animals, namely our capacity to work collectively to free ourselves from the irrationalities of nature (or what Marx would call our “species being”), has become the alienated labor so common to the modern experience of production. Daily, monthly, yearly we toil. Individually or collectively, we look back upon our labors and hope for signs of something we might call progress, yet seek in vain the reference points through which we could be assured of its occurrence. Little wonder, then, that we fetishize commodities in the manner so powerfully analyzed by Marx. The rapidity of technological innovation and the clear distinction between yesterday’s model and today’s satisfy our need for progress and reinforce our belief that things are getting better all the time.

Pessimism, by contrast, seeks a more earnest engagement with the price we pay not just for our frenzied pursuit of the latest technological enhancement but with the more serious psychological burden we’re forced to bear when optimistic expectations are countered by the

implacable realities of stasis or even decline. Indeed, “We cannot, the pessimists argue, separate the material and intellectual achievements that the accumulation of experience makes possible from the costs such an accumulation imposes. What optimistic philosophies depict simply as a growth of ability and power is, to all the pessimists, the cause of much human suffering and, to some of them, the source of a certain moral decrepitude as well” (Dienstag, 2006: 32). To acknowledge this point is not necessarily to impugn technological innovation, though it could (and perhaps should) lead to a greater level of skepticism concerning the virtues claimed on its behalf.<sup>5</sup> This is all the more true given the aforementioned extent to which transformation is not change and to which change is not the same thing as progress. A pessimistic approach therefore confronts the logic of “the optimists who claim that the increase in human mental and technological abilities will inevitably produce a society of happier, freer individuals” with the competing claim that this “is a false promise, one without foundation in experience or theory” (Dienstag, 2006: 18). If freedom is to be understood as Marx would have it (i.e., the freedom gained when we are liberated from the irrationalities of nature through work), then the kinds of dependence upon labor endemic to capitalism cannot be reconciled with the versions of progress and freedom promoted by optimistic philosophical positions.

Though this may at first sound like an extreme claim, it proceeds from an additional dimension of pessimism involving our consciousness of time. While the shift from cyclical to linear accounts of time was important for reasons discussed above, that development would obviously mean little were humans unaware of time’s passage. For the pessimists, our consciousness of the passage of time is a significant dimension of what makes optimism possible and pessimism necessary. So far as optimism is concerned, “As time became less a matter of

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<sup>5</sup> One could, in other words, pause to reflect on the weirdness of a situation in which the planet is slowly roasting to death while the best and brightest minds are dedicated to the production of frivolities like Pinterest and Snapchat.

heavenly revolutions and more a matter of secular sequences, the idea of a long-term direction or trend to human history became increasingly conceivable” (Dienstag, 2006: 14). Yet it is precisely the notion of a “longer term” or a trend to time’s passage that also makes time consciousness a burden, and this burden forms part of the basis of philosophical pessimism. The contrast with animals helps illustrate the point. As Nietzsche argues in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” animals live “unhistorically,” meaning they can form no concept of past or future. Forever stuck in an eternal present, they experience neither satisfaction or regret about the past nor can they hope for, or worry about, the future (Dienstag, 2006: 20). By contrast, because humans are conscious of the passage of time, they experience a set of existential ills unknown even to the other higher primates. Yes it’s the case that “Animals, like humans, lose whatever it is they possess every moment. But only humans feel the pain of that loss, since only human consciousness retains a sense of these things as past” (Dienstag, 2006: 23). Nor does our ability to hope for an improved future help solve the problem. Indeed, it makes it worse, “since most of our hopes are bound to be disappointed, and those that are fulfilled are disfulfilled in the next moment as the objects of our hopes slip into the past” (Dienstag, 2006: 23). For humans, at least, time is the great negator, a force that threatens to undermine all that we have strived to achieve as successive developments consign all previous ones to the dustbin of history.

Still worse, “consciousness of time means consciousness of death” (Dienstag, 2006: 21). Every moment of every day is one step closer to the end, a circumstance sufficiently unsettling as to make it understandable why so few humans actively spend time contemplating it.<sup>6</sup> The inevitability of death imposes significant psychological burdens on humans, and primary among

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<sup>6</sup> To their detriment, or so says Seneca (1969). In *Letters from a Stoic*, he recommends actively pondering one’s own death, partly as a means of eliminating the fear of it and partly as a means of coming to terms with the inevitability of the Fate that governs our lives.

these is the need to make life meaningful. However fictitious it may be from a grand cosmological perspective, a meaningful life can serve as a form of this-worldly redemption by offering a sense of satisfaction that, though it ended in death, the life in question was not lived in vain. Still, foregrounding our consciousness of death and the burdens it imposes on humans runs the risk of sounding like the colloquial, moody version of pessimism discarded earlier. But as Dienstag shows, this is the conclusion more often drawn by optimists and hardly ever reached by pessimists. As he points out (2006: 22), “To say that our lives are always on the way to death is not at all to say that they are pointless, but simply to set out the parameters of possibility for our existence. Pessimism may warn us to acknowledge our limitations—but it does not urge us to collapse in the face of them. Death is merely the ultimate reminder that we do not control the conditions of our existence and are not ever likely to.”

This “reminder” is certainly among the more existentially significant dimensions of our time consciousness, but it has a beneficial effect that can be realized well before a person ceases to live. In other words, one of the unavoidable results of time consciousness is also an awareness of ceaseless, inevitable change. This, furthermore, is why pessimism emerges as an appropriate response to the conditions of late modern capitalism. If it be the case that the sorts of change we endure are not transformative in the manner dramatized by Goethe’s *Faust*, and if it’s therefore the case that we err in optimistically seeking (or even seeing) progress therein, an alternative posture is called for. Drawing on the work of Giacomo Leopardi, Dienstag uses the example of fashion to exemplify the point. As he writes (2006: 22), “The change of fashions that Leopardi describes is . . . emblematic to the pessimist of the ordinary nature of temporal, nonprogressive existence: *constant change to no particular effect*” (emphasis mine). As it would surely be absurd to think of changes in the realm of fashion as being “progressive” in any meaningful



sense, the pessimist merely asks that we extend this observation to change in general. The value of a life, or of existence more generally, is not redeemed by its having obeyed a *telos* or by its having been dragged from the shadows of ignorance into the light of knowledge. Rather the opposite is the case, because “For creatures condemned to an earthly existence, the acquisition of knowledge about their fate does not, as Plato thought, arrive as a gift, but as a terrible penalty” (Dienstag, 2006: 27). Pessimism is an orientation that takes that penalty seriously and asks us to live not merely in spite of it but—in some variations, at least—with a position of gratitude toward it.

How, for the pessimists, does one accomplish this? For starters, pessimism does not typically find expression in some sort of governmental structure or ideal social program. As Dienstag points out, pessimism “is (for the most part) a philosophy of personal conduct, rather than public order” (2006: 7). One dimension of this personal conduct is found in Nietzsche’s rejection of otherworldly comforts, among which is included the optimistic faith in progress. In Nietzsche’s words, “You ought to learn the art of this-world comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may someday dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front” (in Dienstag, 2006: 39). In parallel with Nietzsche’s (1973: 96) claim that “There are no moral phenomena at all, only moral interpretation of phenomena,” we might say that there are no other-worldly comforts, only other-worldly interpretations of comforts, meaning pleasing fictions, palliatives, and other coping mechanisms that Marx included under the category of false consciousness. Pessimism, by contrast, insists on finding value in existence “neither because it constitutes progress nor because it constitutes an appropriate punishment for our failings” but because of “the continual reappearance of novelty that is the consequence, along with constant

decay and death, of a temporal existence” (Dienstag, 2006: 39-40). As Dienstag points out, this is the notion of “natality” later invoked by Hannah Arendt. Though humans are uniquely cognizant of their own deaths, so too are they aware of their births and of the significance of birth as a metaphor for renewal. The presence of this sort of newness potentially leads to an appreciation of the relentlessness of transformation, even as that transformation fails to lead to change in any meaningful sense. Change need neither be goal-oriented nor progressive in order to lead to an appreciation of existence, up to and including the ability to laugh at it. Laughter here would signify precisely the enthusiastic and grateful embrace of existence noted above.

Through this brief consideration of the ironic embrace of existence on the basis of its ever-recurrent newness, we’re returned to a central theme of pessimism highlighted earlier concerning expectations. Which is to say, “The pessimist expects nothing—thus he or she is more truly open to every possibility as it presents itself” (Dienstag, 2006: 40). The contrast with optimism is stark and affords a clearer sense of why pessimism in the face of stagnation may be the more appropriate response. This is because “A pessimist can recognize and delight in the fact that we live in a world of surprises—surprises that can only strike the optimist as accidents and mishaps, disturbing as they do a preordered image of the world’s continuous improvement” (Dienstag, 2006: 40). This is what Dienstag refers to a “spontaneity, or futurity,” an outlook that “envisions a democracy of moments for an individual who can neither escape time but is not imprisoned by it either” (2006: 41). Pessimism thus amounts to a judgment about the value of life based on the importance of the unexpected and the forms of self-conduct this entails.

As a response to the transformation-that-is-not-change argument advanced earlier in this paper, the pessimistic response is likely to strike some as too passive in the face of widespread economic inequality and injustice and thus not especially amenable to challenging or reforming

that injustice. But I'm not sure if that conclusion necessarily follows. The possibilities for politics, in other words, are not monopolized by an optimistic outlook that expects change to follow in the wake of activism, regulation, and opposition. The Occupy movement of 2011-12 is a case in point. Literally *nothing* about the economic environment of late-modern capitalism changed as a result of the occupation of Zuccotti Park in Manhattan and similar actions by activists around the globe. But perhaps therein lies part of the point. By revealing that the political sphere is no longer the one in which the most significant decisions impacting our lives are made, Occupy Wall Street at the very least forced us to confront the implacability of existing economic arrangements. The ever-recurrent newness of transformations that are not change may be all we have, and we may not be able to control that. Pessimism suggests there's a virtue in recognizing that circumstance and it sets us the task of embracing existence despite our lack of control. That could be a political posture as useful as any inspired by an optimistic faith in progress and the efficacy of human activity.

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