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# THE MIDWAY REVIEW

*A Journal of Essays*



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*The Midway Review* publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Spring 2017 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult [midwayreview.uchicago.edu](http://midwayreview.uchicago.edu).

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Letters to the editor may be addressed to [themidwayreview@uchicago.edu](mailto:themidwayreview@uchicago.edu). We ask that letters be limited to 350 words.

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*Volume 12, Issue 2 — Winter 2017*

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fighting for subject-hood itself.*

*Knocked flat on our backs, staring up at this loss of power, humans  
retaliate and attempt to regain control at the expense of understanding.*

*Useless yet indispensable, intellectuals cannot steer the course of history, but  
their position at a critical remove from society can grant them uncommon views  
into present unfreedom.*

*One of the greatest things about the Chicago education is  
that it teaches the limits of partisanship.*

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## Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

While probing for new, dazzling insights on the age-old questions raised by Plato and Aristotle, or while guzzling down a third cup of coffee the night before the deadline for a term paper, each aspiring intellectual at the University of Chicago can't help but ask at some point, "Why should I care?" We at *The Midway Review* relish this moment. This is where genuine intellectual engagement begins.

The essays featured in this issue wrestle with ideas that their authors make worthy of consideration. Rosemarie Ho questions the ethical treatment of race, love, and gender in her review of Anne F. Garréta's *Sphinx*, a classic work of experimental Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) literature. Saylor Soinski challenges us to question humanity's exceptional position in the universe by unveiling the point of contact between human and animal as a revelation of human vulnerability. Former Editor-in-Chief of *The Midway Review* Jon Catlin weighs in on the role of the intellectual in the age of Trump by drawing wisdom from Adorno as he pursues a Ph.D in modern European intellectual history at Princeton University. Finally, Hansong Li interviews political theorist and public servant Kenneth Weinstein, graduate of the University of Chicago (B.A.), the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (D.E.A.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.) on the influence of history, politics, and locality on the expression of academic life.

We love the heart and spirited curiosity that animate each of these pieces. We hope they will provide you with fruitful food for your thoughts.

—The Editors

## Shuffling Towards Love: On Anne F. Garréta's *Sphinx*

Rosemarie Ho

*...where I does not exist, nor you,  
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,  
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.*

—Pablo Neruda, Sonnet XVII

I first came across *Sphinx* when the local bookstore put the slim novella on display as part of their celebrations for Women in Translation Month. "A LANDMARK LITERARY EVENT, the blurb declared, "A MODERN CLASSIC OF FEMINIST AND LGBT/QUEER LITERATURE". It is an odd choice of words, given that the story turns out to be none of those things—it had no aspirations to be a text easily slotted into nearly partitioned off categories or a list of hashtags that would appeal to the consumerist tendencies of the #woke. The central conceit of the book is that the two main protagonists, *je* and A\*\*\*, are never gendered or sexed; had this book been written in English within the last decade, in our age of gender-inclusivity and promotion of a multitude of gender-neutral pronouns, this attempt would seem almost juvenile.

But *Sphinx* was—is—the call to revolt from within a language which requires the indication of the subject's sex in order to make grammatical sense, and which assumes the masculine gender to be the neutral form for nouns. In French, to describe a subject is to immediately gender it: as the translator Emma Ramadan points out, Garréta could never have simply written that *je* went somewhere without already gendering the act of walking through being *je* (in *je suis allé* versus *je suis allée*, one supposes the latter sashays while the

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former marches). What the text does is not so much pointing out the sexist nature of the French language, as revealing the reader's biases surrounding action, thought, occupations and gender as well as the human impulse to fracture the Other, and reconfiguring it into something comprehensible through the lens of difference. For Garréta, the point of writing and reading *Sphinx* is to unpack and destabilize the notion of (sexual) difference itself:

*[What is hegemonic in discourse is] sexual difference with a capital D, the Difference beyond all differences, the fundamental Difference which is so fundamental that it is the anthropological source of all differentiation, the foundation of the symbolic order, of social relations, and the very possibility of culture...If we touch, in one way or another, sexual difference, we are not far from the crisis in culture, the very collapse of civilization, the uneasiness within it...The experiment of Sphinx is to highlight the inanity of the secularization of this metaphysical difference.*<sup>1</sup>

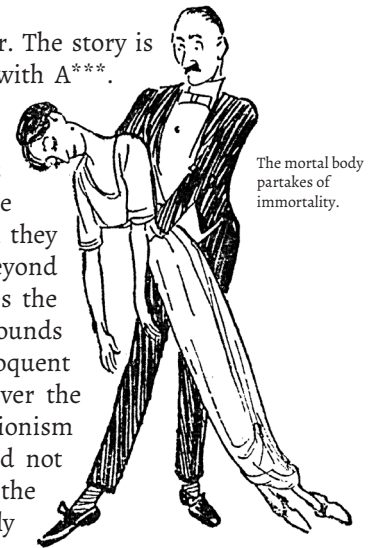
1. "Entretien avec Anne F. Garréta", <http://cosmogonie.free.fr/interview.html>, accessed January 26, 2016, translation mine.

Garréta's project is to show that the gendered binary of difference is a meaningless discursive (and pervasive) social concept: one can and should understand human experience without the dictates of gender; moreover, categorization itself is reductive, essentialist, a sort of epistemic violence. It is perhaps not surprising, however, that reviewers of the text readily imposed their readings of the characters in explicitly sexed ways when it first came out in 1986. A professor at the University of Winsor did not, for example, hesitate in calling *Sphinx* a love story between a young male intellectual and his "mindless Josephine Baker"<sup>2</sup>. No reviewer considered the possibility of *je* or A\*\*\* being non-binary or trans, and yet all agreed that it was a moving story about love and loss. No one occupied themselves with the ways in which Garréta was fighting for subjecthood itself.

As with texts associated with OULIPO (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, an experimental literary group that included Italo Calvino and Georges Perec), concerns with linguistic constraint guides the generation of plot and content. *Je*, as a studious theology student, only speaks in the extra-literary, high register, genderless *passé simple*. A\*\*\* is never truly individuated as a person so that they

2. Ralph Nelson, *World Literature Today*, Issue 61, No. 2, Spring 1987, Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma: p236-237.

do not have had to reveal their gender. The story is framed as a recollection of *je*'s time with A\*\*\*. The whole text is saturated with a self-obsessed focus on *je*'s suffering because of A\*\*\*'s non-existence in *je*'s life. *Je* is, in other words, insufferable in their pining for someone of whom they had never had any understanding beyond the physical in the first place. Besides the political act of writing out gender, this sounds like the average love story—the grandiloquent intellectual painting Annabel Leigh over the visage of Dolores Haze, the reductionism that accompanies lust for a body, and not for a being. Is it any wonder that the aforementioned professor exasperatedly asked in his review, "is A [sic] any more than a symbol of the enigmatic other (the riddle of the Sphinx)?"



The mortal body partakes of immortality.

Yet A\*\*\* is not just a signifier, but a body, albeit a gender indeterminate one. *Je*, due to the constraints of the novel, can only describe their love in body parts: the reader doesn't find herself wondering about the genitalia of the two lovers; she finds herself trying to put a face to a collection of lithe and slender limbs. The fixation of the reader is not necessarily on trying to understand A\*\*\* as a gendered or sexed being, but on the attempt to theorize a coherent, single subject—on filling in the ambiguous gaps that *je* leaves behind to parse why A\*\*\* was so loved by *je*. Some resort to attempting a gendered continuity of subject, and it is not hard to see why that is: the world that Garréta has so painfully constructed is not genderless. In French itself, the tables and chairs are unchangeably female, and the sun is always male; besides *je* and A\*\*\*, everyone is explicitly gendered and sexed, stereotype after stereotype, a Padre and a mother, a high-strung cabaret danseuse and a sleazy nightclub manager. *Je* acknowledges this vagueness in describing A\*\*\*:

*In the end, what I loved beyond all else: those hips, narrow and broad at the same time, those legs that I never knew how to describe except, mundanely, as slim and long. But it wasn't this that made them*

*desirable to me—when we made love, I couldn't stop caressing them, my lips against the inner thighs—it was something else, always something else, this indefinable something else where desire hides itself. Perhaps I was enticed by the slow motion of the dance, before my eyes, sublimely taking the body out of its rhythm.*<sup>3</sup>

3. Anne F. Garréta, *Sphinx*, trans. Emma Ramadan (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015), 84.

All this is gesturing towards an un-embodied body. A\*\*\* is hips and legs metonymized, a placeholder for the object of desire, body fragmented into intelligible yet generic parts for *je* to consume. A\*\*\* is not a person with distinct idiosyncrasies, physical or otherwise, just an “enigmatic, silent figure twisting to the extreme limit of dislocation in miraculous movements that were syncopated but not staccato...an immemorial fatality made into movement”<sup>4</sup>—and this accumulation of actions is attributed to the animated agent that is A\*\*\*. A\*\*\* is from the waist down human—unlike a sphinx—but only when A is in motion.

4. Garréta, *Sphinx*, 57–58.

A\*\*\* is aware of this, of course. Before tragedy strikes, A\*\*\* asks *je* how *je* sees them, and the only answer *je* could think of is: “I see you in a mirror.”<sup>5</sup> One could take *je* to be admitting that *je* has decidedly reified, ossified A\*\*\*, this luminous subject, into a sexualized object distanced from *je* (consider the Lacanian injunction that there is no sexual relationship, but individuals mediating pleasure from one another). Or one could interpret this to mean that *je* has used A\*\*\* to foreground *je*'s parsing of *je*'s own self. In this sense *je* is using the mirror as a way to consider *je* as a coherent, integrated subject, and A\*\*\* is a part of this identity-formation, but only as a blur at the periphery of *je*'s narcissistic gaze. In both cases, A\*\*\* is shattered into splinters, and reformulated in *je*'s image.

Yet this body, so beloved by *je*, is not only sexualized, but also explicitly raced. (A\*\*\*'s skin is



Man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute.

black, and “satiny...far superior to anything [*je* has] ever known”<sup>6</sup>.) Garréta makes it clear that A\*\*\* is of African-American origins, having grown up in Harlem and leaving her destitute single mother behind, so different from *je* (white, educated, graduate student in theology) in every facet of life imaginable (A\*\*\* performs in cabarets and likes to binge-watch soap operas). With the gender binary foreclosed, racial difference is made even more striking: *je*'s being in the world is mediated through contemplation and a distasteful reflection upon their surroundings, whereas A\*\*\*, being an exotic “attractive animal”<sup>7</sup> and exuding an eroticism, drags *je* from nightclub to nightclub. In the English translation, Ramadan avoids the problematic racial politics that permeate the novella in the original, side-stepping *les origines nègres* and *les Nord-Africains* and leaving in their place “working-class men”. What remains is still race refracted into a prism of distinct white privilege, and descriptions of a devastated Harlem that “projected the muffled but poignant impression of the end of the world”<sup>8</sup>. The raced subject is destroyed and consumed, even as sexual difference is shown to be artificially constructed. The sphinx of this novella may be gender-indeterminate, but it is fetishized beyond repair.

6. Garréta, 2.

7. Garréta, 37.

8. Garréta, 65.

What *Sphinx* ends up arguing is that people can only conceive of one another in terms of oppositions; if it's not gender or sex, as in the case of *je* and A\*\*\*, then it's race encoded in socioeconomic difference. If love has to be made comprehensible beyond the paradigm of overdetermined axioms about gender and sexual norms, then the beloved—a beloved, by definition, has to be non-generic—is reduced to the level of generalized biological functions. Love becomes moot when rendered in disembodied subjects, and objectification, unsurprisingly, ends in literal death. One can concede to Garréta's point that she never intended for *Sphinx* to be a text to demonstrate any ostensible Grand Idea about the inequities in social relations, but rather to “test a hypothesis” about gender.<sup>9</sup> Yet for a text to be so overtly political in its very axioms of construction, it is difficult to ignore the conclusions of the story, and continue to laud it unreservedly for its unsexed imaginary possibilities.

9. “Entretien avec Anne F. Garréta”.

I cannot bear reading a text that attempts to bracket the question of socially-determined modes of interaction in and with the world



that doesn't generate space for a subject-self that is construed as a body of color to experience love and being loved back. *Sphinx*, within its linguistic constraints, could not let A\*\*\* speak for themselves about their relationship to *je*; there is blunt, absorbing blackness and an abandoned city back in America, where people speak funny to the patronizing ear of a French native. As I read the book, I found myself wishing that A\*\*\* hadn't been so disposable to the narrative, that A\*\*\* hadn't been so ossified into the unreachable sphinx, their blackness acting as yet another metonymy for their relational difference to *je*. In short, I wished that I could impose a different reading onto the text, and let A\*\*\* *love*.

There's a scene in the book that comes close to demonstrating a dialogic interaction, where *je* and A\*\*\* decide to visit New York City as a way to mend the growing rifts in their relationship caused by their ostensibly fundamental incompatibility. Excited by this new, unknown city that functioned as a metonymy for A\*\*\* themselves, *je* horses around with A\*\*\*, and declares:

*After the subtle sensuality we had just shared, all the other times [we had made love] seemed like a laborious peccadillo. I concluded that making love without laughing was as bad as gifting a book written in a language the recipient does not know.*

*The obscurity of my metaphor perplexed A\*\*\*; already my more serious side was feeling neglected.*<sup>10</sup>

10. Garréta, 60-61.

Clearly *je*'s statement is close to complete absurdity, and one could see A\*\*\* being baffled by such an outlandish statement: what on Earth do you mean? Are you saying that our relationship has thus far been nothing but a chain of contentless hook-ups? Is it only here, in a city that you think hides the



How I wish, that wisdom could be infused by touch.

secrets of my past, that you could see me not as the object of your lust, but as a subject with its orientation in the world? Reading *Sphinx*, I was reminded of Alain Badiou's formulation of love, where

*love reaches out towards the ontological. While desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishistic manner, on particular objects, like breasts, buttocks and cock... love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into [life] thus disrupted and re-fashioned.*<sup>11</sup>

11. Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love* (New York: New Press, 2012), 21.

The re-fashioning of life itself happens *because* of the introduction of the other subject: the world is constructed anew from a de-centered perspective, where the beloved is incorporated into the infrastructure of understanding itself. Within this reconfiguration of relational dynamics, the question of difference itself is elided by the shifting of I/you into we. Garréta brought reified racial difference into the world-building of *je* and A\*\*\*, and *Sphinx* ends up being not about love that is independent of the overdetermination of the sexual binary, but about love that destroys its own prospects in the first encounter-meeting—when *je* sees A\*\*\*, and sees instead a generic lithe black body demonstrating a certain consumerist permissiveness.



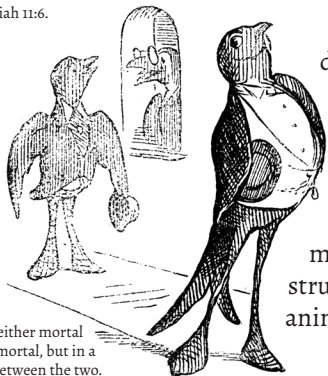
## Milk to Blood

Saylor Soinski

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Ronald Johnson catechizes, “Who placed us with eyes between a microscopic and telescopic world?”<sup>1</sup> With perception hovering amid unsettled bounds, our bodies also linger somewhere in between. A clover mite vaults across the expanse of my fingernail, yet I climb two flights of stairs to be level with the black tongue of a corralled giraffe: When we consider the animal, we must consider scale. Although comparatively few, those that outsize the human are profoundly consequential. They challenge our claims of human exceptionalism and guide us hand and tool, to build fences at best and cages at worst. We are uneasy when faced with the physical proof of our inferiority, and we hastily compensate with prideful claims of intelligence and dexterity. We hope to orchestrate encounters with these beings on our own terms, if at all, yet any brush with the world or the worldliness of these great creatures forces us to confront the stunning, transformative power of the animal.

2. Isaiah 11:6.



He is neither mortal nor immortal, but in a mean between the two.

beyond walls woven of metal, blurred but always appreciated. Jean-Christophe Bailly, driving at night on his suburban street, happens upon an uncaged animal as a deer breaks through the screen of trees running alongside him. Divine in its materiality, the deer grants Bailly “for an instant, that instant opening onto another world.”<sup>3</sup> As the woodland creature of nursery rhymes and childhood movies crashes through Bailly’s landscaped and paved oasis, it is he who transcends, “suspended like a day dream.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Jean-Christophe Bailly, *The Animal Side*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p3.

4. Ibid, 64.

However, Bailly remains enshrined within his car, untouchable, with his fingers wrapped around cold plastic. Although boundaries are bowed, the power dynamic remains asymmetrical as Bailly operates a personal machine in the sort of chance meeting that often ends in metal splattered with bestial blood—the deer slipping through to yet another world. Only vaguely aware of this distinction, he reveres the moment of touch, his eyes skimming the surface of the passing deer, turning to philosophy and poetics to crystallize his sentiments as he eulogizes an infinite Open lost to humankind. Something is lost, however, in this false equivalency of sight and corporeal touch. From the safety of the automobile, Bailly is not subject to the danger of encounter. The shift in power created at the moment of touch can leave you supine and breathless, ribs cracked and bruises spreading over your soft body like rotting fruit. Terra Rowe affirms the corporeality of this concern, writing, “In our touchability—our fleshiness, leafiness, or rockiness—we encounter the wild Other who, as wild Other, is beyond our control and thus dangerously free.”<sup>5</sup> Rendered as a means of maintaining dominion by our obsession with physical force, size is a critical factor in the human-animal interaction.

5. Jacob Erickson, “The Apophatic Animal: Toward a Negative Zoo-theological *Imago Dei*” in *Divin-animality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p98.

Knocked flat on our backs, staring up at this loss of power, humans retaliate and attempt to regain control at the expense of understanding; animals are forced to exist in spaces more specific and tangible than the conceptual realm. Physical confinement has become a condition of large animal existence from reserves to zoos to barns to factory farms. To be wild is to be bounded, relegated to those areas delimited by people. For large animals, these spaces resemble quarantine more closely—bidden to live amongst humans under the pretext of communion in the way that cats



6. Bailly, p. 41.

are permitted to curl up on our sofas and probiotics populate our yogurt. Bailly points to this difference, acknowledging that there is an evident distinction between “the relations we as large animals may have with those from which we have nothing to fear and with those that we may well fear.”<sup>6</sup> The influence of scale on fear of the contact zone situates those animals larger than humans in a unique position, although small creatures, even invisible pathogens, can still pose a threat. Our methods of coping with these organisms are distinct, oriented more often towards either avoidance or total elimination. The “dangerous freedom” invoked by Rowe becomes paradoxical for the large animal, as it functions as the very incentive for its internment.

While this confinement of the wild is in part defensive—as a self-justified preemptive measure—domestication of animals is often painted as an act of communion, building a pluriverse on coerced coexistence. Although now polluted by violence, an enduring gentleness exists as a holdover from a past era of more sympathetic shepherdry. While critical of domestication, Bailly, with his hushed breath perhaps still fogging up the window as he searches for flickers of life, finds hope in this gentleness, in the way that our “first impression” of those animals whose wildness has been constrained “is not a fantasy of domination ... [but] the sensation of harmony, of a peaceful possibility—a tranquil surge of the world into itself.”<sup>7</sup> It is in the realm of peaceful possibility that Donna Haraway resides, reflecting on her experience training her dog, Cayenne. Haraway portrays the training relationship as something far removed from enslavement and explicit expression of human control. The emphasis lies instead on reciprocity; both human and animal—each situated in their own power-laden histories—are “partners-in-the-making through the active relations of coshaping.”<sup>8</sup> It is fluid system in constant flux, where each being is constituted through mutuality in a way that softens the edges of “the other.”

8. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 208.

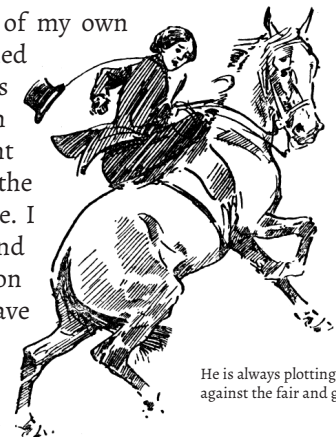
When we try to form a comparable relationship to that of this woman and her well-mannered dog with creatures that outweigh or

overtop us, we face a different challenge.<sup>9</sup> When our material fragility is exposed to animals more physically powerful than ourselves, the palpable consequences of touch become exceedingly real. Although confinement is most often inseparably intertwined with isolation, it is through this bondage that we manifest far greater potential for human-animal interaction. While large animals are consigned to particular spaces, in part to diminish human feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, confinement also contributes to the formation of a constructed, often dangerous, space of encounter. It is in this hazardous contact zone that some humans will risk trauma, or their very life, in exchange for the chance to share an instant of sublime, harmonious touch. Fingertips of shaking hands brush against unkempt fur in an anxious plea to regain the interspecies intimacy that was lost in the “break ... between milk and blood.”<sup>10</sup>

9. Ibid., p. 16.

10. Bailly, p. 64.

Over a life in this contact zone, I have looked up at the underside of the hooves of a rearing horse, and I have looked down at one’s head lying in my lap as I sat in tall pasture grasses, sighing breaths causing the reeds to sway like they were sharing in each exhalation. With the weight of only a small part of this enormous body resting so heavily on my folded legs, I recalled the sound of the bones in my left foot being crushed under an accidental and ill-fated misstep, unable to support a thousand pounds of animal. Through the years, I watched our difference in size diminish, but never disappear. The familiarity that comes with time and proximity remained colored by fear and incertitude. Any slip into overconfidence and laxity led unfailingly to a reminder of my own weaknesses. I have heard pained howls that I only found out hours later had been spilling from my own throat; I have been hurried into silent ambulances, sirens muted to indulge the animals who strongly prefer quietude. I have returned to the pasture, time and time again, in hopes of a collaboration that allows me to come closest I have ever been to peeking into the strange space of the animal world.



He is always plotting against the fair and good.

11. Haraway, p. 16. Donna Haraway speaks of the love between her and Cayenne as “a historical aberration,”<sup>11</sup> and now, two years removed from ten years on horseback where the word tripped off my tongue as I wrapped swollen hocks in faded red cloth and offered sweet crystal cubes in my open palm, miles away from conceptual considerations, I wonder aloud what that means. Last summer, in an act of impetuosity and perhaps desperation, I climbed from a fence onto the back of a horse with my fractured foot only half healed, my ligament separating again from my bone as I pushed my heels down into stirrups and leaned forward to lay my hand flat against the horse’s warm shoulder, an act of reassurance for us both. Limping more heavily the following morning, I was embarrassed by this sacrifice, somewhat inexplicable even to myself. Two days later, I did it again without hesitation.

I once met the only man in recorded history to train a cassowary—an ancient bird, six feet tall with talons to split you open and swallow your organs whole. This one has eaten her mate alive. I stand transfixed as I listen to him describe the years he spent alternating between her enclosure and a hospital bed, and I watch him stop

You yourself  
will not deny,  
Socrates, that  
your face is like  
that of a satyr.



speaking mid-sentence, holding perfectly still as the bird’s gaze shifts from the apple in his palm to his unprotected body. Later, I meet five women cradling tiger cubs, born in captivity and rejected by their mothers. They tell me how they cannot speak to their families or form human relationships until the tiger has grown, because the chances that coming home smelling like someone else will end in a hunt are too high. I ask one woman if it is worth it, and she only smiles, reaching instinctively for striped fur. It seemed wholly aberrational. If there is another word for this, I do not know it. Yet this is love. I struggle to reconcile this devotion with online images of a dentist kneeling behind a lifeless beast, with its regal mane in one hand and a crossbow in the other, and to reconcile this with wolves denatured into handheld dogs, their tiny gasping breaths inside leather purses.

When risk is met with the phenomenal reward of touch—stroking the sleeping face of the beast, or knowing in your body when hooves will become airborne, leaving you bonded with the animal and entirely unattached to any other point on earth for a few fleeting instants—what feels like clarity is clouded by the irony inherent in the encounter. Haraway’s sentimentalized domestication is consensual between two free beings who are historically situated yet, above all, companions. However, here equality and historical situation are mutually exclusive. The possibility of shaking loose the clinging grip on human exceptionalism, of loving the non-human, is only offered as the end result of a world history where the wild have been condemned to confinement and subjugation. As humans have colonized and dominated the planet, not only is the ideal of animal freedom unreached, but it no longer exists as an obvious perfection towards which to aspire. Is it the housecat who is free, living in the peaceful integration of its owner’s apartment? Or is it the tiger, spared of human contact but pacing alone behind a fence? In the horse, this distinction is obscured; the animal is designated its own space, yet in a world history of close interaction with the human. It is in the confinement of the large animal—simultaneously brought into and excluded from the world that has been claimed as human—that we see a contradiction: the desire to protect our human vulnerabilities vying with the desperate yearning to touch a part of the animal world.

## The Intellectual Under Trump: Between Solitude and Solidarity

Jon Catlin

Jon Catlin is a graduate of the College and former Editor-in-Chief of *The Midway Review*. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in modern European intellectual history at Princeton.

Professor Adorno," begins a 1969 interview with the German-Jewish critical theorist, which would turn out to be his last. "Two weeks ago, the world still seemed in order—"

"Not to me," Adorno interjects.<sup>1</sup>

To the intellectual falls the unhappy task of permanent dissatisfaction with the status quo. Theodor W. Adorno thus called his way of thought "the melancholy science." During his exile from Nazi Germany as a persecuted Jew twenty-five years earlier, Adorno had cited Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his "reflections from damaged life": "The life of the mind only attains its truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation."<sup>2</sup>

The weeks and months since the election of Donald Trump have been clouded by such a mood of intellectual desolation. What power can ideas have when all we see on the horizon is increasing violence—against our democracy, its laws, the most vulnerable members of our society, and our planet? Trump's undisguised abuse of power defies understanding and overwhelms reflection. Intellect itself seems paralyzed.

In my seminar the morning after the election we could do little but stare in silence. Professors were called upon not to impart new knowledge, but to teach to mourn. After 9/11, the



1. Theodor Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?" in *Language without Soil*, trans. and ed. Gerhard Richter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

2. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 15.

second "Where were you when...?" event of my generation will be the night Trump was elected. I was with friends, and the spectacularly wrong projections kept me in willful ignorance as I saw, live on television, one state after another fall. Finally, I saw my home state of Wisconsin—three or four states behind the Democratic "blue wall"—going for Trump by several points with well over half of the counties reporting as the clock approached midnight. At this I got up and went home, pretending not to have understood what I had seen until, the next morning, I was forced to.

At no point after the election did I feel fear, no doubt on account of my own privileges. Rather, I felt what I describe only now as intellectual defeat. Jacob Mikanowski, a fellow historian, perfectly captured my despondence in an essay in *The Point*:

*Three days on, it feels like an abyss has opened up. I thought I knew something, I thought I understood the world, and I didn't...I trusted polls, I trusted experts, I trusted insiders. I should have trusted my instinct as a son of exiles and grandson of refugees. I've spent half my life studying history and politics, and I feel as if it hasn't taught me anything. Social science assumes that a pattern governs human affairs. I think all we have is a wheel of fire. I've started to think that all history gives us is stories, stories that accumulate meaning like springs and burst through at the appointed time.<sup>3</sup>*

3. Jacob Mikanowski, "An Ill Wind," *The Point* (Nov. 2016).

After this utter failure of expert knowledge from the media, pollsters, academics, and politicians themselves, I had to erase and redraw the lines of my intellectual commitments.

I returned to the book that has influenced my thinking most profoundly, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, which Adorno wrote in exile in the United States shortly after realizing the full extent of what had happened at Auschwitz. For the first time I found myself identifying less with its images of messianic hope than with its deep currents of nihilism:

*There is nothing innocuous left...For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity. All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and*



*participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity.*

As suggested by Adorno's title *Minima Moralia*—an inversion of the classical ethical treatise *Magna Moralia* once attributed to Aristotle—for we who live after Auschwitz, the good life is irrevocably finished. “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.” For we who must live on today, the only responsible course is to shed light on horror: “There is no remedy but steadfast diagnosis of oneself and others, the attempt, through awareness, if not to escape doom, at least to rob it of its dreadful violence, that of blindness.” It falls to the intellectual to hold off society's willing descent into barbarism, but Adorno maintains only the dimmest hope in that possibility:

*That intellectuals are at once beneficiaries of a bad society, and yet those on whose socially useless work it largely depends whether a society emancipated from utility is achieved—this is not a contradiction acceptable once and for all and therefore irrelevant. It gnaws incessantly at the objective quality of their work. Whatever the intellectual does is wrong.*

Useless yet indispensable, intellectuals cannot steer the course of history, but their position at a critical remove from society can grant them uncommon views into present unfreedom. Where Nietzsche remarked, “It is even part of my good fortune not to be a house-owner,” Adorno adds, “Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home.” The intellectual is a *permanent exile* from his or her own culture, forever out of place.<sup>4</sup>

In lectures he delivered for the BBC in 1993 on the idea of the intellectual, Edward Said calls Adorno “the dominating intellectual conscience of the middle twentieth century”:

*Paradoxical, ironic, mercilessly critical: Adorno was the quintessential intellectual, hating all systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste. For him life was at its most false in the aggregate—the whole is always the untrue, he once said—and this, he continued, placed an even greater premium on subjectivity, on the individual's consciousness, on what could not be regimented in the totally administered society.*<sup>5</sup>

4. Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (Columbia University Press, 1986).

5. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), pp. 54–55.

It is precisely at moments like ours that “the whole” seems false: the most basic structures of our world—democracy, the media, capitalism—seem bankrupt. As Adorno wrote, “there is no way out of entanglement.” If the public sphere is rotten, it can seem that “the only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence” by retreating into private life.

Yet a common critique of Adorno's exilic doomsaying applies in our moment as well. When a fellow student in one of my classes called Trump's election a watershed, saying it was then that they realized this country was not a community of tolerance, a professor paused and asked, “What privileges and blindnesses allowed Trump to be that breakthrough?” So many others have not had the privilege of maintaining hope in democratic social life up until now. It is, after all, a privilege to have a merely *intellectual* crisis when so many live in precarity.

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A friend texted me a few days after the election: “Has this week improved your prospects as a historian of catastrophe?” *Too soon*, I thought. As a graduate student, I am lucky to spend my days thinking with invested colleagues and mentors, but I am at the same time haunted by the fact that the dark period of history I study has proved so relevant for today. Recent articles have boldly suggested that the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, a mid-century intellectual movement of which Adorno was a founder, “knew Trump was coming.” As much as part of me welcomes this surge of interest in an otherwise obscure group of Marxist cultural theorists, these are dark parallels indeed: “The combination of economic inequality and pop-cultural frivolity is precisely the scenario Adorno and others had in mind: mass distraction masking elite domination,” *The New Yorker's* music critic Alex Ross wrote. “If Adorno were to look upon the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, he might take grim satisfaction in seeing his fondest fears realized.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, history never happens twice. But as a project of institutionalized memory, historical practice is one of the most powerful resources we have against the lack of attention, care, and

6. Alex Ross, “The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming,” *The New Yorker* (Dec. 5, 2016).

foresight Trump displays daily. Adorno wrote in his meditations on politics after Auschwitz that a “lack of historical awareness [*Geschichtsfremdheit*]” fulfills “the nightmare of a humanity without memory.”<sup>7</sup> He considers this sensibility as typified by Henry Ford’s 1916 remark in an interview in *The Chicago Tribune*: “I don’t know much about history, and I wouldn’t give a nickel for all the history in the world. It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today.” A hundred years later, Trump might have tweeted these words—at 3am, and in garbled English—to justify upending democratic traditions and to defend a worldview of redemptive racism not far from Ford’s notorious antisemitism.

Anti-intellectualism today is anti-historical for its refusal to acknowledge the wisdom of our forebears and the democratic institutions they built—especially the development of the social welfare as a concerted effort to keep the fascist populism of the 1930s at bay. Such forgetting entails exactly the regression into positivism that Adorno warns against, whereby “humanity divests itself of memory and breathlessly exhausts itself in continually conforming to what is immediately present.” Living without history, with regard only for the present as it is, means seeing the present world as natural, as the only way things might be. Historical forgetting thus implicitly entails justifying and excusing the present’s faults and injustices. Without a capacity for historical reflection, we are without any standpoint from which to realize the contingency of the present, and to judge it morally. In this spirit, the German novelist W. G. Sebald

8. W. G. Sebald in Maya Jaggi, “Recovered Memories,” *The Guardian* (Sept. 21, 2001).

once remarked that “if people were more preoccupied with the past, maybe the events that overwhelm us would be fewer.”<sup>8</sup>

In the same anti-historical, smash-everything



It is the truth that you are unable to challenge. It is not hard at all to challenge Socrates.

spirit as Trump, his Chief Strategist Steve Bannon has claimed to be a “Leninist” in the sense that Lenin “wanted to destroy the state, and that’s my goal too. I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today’s establishment.”<sup>9</sup> He has remarked that Trump’s administration thinks of itself “as virulently anti-establishment.” Rather than calmly returning America to the racial hierarchies of the 1950s, this administration seeks to incite enough chaos and violence that the public, desperate for stability, becomes putty in Trump’s hands and plays along until it is too late. As Hannah Arendt remarked decades ago: “Totalitarianism begins in contempt for what you have. The second step is the notion: ‘Things must change—no matter how, ainnything is better than what we have.’”<sup>10</sup> Trump’s term began with a classic cups and balls routine. Chaos from measures like the travel ban distracted the media and the public’s limited attention from less-visible power grabs undertaken simultaneously: executive orders aimed at corporate and environmental deregulation and the regulatory capture of agencies that defend the public interest.

Most historians who have weighed in on whether Trump is a fascist have answered in the negative, for at least three reasons: First, Trump lacks popular support—being elected by only 27% of the electorate and having record-low approval ratings in the low-40s. Second, fascism in both Italy and Germany in the 1920s through the 1940s was characterized by the widespread use of private party police and state-sanctioned violence against political opposition. Third, as the intellectual historian Anson Rabinbach recently said to me, completely straight-faced: “Trump’s not a fascist because he doesn’t read.” (A *sad* photo from Trump’s first week in the White House showed his bookshelves filled only with display copies of *The Art of the Deal*.) Fascists actually read. They knew their history, myth, and romantic philosophy, and they often presented radical modern transformations in the idiom of national tradition, invoking ideals that resonated.

Needless to say, these differences do not erase salient historical parallels, not the least of which is identification with Nazism from Bannon and others within Trump’s administration. Perhaps the most important fascist element is Trump’s claim to represent “the will of the people,” that is, the white America of foregone “greatness,”

9. Martin Shuster, “Holocaust Statements and Identity in/of/for the World,” *Culture on the Edge* (Feb. 9, 2017).

10. Hannah Arendt, “From an Interview,” *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 26, 1974).



implying the exclusion of all others as not only dispensable but a threat. The political theorist Jan-Werner Müller has thus recently defined populism in terms akin to Carl Schmitt's claim that "the sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception." While all politics makes recourse to values within a political community, populists derive their power from deciding who fits within the political community in the first place: "The point is that populists claim a privileged understanding of what the real people—by definition morally irreproachable—are like and wish for. Every populist operates with a symbolic and ultimately moral distinction between the real people and those who don't belong."<sup>11</sup>

11. Jan-Werner Müller, "Real Citizens," *Boston Review* (Oct. 26, 2016).

One of Bannon's chief problems with the United States today is its inability to produce a strong American nationalism, since it is perpetually undermined by the fact that, as he has remarked, "there are people in New York that feel closer to people in London and in Berlin than they do to people in Kansas and in Colorado."<sup>12</sup> Sure, America has always been divided. My eighty-six-year-old grandfather from rural Wisconsin has always spoken disapprovingly of "them city folk" who voted for Obama. But now it seems one is *either* a "coastal elite" or a "real American." Both Democratic campaigns tried to re-appropriate the latter epithet for all working-class Americans—including women and minorities—but Trump stole their momentum, using divisive rhetoric around such apparently superficial differences as fuel for his rallies.

The idea that Trump was elected because a coastal elite got out of touch with real Americans is of course bunk. (Trump's administration is a who's who of privilege, composed mostly of Ivy League-educated neo-conservatives launched into the 1-percent by Goldman Sachs and Silicon Valley.) Yet Trump's administration is waging a multi-front culture war, and I am part of what Bannon calls the "new barbarism": Urban-dwelling, queer, vegetarian, more socialist by the day, someone who's had more non-white than white friends my entire life—I am the enemy in what Bannon calls the beginning of "a very brutal and bloody conflict" to defend "everything that we've been bequeathed over the last 2,000, 2,500 years."<sup>13</sup> "We" meaning white people. The question today is: What must I, as a white person, assume responsibility for? And where does this political climate

13. Cited in Shuster.

leave the intellectual today?

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The intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers recently debunked the conventional use of the term "post-truth": "We do not live in an era stripped of truths. We live, to the contrary, in a political-cultural moment saturated with competing claims on truth, each insisting on its veracity. We have contrived to construct an open marketplace of truths, and it is not a happy state."<sup>14</sup> Rodgers's fix is not as simple as re-educating consumers of media, for the problem strikes to the root of the monetized and ratings-driven networks that create truth today. "As long as we can click on the truths we want," he writes, "as long as truth is imagined as a desire satisfied in a politically and commercially saturated market, we will have a superabundance of facts that people hold as true. Everyone will get what he wants, and the public—and its trust in truth—will fall apart." When nothing seems true, all that remains is the cacophony of social reality. But Adorno implores us to see that this reality is not *true* in any normative sense just because it simply is. On the contrary, it is a lie because it presents the contingencies and injustices of the world as it is as absolute, as the only way things might be.

14. Daniel Rodgers, "When Truth becomes a Commodity," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 15, 2017).

My own post-truth moment struck when I began to read up on the white nationalist alt-right leader Richard Spencer (a.k.a. the punched Nazi). Why? Not just because I am ashamed of his racist rhetoric. Not just because I am ashamed that in the days after Trump's election he led a room of white men to perform the Hitler salute with cries of, "Hail Trump, hail our movement, hail victory!" It is because if Spencer had continued with his studies, we'd be colleagues.

Before his rise to alt-right fame, Spencer attended the University of Chicago and earned a master's degree in the humanities. I recently heard that his thesis supervisor, German professor David Levin, found the thesis unscholarly and riddled with errors of judgment: C-level work. Its subject? None other than Adorno, whom Spencer allegedly claimed "was afraid to admit how much he loved the music of Wagner because Wagner was an anti-Semite championed by

15. Josh Harkinson, "Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power," *Mother Jones* (Oct. 27, 2016).

16. Talya Zax, "Richard Spencer's Master's Thesis Was an Anti-Semitic Critique — of a Jewish Philosopher," *The Forward* (Jan. 17, 2017).

17. Martin Jay, "Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment: The Frankfurt School as Scapegoat of the Lunatic Fringe," *Salmagundi* (Fall 2010/Winter 2011).

18. Jacob Siegel, "The Alt-Right's Jewish Godfather," *Tablet* (Nov. 29, 2016).

19. Andrew Marantz, "Becoming Steve Bannon's Bannon," *New Yorker* (Feb. 13, 2017).

20. See Harkinson.

the Nazis."<sup>15</sup> One critic derives a "menacing" conclusion from this bizarre reading: that "Spencer's claim that Adorno later came to admire Wagner's famously anti-Semitic thought insinuated that if a Jew could appreciate that discourse, it might have some validity."<sup>16</sup> Such a facile reduction of criticism to antisemitism would seem to fulfill Adorno's own fears about the reification of thought under late capitalism. It typifies what the renowned Frankfurt School historian Martin Jay has called "the transformation of 'the Frankfurt School' into a kind of vulgar meme, a charged unit of cultural meaning that reduces all the complexities of its intellectual history into a sound-bite sized package available to be plugged into a paranoid narrative."<sup>17</sup>

Another of Spencer's mentors, Paul Gottfried, is the son of Hungarian Jews who fled the Holocaust. He studied under the far-left Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse and yet, by the end of his career, was described as a "right-wing proponent of the Frankfurt school" and a founder of "paleoconservatism."<sup>18</sup> We see an equally strange confluence of leftist thought and the alt-right in the figure of Julia Hahn, a graduate of the University of Chicago class of 2015 who has recently been hired as special assistant to Trump. She has been dubbed "Bannon's Bannon," a figure whose views are so far-right that they "will make Bannon look moderate."<sup>19</sup> How does someone who once called the leftist queer theory of Leo Bersani "hugely inspirational" become a reporter at *Breitbart* and then an advisor to Trump's deeply homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic team by age twenty-five? Aside from sheer opportunism, what would lead someone from a Jewish background to associate with so many shameless antisemites? At some point the cables got crossed.

A profile of Spencer claims that he "knows that a white ethnostate is at most a distant dream, but," echoing Bannon, "his more immediate desire is to shift the bounds of accepted political discourse."<sup>20</sup> He does this, like Milo, in large part through lectures to university students. Spencer is himself a product of an elite humanistic education. He studied avant-garde theatre at the University of Virginia and there discovered the writings of Nietzsche, whose "unapologetically elitist embrace of 'great men'" Spencer embraced. He was then, it seems, drawn to Chicago for its historic ties to Leo Strauss, a conservative

philosopher who has been called the "fascist godfather of the neocons" who urged the U.S. into the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars. We have to reckon with the fact that best of American liberal education churned out all of these figures, and that our universities are in no small degree implicated by their present intellectual undertakings.

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Spencer says he left graduate school "to pursue a life of thought-crime." The question for the intellectual today is: what is the opposite of thought-crime, and how do we give it a public platform? Rodgers suggests that intellectual rehabilitation would, above all, "require a renewed commitment to truth's complexity and the processes by which one searches for it." Social reality in a pluralistic society will always be *complex*, as will its very representation amidst competing interests. The Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci famously wrote that "all men are intellectuals ...but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."<sup>21</sup> Hence it is more appropriate to speak of *intellectual responsibility* than restrict the task of thinking to a learned caste of *intellectuals*. With this said, I want to propose that at all levels, and at minimum, intellectual responsibility today means recognizing the increasing complexity of social life.

The literature scholar Eduardo Cadava argued in a recent roundtable on rethinking the humanities in the era of Trump that despite important opportunities for activism, someone needs to continue "doing what we do"—thinking and teaching. One of the vital fruits of humanistic inquiry, as he put it, is the patience "to endure complexity." From literature as well as from philosophy or music or history, one learns that the simplest story is rarely the truest one. David Devries, a Dean of Undergraduate Education at Cornell wrote last year that the defining feature of a liberal arts education is that it "equips one to be comprehensively alone." He ponders, "Late at night, once the computers have shut down and the smartphones have stopped buzzing and televisions have gone dark and the rooms have settled into their creaking recovery from the day's bustle, once you are finally alone with yourself, what will sustain you?"<sup>22</sup> Filling that void is what should motivate us as thinkers. In *How to Be Alone*, Jonathan Franzen similarly writes that he aims "to write sentences of

21. Antonio Gramsci, "Prison Notebooks," in *An Anthology of Western Marxism*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 115.

22. David Devries, "The Consolations of an Occupied Mind," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 10, 2016).

such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them,” but thereby aims to foster “a community of readers and writers,” in which members recognize each other by the fact “that nothing in the world seems simple to them.” This entails, he writes, “the reclamation of a sense of history,” the knowledge that there is more to human experience than life’s immediacy.<sup>23</sup>

Embracing complexity has a long legacy in the humanities. Michel Foucault translated Immanuel Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” to speak to his own time as follows:

*The thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.*<sup>24</sup>

Ironically, such a critique of tradition also demands a deep appreciation of history. Said wrote that intellectual dissent “involves what Foucault once called ‘a relentless erudition,’ scouring alternative sources, exhuming buried documents, reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories.”<sup>25</sup> Foucault’s project of genealogy traces historical differences over time in order to emphasize the contingency of the present—using “detailed archival research to singularize and ‘event-alize’ our relation to the historically determined forms in which we live and think.”<sup>26</sup> Institutions like prisons and categories like madness are modern inventions with “chance beginnings” enacted about by people like us. They are not universally true but utterly contingent. By denaturalizing present modes of thought, Foucault cleared room for alternatives that might displace them.

Said noted that the tendency to see the world *critically*, as fundamentally strange, comes more instinctively to those who have experienced exile—literal, in Said and Adorno’s cases, or social, on account of Foucault’s homosexuality. From the exilic standpoint, Said writes, “you tend to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way,” to see “situations as contingent, not as inevitable, look at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human

beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible.”<sup>27</sup> Intellectuals are thus tasked to open the horizon of social possibilities beyond the merely existent. As Adorno put it, “Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway.”<sup>28</sup> Given this imperative, it is crucial that we remain open to exilic modes of thought today, including those awaiting entry at our borders.

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It remains a daunting question in our moment of contingency what kind of world we want to follow from the present one, but we should at least resist complacent calls for a “return to reason.” A recent *New Yorker* cartoon captures the problem. A man stands up backwards on his seat on an airplane and raises his hand as he addresses his fellow passengers: “These smug pilots have lost touch with regular passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane?” Everyone raises their hand enthusiastically. When the cartoon was published, Trump had just nominated several cabinet members who had previously worked to abolish the federal agencies they will now run. It seems to perfectly capture the anti-expert currents of present populist fervor. But many on the Left were quick to object to the analogy of a democracy to an airplane: Isn’t a democracy rule by the people, not just experts? Isn’t something amiss in the hasty defense of technocratic expertise the cartoon plays upon? Trump has been called the “anti-wonk,” and I’ve heard this quality lauded by Trump supporters in my own family: “When Hillary opens her mouth, I don’t understand a word; when Trump speaks, he talks directly to me.” One of the clearest signs of national division is that most people I know would say the opposite. For all her flaws, Hillary won the popular vote in part for speaking on complex issues with intellectual honesty, resisting the soundbites and false promises that distinguished Trump’s campaign as fantasy and fraud.

Yet what the Clinton campaign, pollsters, and, frankly, most of us, missed was a true read on the electorate’s pain and anger. In the days after the election I read and shared articles with titles like “Trump won because college-educated Americans are out of touch,” which critiqued naïve liberal identity politics and glorified

23. Jonathan Franzen, *How to Be Alone* (New York: FSG, 2002), pp. 84, 90, 93.

24. Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment,” *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 32–50.

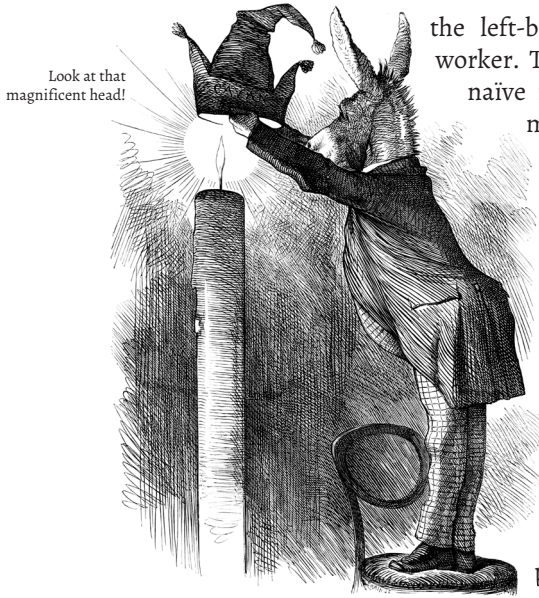
25. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. xviii.

26. John Rajchman, introduction to Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

27. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp. 60–61.

28. Theodor Adorno, “Resignation,” p. 292.





29. Pankaj Mishra, "Welcome to the age of anger," *The Guardian* (Dec. 6, 2016).

the left-behind white Middle-American worker. That moment has passed. Such naïve narratives served to give us a momentary sense of intellectual security by pointing to a single cause to explain Trump's rise, but thereby dodged the challenging fact that we *didn't* see this moment coming, and that no story is so simple. An important part of enduring complexity today means teaching ourselves to recognize but not succumb to the anger of the age of Trump. As Pankaj Mishra writes in his new book *Age of Anger*, "Our political and intellectual elites midwived the new 'irrationalism'

through a studied indifference to the emotional dislocation and economic suffering induced by modern capitalism."<sup>29</sup> Hillary was not the only one. The Remain campaign in Brexit remained aloof, until it was too late, to anger that had already swept in populist, despotic governments from Poland and Hungary to Turkey and India. Enduring complexity means resisting political dogmatism, especially the paternalistic notion that you, like the pilots in the cartoon, already know what is best for people before listening to their voices, the same error behind the DNC's premature support for Clinton over Bernie Sanders.

Anti-intellectualism has a long history in American life. In our current wave, which began with the Tea Party movement in 2009, intellectuals, and especially professors, have been characterized as out of touch, lazy, and overpaid. Several state governments have attempted to reform public universities into job-preparation factories with little regard for research. In 2015, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker incited enormous backlash by proposing to delete references to "the search for truth" from the University of

Wisconsin's mission statement. Known as the Wisconsin Idea, the document dates from 1904 and has been hailed as a model for public education nationally for claiming that "the borders of the University are the borders of the state." In place of pursuing "instruction, research, extended training and public service designed to educate people and improve the human condition," Walker saw the system as tasked primarily "to meet the state's workforce needs."<sup>30</sup> The next year, he attracted still more scorn for effectively abolishing tenure by wresting control over hiring decisions and the continued existence of academic departments away from the faculty government and to a "Board of Regents" that he appoints. Neither the faculty nor the administration now dictate the university's priorities. Hailed by Walker as a victory that would make college more affordable, Walker's meddling ironically cost the system an additional \$23.6 million in the first year alone in increases in salaries and research funding needed to retain the system's faculty from being poached by other universities. The next year, the university dropped out of the top-five research institutions in the U.S. for the first time in forty-five years. Take note: this is what the destruction of public education looks like.

In such a climate, one can see how the humanities, considered frivolous, are first to be cut. In 2016, Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin proposed revising state funding for public universities to subsidize only those programs with career outcomes for graduates that fit the state's priorities. "All the people in the world who want to study French literature can do so," he said, "they're just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayers like engineers will be, for example."<sup>31</sup> Bevin, it was noted, majored in East Asian studies at a cushy private liberal arts college. (Walker didn't graduate from his private college.) This attack on university autonomy is sure to continue, with federal support, under Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. We have already seen Trump's proposal to abolish the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which funds PBS and National Public Radio). Together, these programs account for less than *one tenth of one percent* of the federal budget. Their destruction or privatization would do little to save money, and much to eviscerate

30. Dan Simmons, "Scott Walker backtracks from striking 'truth,' 'human condition' from Wisconsin Idea," *Wisconsin State Journal* (Feb. 5, 2015).

31. Patricia Cohen, "A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding," *New York Times* (Feb. 21, 2016).

the “public wisdom” upon which, as the NEH’s mission statement notes, democracy depends. These are all battles in a larger war in which, since 2008, government funding for public universities has shrunk by nearly \$10 billion, with per-pupil spending falling 18 percent.<sup>32</sup> The student debt crisis is the most obvious outcome of this trend, but truth also numbers among its casualties.

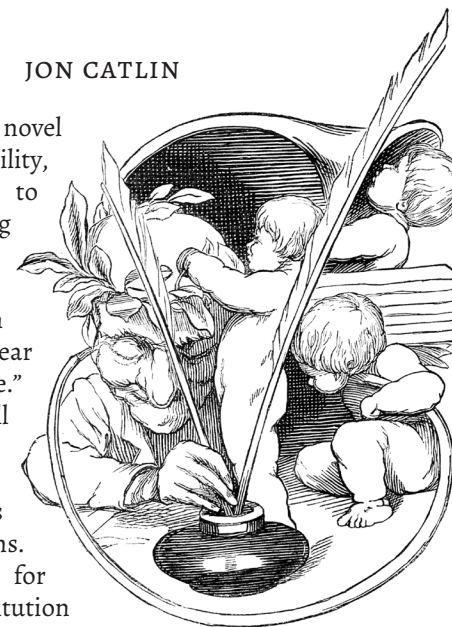
32. “Meritocratic Myths,” Tanner Howard, *Jacobin* (Feb. 18, 2017).

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida interrogated the problem of university autonomy in a 1980 lecture he delivered at Columbia University for its graduate school’s centennial. Drawing upon Kant’s 1798 work *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Derrida asks, What are universities for? Whom do they represent? To whom are they responsible?<sup>33</sup> In contrast to Kant’s ideal of human freedom as *autonomy*, universities (public, in Kant’s Prussia) are structurally *heteronomous*, being answerable to the states that found them. With public legitimation comes public responsibility. Yet Kant insists that if universities are to be guardians of truth, only those within the university have the authority to regulate them. While states have the power to charter universities, Kant also asks that governmental power create the conditions for a *counterpower* that guarantees the university the freedom to come to its own conclusions about the true and the false. Among the faculties, philosophy, as the farthest removed from the worldly influence of commerce and state, occupies a privileged role. Both Kant and Derrida defend the university’s indispensable role in resisting authoritarianism by allowing subjects to think freely and confer with others: “The university is there to *tell the truth*, to judge, to criticize in the most rigorous sense of the term.” This mission is actively undermined by laws like one the House of Representatives passed in February, 2016, deeming government-funded science “in the natural interest.” Intended to win back the public’s support for research, the law plays upon a conservative suspicion that if “research comes from a university, it must be biased.”<sup>34</sup>

34. Peter Moskowitz, “The Campus Free Speech Battle You’re Not Seeing” (Feb. 13, 2017).

Despite this higher mission, universities are, of course, fallible and flawed institutions. They can just as well serve as “a safeguard for the most totalitarian of social forms as a place for the most intransigently liberal resistance to any abuse of power.” Derrida thus writes: “Today the minimal responsibility and in any case the most

interesting one, the most novel and strongest responsibility, for someone belonging to a research or teaching institution, is perhaps to make such a political implication, its system and its aporias, as clear and thematic as possible.” Universities must also tell the truth about themselves, and interrogate their own hierarchies and inequalities using all available means. A recent study reveals, for example, that an elite institution as wealthy as Washington University in St. Louis enrolls three-and-a-half times as many students from the top 1% income bracket (21.7%) as from the bottom 60% (6.1%).<sup>35</sup> The numbers for the University of Chicago are less astonishing, but over half of students there come from the top 15% of median family income. Such inequalities expose the myth of meritocracy in U.S. higher education.



All creation of every craft is a kind of poetry.

35. “Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60,” *New York Times* (Jan. 18, 2017).

Amidst the conflicts of the authority and responsibility of universities, Derrida introduces the Greek concept *mochlos*, a kind of lever or wedge, which he defines as “something to lean on for forcing and displacing.” As he elaborates: “When one asks how to orient oneself in history, morality, or politics, the most serious discords and decisions have to do less often with ends, it seems to me, than with *levers*.” Universities and those within them are embodied within particular institutional contexts, each with their own political levers to draw upon. From their unique access to communal insight and social resources, pressures can and must be levied. The effectiveness of the sanctuary campus movement to protect students at risk of deportation and those intervening to prevent ICE deportations speaks to the need to protect the most vulnerable among us.

In a recent letter to Trump signed by the presidents of forty-

eight universities, Princeton University President Christopher Eisgruber urged the revoking of the President's executive action, which "unfairly targets seven predominantly Muslim countries in a manner inconsistent with America's best principles and greatest traditions," charging it with "dimming the lamp of liberty and staining the country's reputation."<sup>36</sup> Eisgruber considered the effects on a personal level: "My mother's family fled first from Germany and then from France—they were Jewish and they fled when the Nazis came to power—and they made it to this country in May of 1940. If we had a refugee ban in place in May of 1940 and my mother and her family had been turned away, they almost certainly would have been murdered." A public opinion poll from January 20, 1939 reports that 61% of American respondents rejected taking in just ten thousand Jewish refugee children, and just 30% supported it. Taking the Holocaust as a moral touchstone for the Trump era should point us to the fact that so much more could have been done, then as now, to reduce the suffering of millions with the stroke of a pen. There is evidence that efforts like Eisgruber's have paid off: In its decision to reject Trump's travel ban, the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals cited students with rights to education and their universities among those wronged.<sup>37</sup> But these university presidents didn't act alone: they had to be compelled to action by countless petitions and demonstrations by their students who stood up for those whose voices are not heard.

It can seem absurd to remain calm in such circumstances. Here historical precedent should keep us on edge. Trump may not be a fascist yet, but he effectively will be, the historian Timothy Snyder said in a recent interview, if he takes violent actions against his opponents.<sup>38</sup> Snyder notes that Hitler was democratically elected with just under 37% of the vote in 1932. But his power was still largely checked until the German parliament, the Reichstag, burned down on February 27, 1933. The cause of the fire is unknown (it may have been the Nazis themselves), but the Nazis blamed it on their political adversaries, using the fire as a pretext to arrest leftists and send them to concentration camps. The Nazi party masterfully capitalized upon this crisis to pass the Reichstag Fire Decree "for the protection of people and state." This soon led to the so-called Enabling Act, which

36. Abby Jackson, "Princeton, Harvard, and dozens of other top American colleges delivered Trump a searing letter accusing him of 'staining the country's reputation,'" *Business Insider* (Feb. 3, 2017).

37. Blumenstyk, Najmabadi, and Brown, "Court Rebukes Trump's Travel Ban, and Harm to Universities Plays a Key Role," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 9, 2017).

38. Timothy Snyder speaking with Jacob Weisberg, "His Rise to Power," *Slate* (Nov. 22, 2016).

allowed Hitler to rule by decree and revoked the civil liberties of free expression and due process. Fear generated by crisis was essential to establishing the Nazi dictatorship.

What will be our Reichstag Fire? The analogy may seem alarmist, but the reality is that, if recent history is any guide, chaos-inducing acts of mass-violence will occur in the U.S. in the next four years. Whether it is really "terror" or not hardly matters; Trump has demonstrated his ability to spin events in any direction that suits him. Even when there are no *disasters* (to use a favorite Trumpism), we have seen administration invent them in places ranging from Bowling Green to Sweden. Trump can, with renewed force, instill panic among the American people, and target scapegoats who do not fit with his image of America. Remember that we are dealing with the same Trump who wrote in 1989 that "civil liberties end when an attack on our safety begins."<sup>39</sup>

Paul Krugman recently challenged his readers to know what they will do "When the Fire Comes." He observed that, as in Germany in 1933, "After 9/11, the overwhelming public response" was not critique but "to rally around the commander in chief."<sup>40</sup> Krugman and Snyder raise some of the most important questions facing us: What will you do when disaster strikes? Before you mobilize, will you have done the intellectual work necessary to shield yourself and those around you from succumbing to the panic that can only play into Trump's hands? Snyder stresses this last point by turning the tables on Trump: "If a terror attack happens in the United States, that is simply the Trump administration failing to keep its most basic promise. It is not a reason to suspend the rights of Americans or declare have a state of emergency. History teaches us the tricks of authoritarians. We can't allow ourselves to fall for them."<sup>41</sup>

\* \* \*

In lieu of a senior thesis, students in Chicago's Fundamentals: Issues and Texts major attempt to answer the "fundamental question" they have spent four years reflecting upon. To my question, "What is the human response to catastrophe?" the historian David Nirenberg posed the following prompt: "Somewhere Nietzsche

39. Trump wrote this in a 1989 full-page ad in the *New York Times*, cited in Timothy Snyder, "The Reichstag Warning," *New York Review of Books Daily* (Feb. 26, 2017).

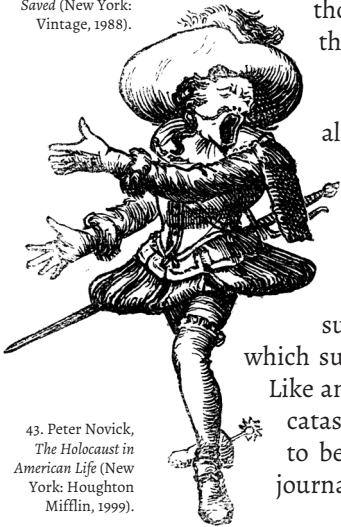
40. Paul Krugman, "When the Fire Comes," *New York Times* (Feb. 10, 2017).

41. Timothy Snyder, "We have at most a year to defend American democracy, perhaps less," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Feb. 7, 2017).



writes that a bourgeois housewife feels as much pain from a hangnail, as a bushman does when he loses a leg. And some Spanish wit once observed that ‘people who live in a golden age complain that everything looks yellow.’ Which is all to say: who decides what constitutes catastrophe or crisis? And how do they decide it?” I responded with a dialogue between two texts I had studied closely: *Hamlet* and Primo Levi’s philosophical reflections on his time in Auschwitz, *The Drowned and the Saved*. I wondered what allows Primo Levi to describe Auschwitz as his “university” while Hamlet in a situation of ghastly but predictable courtly corruption falls into despair. How can Hamlet cry that “time is out of joint,” calling his court “a prison,” while Levi investigates Auschwitz as an “excellent ‘laboratory’” of human experience? What does Hamlet know about the “thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” and man’s status as the “quintessence of dust,” when he has experienced but the loss of one man, compared to Levi’s thousands, and by unthinkable methods? What makes Hamlet’s world “a world where one has lost one’s way,” when outside the court nothing seems to have changed? Elsinore is no “*anus mundi*.” But perhaps one ought to reverse the question: How is Levi able to redeem moments of humanity amidst the suffering of Auschwitz, to admit, “luckily...there are among us those who have the virtue and the privilege of extracting, isolating those instants of happiness, of enjoying them fully, as though they were extracting pure gold from dross”?<sup>42</sup>

42. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1988).



43. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

What counts as a “catastrophe” is, I realized, almost entirely relative: catastrophe comes the Greek for “overturning,” but what is overturned always depends on context. The same destruction and loss of life can be more or less catastrophic depending on the world-order it disturbs. Because we have a limited capacity to care about the suffering of others, it is always a matter of politics which suffering we are affected by and mobilize against. Like any other event, the Holocaust, now considered the catastrophe of the twentieth century *par excellence*, had to be made into a catastrophe by outspoken victims, journalists, lawyers, historians, and public intellectuals.<sup>43</sup>

Before the 1970s, this now-omnipresent event didn’t even have a common name.

I became fixated on figures like Adorno, who in the spirit of a public intellectual went on German public radio in the 1950s and ‘60s to insistently remind willfully forgetful Germans that Auschwitz was the moral catastrophe everyone now takes it to be. It is precisely the fact that social conditions in West Germany had not fundamentally changed since the Nazi era—that another Auschwitz was still possible—that was, for Adorno, catastrophic. After the war, he remarked that “fascism lives on” because though the swastikas were wiped away, “the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, while Adorno is most famous for his remark that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, he later claimed that by this he meant “not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam.” He added that Auschwitz “form[ed] a kind of coherence, a hellish unity” with the atom bomb and “torture as a permanent institution.”<sup>45</sup> While preserving the uniquely persecutory history of the Holocaust, Adorno was politically determined to link its barbarity with that of other events that took place long after it.

44. Adorno, *Can one Live after Auschwitz?* p. 13.

45. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 101.

The work of calling catastrophes to public attention is a courageous kind of intellectual activism still urgently needed today. In a conversation with former Dean of Humanities at the University of Chicago, Danielle Allen, Cornel West recently remarked in an Adornian spirit:

*There’s never been a “negro problem” in America; it’s been a catastrophe visited on black people. Slavery wasn’t a “negro problem.” Jim Crow wasn’t a “negro problem.” New Jim Crow—not a “negro problem.” Ferguson’s not a “problem,” it’s a catastrophe—there’s human beings down there!...“Jewish problem”? No, a catastrophe: 1492 to 1945, the expulsion of Jews from Spain and indescribable evil of the Holocaust—that’s a catastrophe! “Palestinian problem,” that’s not a problem: the Israeli occupation is a catastrophe. You have to talk about it in those terms even as you keep track of the humanity of our precious Jewish brothers and sisters who have to deal with 2000 years*

of catastrophic backdrop. Do we have the spiritual courage to love both Jewish brothers and sisters and Palestinian brothers and sisters, and do it in such a way that we preserve morality, spirituality, and integrity?<sup>46</sup>

Knowing that we live in a catastrophic world changes the political demands placed upon us. West likes to quote Socrates in his defense in Plato's *Apology*: "The cause of my unpopularity is *parrhesia*—plain speech, truthful speech. It'll get you in trouble!" Especially among historians, opposition to this kind of analogy remains fierce. It may seem to some to commit the same error as Trump's now-infamous statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day, which "all lives matter'd" the Holocaust by failing to mention Jews.<sup>47</sup> Martin Shuster, for example, condemns the statement for "literally whitewashing" the Holocaust and suggesting, in entirely ahistorical terms, "a thoroughly mythological approach to history as a narrative of the struggle between good and evil, innocent and not."<sup>48</sup> But, with West, we need to be able to recognize historical difference and at the same time recognize that suffering is not a zero-sum game. Snyder has explicitly called for Germans to "be generous with their history and help others to learn how republics collapse" because "right now the comparison we need to ponder is between the treatment of Muslims and the treatment of Jews."<sup>49</sup> Learning from past catastrophes certainly requires historical care, but it also demands the intellectual courage to decry injustice in every form.

\* \* \*

John Stuart Mill remarks in his autobiography that "no great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible, until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought."<sup>50</sup> This takes time. Žižek has thus rebuked the call for "an immediate counteroffensive" as "an echo of Trump's own anti-intellectual attitudes." He regrets that Trump has given people of *all political stripes* the excuse not to have to think, but insists that "the urgency of the situation is not an excuse: *especially* when time is pressing you have to think."<sup>51</sup> As for his own plan of action, Žižek remarks, "You know what Lenin did, in 1915, when World War I exploded? He went to Switzerland and started to read Hegel."<sup>52</sup>

In the interview quoted at the opening of this essay, Adorno famously declared in the midst of the 1968 protests of German university students that he was "not afraid of the ivory tower."<sup>53</sup> In a time of social unrest, he unapologetically claimed to be "a theoretical human being" whose next project—it was to be his last—was a hefty tome on aesthetic theory. While his students took to the streets demanding control over their own education and the denazification of German universities, Adorno refused to sign a letter of solidarity even though many protestors claimed his work as an inspiration for their activism. He said, "Even though I had established a theoretical model, I could not have foreseen that people would try to implement it with Molotov cocktails... In my writings, I have never offered a model for any kind of action or for some specific campaigns." Yet the alternative is not resigned scholasticism: flip to any page of Adorno's work, and you'll find him deeply engaged with social conditions and attuned to the horror of suffering around the globe. As he explained, "I believe that a theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to praxis from the start." He rejected above all the students' violent methods—"the half-crazed activity of throwing rocks at university institutes"—and criticized their "prioritization of tactics" at the expense of critical thought, charging them of "actionism" and "pseudo-activity."<sup>54</sup> One thinks of the old joke that the University of Chicago is a place in which one asks, "That's great in practice, but how does it work in theory?" Adorno asked whether, because critical thought, unlike politics, "effects change precisely

by remaining theory," one could not also say that theory "is also a genuine form of praxis."

Judith Butler reprises Adorno for our moment of protest in her latest book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Responding to Adorno's cynical claim that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," Butler asks an important



I always do what you advise.

52. Slavoj Žižek, "Philosopher Slavoj Žižek settles the 'Is it OK to punch a Nazi?' question once and for all," *Quartz* (Jan. 27, 2017).

53. Adorno, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?" p. 233.

54. Adorno, "Resignation," *Critical Models* (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 291.

46. Cornel West, "A Conversation with Cornel West," lecture sponsored by the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University (Oct. 5, 2016).

47. Jordan Weissmann, "Team Trump just All Lives Matter'd the Holocaust," *Slate* (Jan. 28, 2017).

48. Shuster, "Holocaust Statements and Identity in/of for the World."

49. Timothy Snyder, "We have at most a year to defend American democracy, perhaps less," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Feb. 7, 2017).

50. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London, 1873), p. 239.

51. Žižek, "Zukunft nach Trump: Mehr Selbstkritik, bitte!"

question of those who might attempt to resist by removing themselves from corrupt society out of a sense of moral purity: “If I refuse that part of myself that is complicit with the bad life, have I then made myself pure? Have I intervened to change the structure of that social world from which I withhold myself, or have I isolated myself?”<sup>55</sup> Butler argues that movements like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and anti-Trump protests are not simply “resistance” movements, for they “say no to one way of life at the same time that they say yes to another.” Embodied and plural, these struggles *performatively enact* “what it might mean to live a good life in the sense of a livable life” today. Beyond their symbolic force, such movements can themselves concretely help “produce the conditions under which vulnerability and interdependency become livable.” Butler fills in one of Adorno’s biggest blind spots by upholding a mode of political praxis that is also reflexive and self-critical.

Invoking Adorno, Martin Shuster exhorted in the days after the election, “Understand that the thing that will be most under threat—in addition to just raw, suffering bodies—is the imagination. Our powers for imagining things differently will be greatly compromised. It is up to us to maintain them, to train them, and to consistently work them. Start now.”<sup>56</sup> Upholding the imagination against despair and capitulation to the status quo seems to me the single most important responsibility of intellectual life today, for it is the precondition that makes all other forms of solidarity and resistance conceivable. The rest follows from Adorno’s insight that “what is must be changeable if it is not to be all.”<sup>57</sup> It is in this spirit that Said wrote that “real intellectuals constitute a clerisy, very rare creatures indeed, since what they uphold are eternal standards of truth and justice that are precisely *not* of this world.”<sup>58</sup> Truth-telling against truth’s declared enemies, keeping those in power responsible for their words, bracing one’s mind in solitude to tackle complexity of life in common, employing all levers available, resisting false divisions and enacting new forms of life through proactive, performative solidarity—this is the tall order of intellectual responsibility called for in the era of Trump.

55. Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 217–18.

56. Martin Shuster, “Eleven Theses on Trump(ism),” public Facebook post (Nov. 9, 2016).

57. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 398.

58. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 5.

## An Alumnus' Journey from Imagined Principalities to the Real Republic

*A conversation with Kenneth Weinstein, AB '84*

Hansong Li

**K**enneth Weinstein graduated from the University of Chicago (B.A.), the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (D.E.A.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.). A political theorist and a public servant, Weinstein has served by presidential appointment and Senate confirmation as a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors and on the National Humanities Council, and is currently CEO of the Hudson Institute. A frequent guest on French media, Weinstein has served as commentator for live French television coverage of U.S. presidential elections since 1996. He is decorated with a knighthood (Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) in Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. The conversation took place in the Saxbys Café, Washington D.C., on July 26th 2016.

Hansong Li is a fourth-year in the College majoring in Fundamentals and History.

**HL:** *What brought you to study the humanities at the University of Chicago?*

**KW:** My path was a little unusual. I didn't begin college at the University of Chicago, but in a six-year BA/MD joint degree program in New York—the City College of New York. I always assumed that I would be a physician. My father was a doctor, both of my grandfathers were doctors, and my uncle and cousins as well. Right after I began the BA/MD program, I realized that I did not want to deal with bodies, and that medicine did not appeal to my interests. So, I dropped out and, not knowing what to do with my life, ended up volunteering on a political campaign. First, I worked for Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in 1979 in New York,



then for George H.W. Bush's, and during the campaign I moved to Washington.

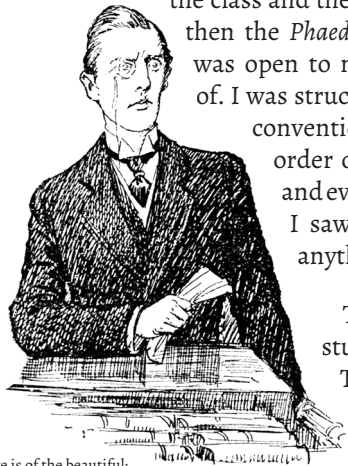
I visited the University of Chicago campus on the day of the Iowa Caucus, which was, if you look at the date, probably Jan. 21st, 1980. The second I stepped on the campus of the University of Chicago I felt at home. I met students who were intellectual, inquisitive, socially awkward, a little ill at ease with the world and ill at ease with themselves.

**HL:** *It's still the case, especially the last part.*

**KW:** And that's why I very much felt at home. I chose to come to the University of Chicago for a number of other reasons. For one, I mistakenly thought that Chicago, unlike the Ivy Leagues such as Columbia where I had also been admitted, didn't require a swim test. I learned very quickly that I was dead wrong.

**HL:** *Right, the swim test requirement was abolished fairly late, around 2012.*

**KW:** Yes, so the beginning was swimming. But it was also the Common Core. The first class I took was Human Being and Citizen, which was designed by Leon and Amy Kass, and it really came to play a very central role in my life, much to my surprise. I walked into the class and the first reading was the *Apology of Socrates*, then the *Phaedo*, *Crito* and the *Republic*. A new world was open to me that I had been absolutely unaware of. I was struck by the distinction between nature and convention, the notion of the possibility of an order of souls, discussions on the best regime and even the forms of the dialogues themselves. I saw a depth in Plato and Aristotle unlike anything I had encountered before.



Love is of the beautiful;  
and therefore Love is also a lover of wisdom.

encountered. He had a rare talent: your entire interaction with him was akin to a Platonic dialogue. There was the surface discussion, but also something that he was trying to teach you—and I mean you as an individual. Just an ordinary discussion walking down the street—it could have been in the classroom talking about Plato and Rousseau, or just joining him at the barber shop, or having lunch together—he was constantly trying to teach you something, something about yourself, sometimes very profound truths. He had a psychological insight deeper than that of anyone else I have ever come across. And he had this ability of picking up things about yourself that you are only vaguely aware of. Though he is gone almost twenty-five years, I still laugh hard at some of the jokes he told.

One of the greatest days of my undergraduate life was—it was in junior year, spring quarter—I went to France to work on my French, and Bloom came to Paris. I spent a day walking around Paris with him. He opened up Paris to me: the grandeur of the *ancien régime*, what life was like back then, and what the revolution meant. There was a deeper sense of what France was about. And these few hours came to shape me in ways so deep that I ended up doing a large part of my graduate work in France: I did a graduate degree in Soviet and Eastern European Studies, and later went on to do doctoral work at Harvard. But throughout these years my interactions with Bloom in Paris have always been defining in terms of how I perceive French society, culture and history.

**HL:** *So the promenade with Bloom inspired you to study at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris?*

**KW:** Absolutely, though that was also Harvey Mansfield's suggestion that I should go and explore. But it was definitely very much influenced by Bloom: he opened the world of ideas and culture that is in some way the counterpart to what America stood for. In a certain way, it is tragic that Europe has become so Americanized. In my early years as a student, the French spoke, acted and even smiled in a certain way, but when I went back to give a talk at Sciences Po a couple of years ago, I was struck at just how American the French students looked. The cultural differences have become less important than they once had been. Partly because of the European project and

partly due to the pressures of mass media and multiculturalism, France is certainly not the France that it was 35 years ago.

**HL:** *How would you compare your education at the University of Chicago to intellectual experiences elsewhere?*

**KW:** I majored in what was then called General Studies in the Humanities, a precursor to Fundamentals: Issues and Texts, which was still in its formation when I was there. I took classes with Cropsey in addition to Bloom and Tarcov. I also took English and French literature classes. I emerged as a very different person at the end of my four years at Chicago than at the beginning. When I first came in, I was very political, somewhat economics-focused, and wanted to study economics. For in my years working for political campaigns I became increasingly interested in economic issues. In fact, I used to write a lot on free-market economics in high school. But the University of Chicago gave me a real education—thinking about the human possibilities and the fundamental challenges man faces, not some faddish, academic jibberish. I can't imagine getting a better education elsewhere. I taught as a graduate student at Harvard. Later, I taught at Claremont and Georgetown. But Chicago has an intensity in its academic life about ideas, a passion and dedication, and I've never seen anything like that.



By contrast, at Harvard, it's more about what happens after you graduate—whether the jobs will line up neatly. At Chicago, the world of ideas matters: we had real discussions about Aristotle, Plato, Tocqueville, Hobbes and Locke that were unlike anything else I've ever seen. The students at Sciences Po are probably the second most impressive. But they were impressive because they had a general culture. For, as you know, to go to a *grande école*, requires a level of competence in the face of significant competition for admissions, and at the higher level of the lycée education there is much literature and philosophy. But even they don't have that depth, and there is no tension in the soul the way you see among Chicago kids—that they are

uncomfortable with themselves and with the world around them. The University of Chicago was definitely a unique place when I was there.

**HL:** *Do you remember what the political environment was like on campus in the 80s?*

**KW:** I was absorbed into my studies and barely involved in political activism. The first year I was involved in the College Republicans and other groups. But I quickly became much more interested in my studies than in partisan things, and never wrote for student newspapers. I also think that one of the greatest things about the Chicago education is that it teaches the limits of partisanship. There is no truth in a partial truth. Or, I could rephrase that as: partisanship requires the affirmation of partial truth.

**HL:** *There still seems to be a general consensus, though increasingly challenged, that the intellectual life stands above particular interests, and that rigorous inquiry is indispensable to the search of truth.*

**KW:** Yes, and I always thought that Chicago is relatively free from excessive political correctness and hyper-partisanship. Harvard and Sciences Po to some degree are more enslaved to conventional opinions. There was a seriousness at the University of Chicago that is not found elsewhere.

**HL:** *As a regular contributor to Le Monde and Le Figaro, how do you consider the different perspectives of the Europeans and the Americans on political questions?*

**KW:** I think that the philosophical perspective tends to be the broadest perspective. And having a more international perspective on issues can in some ways serve that purpose of broadening, but it can be less insightful as well. It is ideal that breadth complements depth in our analysis of these issues.

I've also found that we Americans have not been terribly good at doing alliance politics. There were times when Western alliances worked effectively in the aftermath of World War II, by making our

allies understand that the relationship is not transactional and that there is a deeper common cause that we stand for. And my time in both France and in Germany has allowed me to be sensitive to the claims that the Europeans make against us that we tend to overlook. In a sense, the Americans aren't trained to do international affairs. Most of the American officials don't do that well. Foreign affairs is an item on the checklist that a candidate has to check when running for president, offering positions on this or that issue. But our leaders don't grow up consciously understanding that America has unique global responsibilities and a critical part of our role in the world is the leadership that comes out of the White House. And an important part of that leadership is understanding how our allies think, and what you need to do to persuade them. Oftentimes our politicians are not aware that what they say and do have a very broad impact in ways that they cannot imagine. So, spending time overseas has broadened my understanding of the challenges faced by our officials, and has given me a much firmer understanding of American exceptionalism—what it is that we stand for and defend. It's enabled me to appreciate how complicated alliances are—how hard the work is, but how important it is as well.

**HL:** *And that effort also includes spreading our messages to the rest of the world. As a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, what do you consider to be the agency's historical and present roles? How much has it actually done? And what is your evaluation of our propaganda efforts in the last few decades?*

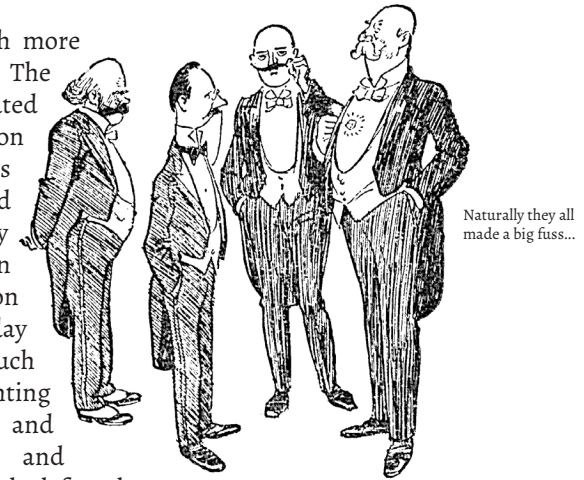
**KW:** I wouldn't call it propaganda. The U.S. international media played a critical role in the Cold War. Radio Free Europe and Voice of America reached audiences, provided information behind the Iron Curtain in ways that no one could imagine, whether it would be people in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet troops had come in, or in Poland after the martial law had been imposed. The locals had a sense that others were standing up for freedom, and we were able to use broadcast to reassure and inform them, give them the moral courage to go on and live their lives, and to get ready for the regimes to fall. It laid the basis for civil society and a free press, so the work was critically important.

Today we face a much more complicated challenge. The Soviets were unsophisticated in their use of information warfare. They had allies in the West who would stand for them, but they were unsophisticated in manipulating information to their advantage. Today our adversaries are much more effective at fighting information warfare and spreading distortions and building alliances both on the left and on the right, in order to undermine Western solidarity. Therefore, we are fighting a much more complicated and multifaceted information war not just against Russia and China but also against ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood and a wide array of political opponents who oftentimes tend to know how to manipulate our own media effectively.

**HL:** *That means the new situation requires a much more sophisticated strategy on our part.*

**KW:** Right, infinitely more sophisticated strategies on our part. We are beginning to adopt more effective ways of fighting this warfare, but it is complicated work, hampered by rules and regulations that our opponents aren't bothered by. But we have become much more adept now at producing and countering reports. For example, when the report came out of Crimea saying that Russian speakers were slaughtered, we immediately confirmed that there were no bodies and no slaughter at that very location. We've developed all sorts of techniques and programs that show that Russian speakers are not being handled brutally in these countries. Similarly, our work on Radio Free Asia does an immense job of broadcasting information to various peoples inside China.

**HL:** *Do you think that the U.S. is at a disadvantage because it is being held*





*accountable for higher moral principles than its opponents are?*

**KW:** I think we are at an absolute disadvantage because of our principles that our adversaries do not abide by. We are also at a disadvantage because of the moral relativism that Allan Bloom decried. Say, when Russian armies rolled into Crimea, President Obama's immediate reaction was "oh, we need to have an inquiry in order to find out what is going on," whereas it was very clear what was going on. Oftentimes we are hampered by the sense that we have to listen to both sides of the story, no matter what the story is about. Surely, we did not feel that way in WWII, and we didn't feel that way at all in earlier conflicts. There is a creeping cultural relativism that has really weakened our society and made us unwilling to stand up at critical moments—when poisonous gases are being used in Syria against the civilians, when Russians make false claims that people are being attacked. This is a huge problem: that we both abide by our principles, our due processes, and are also affected by a cultural relativism that makes it much more difficult to stand up for the principles that we believe in.

**HL:** *Were the 9/11 attacks a turning point for you and your colleagues at the Hudson Institute?*

**KW:** It really was. The institute was built by Herman Kahn, a great futurist and nuclear strategist. At the time of Hudson's founding in 1961, he was largely focused on the threat of the Soviet Union and nuclear warfare. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, we ended up moving our focus to domestic policy. One of the most important pieces of work we did was to develop the Wisconsin welfare reform program, which began the basis for the national welfare reform bill that President Clinton signed into law. We also first developed the notion of charter schools.

After 9/11, it became increasingly clear that we needed to turn our focus onto international affairs, national security, and the threat of Islamic radicalism. I think for many of us it was a very defining moment, not just in our personal lives but also because it raised the stakes. With the Twin Towers coming down, our own way of life was threatened. It forced us to realize that the world that America had

lived in for over two centuries was coming to an end.

**HL:** *What role does and should the National Humanities Council play? Does it function well without political pressures?*

**KW:** I was very fortunate to serve for six years in the National Humanities Council. It is an important body: the National Endowment for the Humanities provides significant grant funding to the humanities, and to institutions around the country including the University of Chicago. We also have the annual Jefferson Lecture, which is the highest honor that humanities and art can offer. In addition, we awarded the National Humanities Medals. I was pleased that in my tenure on the Council, a number of University of Chicago professors were awarded the National Humanities Medal, and Leon Kass was given the Jefferson Lecture. These are important signs of the best kinds of achievements in the fields of the arts and humanities.

The National Humanities Council should honor the best of the humanities work that the country has to offer. When it functions well, it honors the absolute best work. That means it should be free of political pressure, so that our society would not appeal to the most vulgar and popular elements that are endangering our democracy. So it is an important institution, but only when it does its work well.

**HL:** *What is the relationship between scholarship and statesmanship?*

**KW:** I don't think politicians should be scholars. Officials are oftentimes faced with challenges so critical that they need to make decisions in a very compressed time window—whether it is to react on behalf of national security or to react to events that are unfolding in an artificial political timetable, such as a legislative calendar, that puts pressure on policymakers to act relatively quickly. Politicians usually have very little understanding of critical issues. I think the ideal role of policy research institutions like Hudson is to broaden their understanding and to set the fundamental framework in which the questions and issues are examined, so that the right kind of questions are being asked, and that the right types of answers can be proposed.

## AN ALUMNUS' JOURNEY

For example, oftentimes in public policy, we have a crisis mentality that hits the country in which politicians and elected officials assume that a momentary crisis was developing into a major and long term one—whereas there is in fact not a crisis, but only problems that are not national or massive. I believe that when a think tank does its work best, it is able to frame the debate to show that what you think is a problem is actually not, and that the real problem is actually something much deeper, and you need to have a longer-term perspective and keep your eyes on what the real questions are. Those are our real additions to the debate. The goal is really to come to a true understanding of what the policy challenges are and to frame them in the right perspective.

**HL:** *And that's the difficult task of balancing the complexity that is required in thinking, and the simplicity that is necessary for decision-making. Does the practical work of the policy research world stand in between?*

**KW:** Scholars seek oftentimes to deepen our understanding of certain issues within the scholarly apparatus. I think in the policy world we are asked to think in ways sometimes much more naïve than the academics do. We are asked to look at a question, and when we do our work best we undertake a kind of naïve examination somewhat philosophically inspired, which would lead to a better understanding of what the true problems are. The really best think tank work has something in common with the rejection of convention – the analogy is far from perfect, but sometimes I feel some policy experts are stuck in the proverbial cave and need to turn towards a truer understanding. But in challenging the conventional wisdom, what everyone else is saying, one has to be guided by a practical reason in order to deliberate well and to make your proposals real and effective.



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