

THE DIALECTICS OF MIDDLENESS

THE DIALECTICS OF MIDDLENESS:
TOWARDS A POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF CENTRISM

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2010)

McMaster University

(English and Cultural Studies)

Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: The Dialectics of Middleness: Towards a Political Ontology of Centrism

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NUMBER OF PAGES 233

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the recent history and politics of the formation of the center or middle as the sovereign horizon of contemporary political practice and history. The political center has typically been imagined as the space between the two poles of Left and Right. Rather than beginning with an assumption of the political center's absolute relativity—a history absorbed by infinitely contingent contexts—this thesis understands centrism as itself a political position: a plural, yet relatively stable complex of meanings in urgent need of problematization. Guided methodologically by the work of Michel Foucault and Frederic Jameson, the thesis grounds this analysis in a reading of *The Economist* magazine between the years 1950-2007. A self-identified advocate of the "extreme center", the magazine functions as a primary archive through which to document shifts in the constitution of an historically-specific centrism, a political position with significant global traces and consequences.

In the Introduction the basic theoretical coordinates of the center as a metaphor, concept and political fantasy are unpacked against the backdrop of a broader diagnostics of the present. Chapter 1 addresses itself to the Keynesian centrism prevalent in the years immediately following the war in Britain, one characterized primarily by ideas about balance, consensus, and moderation. Chapter 2 follows the content of this discourse across the break-down of post-war growth and its subsequent identification with "radical" Thatcherism. In Chapter 3, the contradictions accumulated in this shift from a thematics of caution to one emphasizing a radical break with consensus, are examined through the figure of the heretical manager, the pragmatist who presides over the inherently

revolutionary fabric of capitalist space and innovation. Finally, the conclusion thinks through the ways in which the radical center functions within a broader cultural sensation of middle-classness very much a basic part of life in postmodern societies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis hummed away for years in the background of a love I won't forget: it owes no small part of its contents to the intelligence, care, and unconditional everyday generosity of Rachel Kwan. Also crucial has been the constant encouragement and friendship of Imre Szeman; he always found (psychologically ingenious) ways to trick me into thinking writing a dissertation was less torture than pleasure. He and Maria have functioned as two of the most consistent, giving and necessary presences in my life. Folk who've sustained me with provocative speech, love and drink for years (or days) all deserve a mention: Timothy Kaposy, my incredible sister Kate, Maria Whiteman, Justin Sully, Wafaa Hasan, Nathan Holmes, Sonal Nalkur, Gabe Boldt, Petra Rethmann, Fahad Razak, Chris Carlson, Omar Dessouki, Cynthia and Enoch Kwan, Justin Armstrong, Elana Commisso, Susie O'Brien, Eugene Kwan, Bill Huizer, Karen Espiritu, Bhavani Konings, Nick Buffo, Nisha Shah, Sean Reichheld, and many more. Edmunda Ferreira and Antionette Somo have both saved my life on numerous occasions and poured out tons of love in my direction.

This thesis, as it turns out, is dedicated to my mother: without her I would have never met words. And to my father, whose death during its writing only sharpened my sense for the banality of life under capitalism. The beach he left for road and work remains.

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Introduction:

Between, Beyond, Amidst: Radical Centrism and the Antinomies of
Middleness

Believe me, sir, in all changes in the state, moderation is a virtue... It is a disposing, arranging, conciliating, cementing virtue...Great powers reside in those who can make great changes. Their own moderation is their only check; and if this virtue is not paramount in their minds, their acts will taste more of their power than of their wisdom, or their benevolence. Whatever they do will be in extremes; it will be crude, harsh, precipitate...This virtue of moderation (which times and situations will clearly distinguish from the counterfeits of pusillanimity and indecision) is the virtue only of superior minds. It requires a deep courage, and full of reflection, to be temperate when the voice of multitudes (the specious mimic of fame and reputation) passes judgment against you. The impetuous desire of an unthinking public will endure no course, but what conducts to splendid and perilous extremes. [Moderation] discovers, in the midst of general levity, a self-possessing and collected character, which, sooner or later, bids fair to attract every thing to it, as to a centre.

Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*

...being at the center of things was always a blast for me.

Alan Greenspan, *The Age of Turbulence*

A trivial image on a page of tight, serious script, its task is little more than a primary injunction to colour, a smear of brightness designed to protect attention from repetition and the threats posed to circulation by boredom. In it, a character straddles theatrically the distance between two strict precipices. Its legs strained thin by the inflexible geography, it minds a stunt of balance the outcome of which is critically unsure. This precarity, however, is not to be confused with the befuddlement or powerlessness of a predicament; there is nothing passive or stunned in this skilled stretch even if its terms exact a gymnast's seriousness. Indeed, the figure's suit here invokes a disciplined charm, a disposition well-stocked in options and connections—in short, a subject fluent in the language and style of institutional power. As is to be expected, its hands--literally--are full. One grasps craftily a rope tied to stakes on each side of the

divide, organizing and distributing the balance of forces: it is wrapped like a fist and holds the rope as if it were a pool cue or fishing rod—*it is in control of things, but also responsive to their movements*. The other wields a cautious hammer: it knocks into place the stakes which hold the rope, shaping and determining the conditions of the divide itself. That this is an image or allegory for an ideal way of being political becomes clear only at the last instant: from the rope swings a placard and the fragment of a truism: “middle ground”, it deadpans.

At best, this image serves to accompany the text like an optical pleasantry; a glance suffices before the page is turned and its impulse wholly forgotten. But in this thumbnail exists the shadow of a contemporary shift in the doxa of the political, a process still in motion that has significantly altered the ways in which subjects operating at a whole range of points and scales manage, conceptualize, and anticipate social possibility under the terms arbitrated by transnational capitalism. Gone is every trace of a middleness stupefied by externality and indecision: asserted instead is a thought which draws from inbetweenness a new power of virility and efficacy, *the dynamism of an amidst*. I call the subject of this image the *extreme* or *radical center* and the process of which it is both a protagonist and consequence *centricization*. Though this is a process explicitly perceptible in the field of statements and habits we casually organize under the sign of the political—the programmes of parties, the content of government policy, the practices of bureaucrats in central banks, think-tanks, etc—the near universalization of centrist reason extends into the quietest cultural reflex, affecting speech patterns, lines of sight, temporal indexes, even the style of a body's movement through space. It is not only, as Jacques

Rancière suggests “a discourse which enters every corner”(7), but really, even in its least determinate mode, a new disposition of existence, what Karl Marx in a different context once called a “definite form of activity” or “mode of life” (42).

Centricization should be conceptualized as the reversible historical perfection of conditions optimal to the growth, development and spread of centrism, all minutely differentiated according to degrees of reflexivity, self-consistency, dynamism, logicity and prestige. Though there is preponderance and accretion, even co-evolutions that border in appearance on a functionalism of the whole, there is no absolute concentricity or expressive immanence at work here; rather, there exists a coacervation of centers in no way exhausted by the visibility and self-certainty of its articulate “extreme” (the radical center proper). The latter's life at the “commanding heights” of the political, its usefulness to contemporary institutional power, exists in plural tension with a jungle-like ensemble of ambient centricities it must resist or poach from semiotically if it is to work at all in the first place.

A whole complex of conditions and symptoms mark the terrain on which a sense for this process appears. The supersession of the enormous Two of Cold War for the One or Many of a beyond imagined to be pure or post capitalist; “partisan de-alignment”; the re-structuring of the advanced economies away from the planned industrialism of the welfare state to a global system emblemized by the eminence, instantaneity, and non-linearity of finance; the concomitant re-conceptualization of an older “anarchy of the market” as a disorganized, yet acute intelligence of the swarm; alterations in the advanced countries on the terrain of production such that old and new are increasingly bi-furcated

along the division separating material from informational production; the waning of the scene of student, industrial, and Marxist-Leninist militancy and unrest; transformations in the culture and semiotics of youth vis a vis a now utterly negated elderliness (separate, of course, from the physical aging of these populations); the global shift from total war to myriad, interminable humanitarian interventions and micro-nationalist ethnic skirmishes and violence; the splitting of political categories (left/right, progressive/conservative) under the pressure of innumerable new sites and forms of identification; the relative decentralization and de-statalization of cultural production all over the world and a corollary global fetishization of what Hegel contemptuously called “absolute freedom”; the celebration of multiculturalism and diversity in the aftermath of antagonistic decolonizations; the turn to “indeterminacy” and “undecidability” in contemporary European theory as well as the whole thematic of the “end of metaphysics”; the spectacularization of professional intelligence (*House*, *CSI*, *Numbers*) which persists uncomfortably, yet logically with a whole cacophony of emergent spiritualisms, holisms, and expressive individualisms (Cranial Sacral Healing, Yoga, Burning Man, Art Galleries, etc); “philanthrocapitalism” (Bishop) and corporate citizenship as well as the thematic of the “social entrepreneur” (Clinton, 137); the near universal valorization of the particular and the local; and-- finally-- the emergence of an idea about sustainable or “green” production all function as discordant pieces in a globalized capitalism for which the default subjectivity appears increasingly to be a centrism the skeptical principle of which somehow never explicitly contradicts its avowed isomorphism with ethico-political exigency—the requirements, as it were, of citizenly duty.

The radical center is a political philosophy--a conscious matrix of principles and propositions--but also a code of subjection, a system of logic and an intense grammatical pleasure. It is a hyper-differentiated node on a plane of centricizations, but also a drifting meme. If it explicitly orients subjects in the zone of a game called politics, continually dividing its space along new faultlines and identifications, always splitting and re-constituting the mise-en-scene of political intelligibility, it is equally active on the level of habitude, the unconscious, and the tick. One need not identify as a centrist to have one's speech thoroughly fibrillated by its categories. Its modes are as likely to accrete in a full discursive identification-- the radical centrist proper, for example-- as they are to disseminate in quiet particles across the entire field of the symbolic, exercising an utterance at the place of its sheerest intimacy. Though there are few avowals less controversial than that of centrist "moderation"; few volitions less contentious than those directed at "reaching across the aisle" and trading peace for partisanship; and though there is perhaps nothing less remarkable than the silent mechanism by which a speaker flags their speech as "independent," it is precisely the utter inoffensiveness of these fragments which renders them spontaneously vital to liberal capitalist reproduction and legitimacy.

The radical center does not simply function as the theoretical doxa of a transnational political elite whose implicit task it is to safeguard the freedoms and pleasures of capitalism against an entire panoply of threats, critiques, disturbances, etc; unlike earlier "ruling" codes which often struck excluded populations as preposterously invalid-- the easy target of a vulgar joke-- centrist reason extends far beyond the

executive modules of liberalism altering the very chemistry of dailyness itself. By expropriating the language of critique--an “extreme”, post-rationalist (i.e., non-dogmatic) rationalism--this discourse frankly disorients a Left for which the vocabulary of negativity no longer seems to hold up against an enemy determined to “think outside the box” or “do no evil”. The presence of a centrism is confirmed every time the response to one's critique of an illogic structural to capitalism--the automobile, for example, or the suburb--assumes the form of a bemused smirk and a patient inducement to complexity, balance, or temperance. In other words, it becomes identifiable at the moment the gesture of critique is renounced as “bias” or mocked as the very picture of childishness. It is the conceit of this thesis that there is no task less indispensable to Left Theory today than that of identifying (and quarantining) the logic of this smirk and to evolve—perhaps, at the cost of some our most cherished aesthetical habits—rhetorical and organizational strategies fully adequate to an epoch for which the middle is less a slough than it is a testing spirit of knowledge.

The Radical Center: A Profile in Smoothness

The greatest managers in the world do not have much in common. They are of different sexes, races, and ages. They employ vastly different styles and focus on different goals. But despite their differences, these great managers do share one thing: before they do anything else, they first break all the rules of conventional wisdom. They do not believe that a person can achieve anything he sets his mind to. They do not try to help a person overcome his weaknesses. They consistently disregard the Golden Rule...We are not encouraging you to replace your natural managerial style with a standardized version of theirs—great managers do not share a “standardized style”. Great managers are revolutionaries.

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules*

“...the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such Finis ultimus, (utmost ayme,) nor Summum Bonum, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires

are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later. The cause whereof is, That the object of mans desire, is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire. And therefore, the voluntary actions, and inclinations of all men, tend, not only to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life; and differ onely in the way: which ariseth partly from the diversity of passions, in divers men; and partly from the difference of the knowledge, or opinion each one has of the causes, which produce the effect desired. So that in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely after Death.”
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

I am not a centrist because I can't make up my mind about the Right and the Left, rather it is because each of those has proved itself to be so non-optimal that rationality and experience move me toward the dynamic moving center.
Paul Samuelson, *Der Spiegel*

The radical center is best characterized as a sophisticated liberal skepticism. It is marked above all else by its claim to have abjured the fusty impasse of polarized thinking for a risky and reflexive space freed to fresh notions¹. Having truculently exited the terrain of mere belief, its ambit limns a disenchanting, but never morose or torpid realism. It differs from many of its enlightened, empiricist antecedents in that its fantasy is not that of a planet finally emptied of the dependency of fetish, a world unambiguously actualized by freedom, reason or science. Marx's evocative early image of a criticism which plucks the flowers from the chains, not to make the chains less beautiful, but to give the human over to the immanence and richness of its autonomy has no place here. Instead, the myopia of the fetish concentrates, intensifies, and enlivens the radiance of a desire: it becomes a pulsating machine, the amoral motor of capitalism's exorbitant material

1 See Lawrence Lessig's *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*; Roger Martin's *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*; James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few*; Stephen D. Levitt's *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*; as well as Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* as recent paradigmatic examples of radical centrist thought.

extension. Philosophically hedonist—Thomas Hobbes' notion of a desire which drifts from object to object in endless succession—radical centrism wields its proximity to this “desiring production” like a bold contraband, a black mass anathema to the holy obedience of the ignorant and ancient moralisms. To speak of its hegemony, in other words, is to speak of a language crucially distinct from the crude moral conservatism often associated with the neo-conservatisms of Thatcher and Reagan.

Perpetually reconstructing the hereticism of modernity—the early subversiveness of a thought for which self was no longer sin--radical centrism imagines its ability to gaze onto the ambivalence of the human--crudely appetitive and prone to gullibility, yet also wildly precocious and creative--as a kind of renaissance courage. It is this realist restraint which protects its practice from the stupid (read totalitarian) impulse of what Edmund Burke called “theoretic perfection”. Allowing the amorality of markets to shape and distribute existence is framed as a radical, materially efficient solution to the problem of infinite human desire. Theatrically agnostic², this discourse demonstrates its secession from the moralism of truth--to say nothing of the elitism and condescension it associates with Left critique--by safeguarding a danger special to liberalism: namely the individual's inalienable right to profligacy and chance, its freedom to err, sleep, lie, lose, fuck, eat, or gamble without limit within the juridical perimeters that protect exchange from fraudulence, and bodies from coerced insecurity. However intense its disdain for revealed truth, it uses its toleration of such practices as evidence for the structural superiority of

2 A whole spate of recent books play on this flamboyant liberal “subversion” of God. See Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, Sam Harris, *End of Faith*, as well as Richard Dawkins's, *The God Delusion*. God's unsophisticated clumsiness and unthinking rituals of obedience here operate as foils to the elegant logicity of a liberal order that is itself left untouched by the skeptical gesture.

civil governance: “rights”, Michael Ignatieff reminds us, “are not a language of the good” (22). Religion, like consensually naughty sex, is an incorrigible libidinal option, a colourful, if not bufoonish expression of the freedom unprescriptively granted by liberal reason³. In short, freed from its long internment to reformist meddling and theocratic dullness, the present is nothing but a mirrored, seething complex of decentralized fetishes; labyrinthine, representable only in fragments, it is the tumultuous circulation of a pleasure finally alive on the scale of the planet itself. In this common and profane, but also euphoric pleasure there is something irrefutable, the shadow of an ontology of the center.

Of course, every competent centrist willingly concedes the “shortcomings” of capitalist globalization. This is a liturgically necessary moment in the performance of the “balance” required to convincingly occupy middle ground. Not surprisingly, this language never finds its tongue tied by a Noam Chomsky or Walden Bello armed to the teeth with damning facts and numbers: rather, the poverty it concedes as empirically existent finds itself suddenly rendered unrecognizable, merely relative, rather than absolute, or tagged as the predictable function of diffuse governmental malfeasance⁴. Far from avoiding these

3 “I am not asking for the right to slaughter a pig in a synagogue or mosque or to relieve myself on a “holy” book. But I will not be told I can’t eat pork, and I will not respect those who burn books on a regular basis. I, too, have strong convictions and beliefs and value the Enlightenment above any priesthood or any sacred fetish-object. It is revolting to me to breathe the same air as wafts from the exhalations of the madrasahs, or the reeking fumes of the suicide-murderers, or the sermons of Billy Graham and Joseph Ratzinger. But these same principles of mine also prevent me from wreaking random violence on the nearest church, or kidnapping a Muslim at random and holding him hostage, or violating diplomatic immunity by attacking an embassy the envoys of even the most despotic Islamic state, or making a moronic spectacle of myself threatening blood and fire to faraway individuals who may have hurt my feelings. The babyish rumor-fueled tantrums that erupt all the time, especially in the Islamic world, show yet again that faith belongs to the spoiled and selfish childhood of our species”. Christopher Hitchens, “The Case for Mocking Religion” *Slate*, Feb 4 2006 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2135499/>>

4 “Indeed, the consequences of increased inequality, in any event, might be paradoxically benign, rather than malign. If a thousand people become millionaires, the inequality is less than if Bill Gates gets to make a billion all by himself. But the thousand millionaires, with only a million each, will likely buy

discussions, the center freely names and rationally expostulates capitalism's great desolate zones, the famine stricken places, holding them up to the light, exposing the work to be done, leaving no inequality or social exclusion unturned. It is into this gap or hole, which transforms the productivity and interconnectedness of pleasures into commodity-adverse fundamentalism and populist blindness, that the center steps as an admonishing, highly didactic consciousness: even if it has abandoned flagrantly the associationism and utilitarian reformism of Victorian liberalism it envisions as crucial to its project a non-perfectionist and extra-statal authority which it uses to dissuade excluded populations from the unreason, delirium and anger of insurrectionary collectivism. Authority, informed by both an impression of technical proficiency, but also a projected experiential worldliness, vitally complements the center's capacity to frame “political” (read “populist”) solutions as naive and unscientific. Those who would critique the anarchic freedom of a human no longer subordinated to the privation of God, Goodness, or Government either simplistically idealise human possibility or wrongly hyperbolize its excesses and failures.

For the radical center, abstractions are vectors of a toxic affectivity liable to transform equilibrium and peace into chaos and catastrophe. Democracy, even freedom itself, are “words” one can take too seriously, with dangerous, even systemically terminal consequences: it is the universality of the desire for a quiet life, a peace amenable to

expensive vacations, BMWs, houses in the Hamptons, and toys at FAO Schwarz. In contrast, Gates will no not be able to spend his billion even if he were to buy a European castle a day, and the unconscionable wealth would likely propel him, as in fact it has, to spend the bulk of the money on social good. So extreme inequality will have turned out to be better than less acute inequality!” Jagdish Bhagwati, *In Defense of Globalization* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2004) 66. Other paradigmatic examples can be found in Jeffery Sachs's *The End of Poverty* and Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to the Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty*, 2003.

production and exchange, experience and pleasure, which is the only legitimate project of human reason. Any thought incommensurate with the frank serendipity of growth importunately risks the fragile institutional balance of liberal governance, “irresponsibly” simplifying a global process too multi-dimensional to be contained by the strict moral trappings of “good” and “bad”. The extremity of the center, then, should be primarily understood as the steadfastness of its capacity to eschew, resist and deny the “extremes” their atavistic power over the simple pleasures of what Edmund Burke called “common human life” or “concrete Man”. Following in the shadow of a liberal tradition which has always framed civil peace as continuously tailed by war and nature, the present order is conceptualized as a temperate climate, a tentative and hospitable armistice broadly susceptible to disastrous reversal and negation. If there are still innumerable global problems, this is either an effect of the imperfectibility of being itself or local often statalized errors best negotiated by the pragmatic, decentralized efficacy of market competition. “There is,” Burke argues, “in the fundamental constitution of all things, a radical infirmity....”. Politics, with its linear ideological sequences and idea-heavy inflexibility, lacks the fractal responsiveness needed to address problems that are fragmented, localized, and primarily technical: needed is a kind of smart tweaking, a minor, but scintillating adjustment of relations and things.

If the gleam of neutrality or balance invoked by centrist discourse appears clumsily negated by an explicit positionality, this is a contradiction the centrist effortlessly negotiates. Where the centrism of comedian Jon Stewart is a form of weak deconstruction, its irony entirely negative and non-propositional politically, a kind of soft,

“inclusive” skepticism which always finds itself awash in liberal remainders and untheorized presuppositions, the extreme center performs the middle as if it were a space of rigorous, even dialectical contention, "liberated territory" continually protected by reason against the stupid, ruining predations of left and right. The center is not one political option among others, another worldview flanked by alternatives, but an extreme attentiveness to the real, *a being at the center of things*. Nor is it a slough of compromise and sycophancy, an indeterminate bog or gridlock, the shame of being “caught in the middle”. Rather, it frames itself as a decisiveness in war, a reason sharpened by the frictions and exclusions of the in-between. Perpetually investigative, always testing old axioms against new information, correcting mis-perception, amending weak conclusions, speaking economic reality to the emotional ellipses of politics as usual, the obviousness of the fact that the extreme center always ends up arriving at the fundamental soundness, efficacy and indispensibility of liberal capitalism is curiously explained less as proof of the faux neutrality of every gesture to the middle, than as a coincidence capacious enough to be nothing but the singularity and profuseness of a cognition arriving at the singularity and profuseness of the solution itself. That the radical center continually passes through Descartes's “methodical doubt” only to arrive once more at the good necessity of capital is less a symptom of the imperfection of its skepticism and more a function of the simply impeccable rationality of capitalism itself.

Inveterately polemical, the extreme center escapes association with "partisanship", "extremism", and "ideology", by modelling itself on the relational ontology of markets. It likes to imagine itself as little more than the act of exchange crystallized in the form of a

combative consciousness, a frisson of "sharing", "free-trade", complete with associations of connectivity, travel, the exotic, smuggling, curiosity, worldliness, etc. Unlike the decrepit political poles--all speech and memory, tradition and protection, cronyism, unreality and repetition--the center imagines its practice as consonant with an anti-essentialism and non-prescriptive futurism isomorphic with the natural, market diffusion of creativity and plurality. The extreme center arrogates to itself all of the sinuosity, prestige, and speed of capital itself: it is its rhetorical mirror, its ideological twin, money with a tongue. It is within this context that centrist discourse and economic "post-industrialism" can be seen to reciprocally determine, contour, and augment each other. The postmodernization of the advanced economies--their association with informational and symbolic production, a labour no longer characterized by alienation, de-personalization, mechanicity, etc--as well as the proliferation of myriad technological "wonders"--the personal computer, the internet, customized communication and entertainment--function as virtuous parables of a center for whom creation is synonymous with the undogmatism of depoliticized reason.

Its only maxim an injunction to "think outside the box", the radical centrist deploys as evidence for its proximity to reason every global instance of invention. The intelligence of the market, which expresses itself in the perpetual novelty of often minutely "innovated" products, comes to appear like a cipher for the processuality and richness of centrist experimentalism and curiosity. In other words, its own persuasiveness as a discourse lies very close to the axiom of the iPod, the near transparent good of "clean", "customizable", information technology and continuously developed formal play.

Richard Branson's eclectic, capitalist adventurism, the wacky philanthropic genius of Nicholas Negroponte's third world laptops, Muhammed Yunus's banks for the poor or Bill Gates arduous midwifery of Microsoft all appear like irrefutable excerpts from the continuous biographical fecundity of the center itself. In opposition to those for whom the middle is a by-word for opportunism, servility, and continual belatedness the extreme center--paradoxically enough--is eccentricity incarnate, Benjamin Franklin in a lightning storm⁵. Always displaced, restless, away from itself in the direction of an intensity or solution, lost in making and thinking, pure febrile bricolage, the extreme center is in this sense a sophisticated strain of pragmatism, one whose unabashed secularity and elevated, hedonist tastes set it apart from every regime of thrift and the entire scenography of Max Weber's Calvinist capitalism (to say nothing of Henry David Thoreau's rustic self-reliance).

With respect to its “social policy,” this discourse prides itself on its unorthodox inclusiveness . The tone and some of its contradictions are perfectly captured by Alfred Reed Jr. with respect to Barack Obama:

In Chicago, for instance, we've gotten a foretaste of the new breed of foundation-hatched black communitarian voices: one of them, a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neoliberal politics, has won a state senate seat on a base mainly in the liberal foundation and development worlds. His fundamentally bootstrap line was softened by a patina of the rhetoric of authentic community, talk about meetings in kitchens, small-scale solutions to social problems, and the predictable elevation of process over program — the point where identity politics converges with old-fashioned middle class reform in favoring form over substances (Reed).

5 The Wall Street Journal's review of Stephen Levitt's *Freakonomics* is here utterly revealing: “If Indiana Jones were an economist, he'd be Stephen Levitt...a maverick treasure hunter who relies for success on his wit, pluck, and disregard for conventional wisdom...*Freakonomics* reads like a detective novel....I tried hard to find something in this book that I could complain about. But I gave up. Criticizing *Freakonomics* would be like criticizing a hot fudge sundae...”

This new interpenetration of old liberal notions of order, security, and freedom, with an ethical paradigm which respects difference, privileges the rights of women and minorities, and even opens itself to flirtations with audacious hope, green capitalism, etc, is what radically separates earlier realisms from today's slightly wicked, constitutively inventive pragmatism of the middle. This tension between an older radically individualist, sometimes cantankerous cynicism--often shamelessly tactical in import and style--and a discernible, recent shift to a restrained, "critical" communitarianism is one of the most compelling antinomies of contemporary centrism.

I could not conclude this section without noting the extent to which the center attempts to register its extremity on the level of speech itself. The default rhetorical option of the center is undoubtedly wit. It is a light, amoral, constitutively irrefutable form of verbal play, the kind which paralyses a politically new or rare proposition by setting before it all of the hubris intrinsic to beginnings. Tonally foreign are the beseeching, saccharine strains of moral indignation, the righteous anger of the manifesto or protest. "Everything solid melts into air" in the crosshairs of a centrist reason capable of disguising its content as irony itself. Its own projects hedged by the putative realism of "balance", the center is situated in such a way that it can parody its opponents to the right and left even as it evades capture by reciprocal ironizations in the accommodating thickets of middleness. The metaphors of the middle, here, function as a kind of screen or fog impenetrable to analysis or critique.

It is in this context that the center's persuasiveness relies very heavily on the accuracy and impact of its comedy. Its humour is vitally enabled by a broad sense for the

futility of everything which refuses to establish itself in the odorous Real of existing bodies, objects, and pleasures. A partisan of that which exists—but never the “status quo” as such—the radical center exploits the insubstantiality of counter-visions of the present by holding them up against what Hegel called the “wealth of bygone life”, the rich determinateness of the world as it is (and has been). The priest's taste for flesh is a metonym for the entire debacle of the human; truth's destiny is a futile carousel of follies, flaws and missteps, every fine utterance spoiled by a tongue bewitched by the real of taste. This naturalism is the logical predator of every communism, every egalitarian political gesture or proposition, to say nothing of its effects on even the least ambitious Keynesianism. The great lumbering entities of State and Party to say nothing of political oratory or `grass-roots` organization are peculiarly susceptible to capture by centrist irony: collective efforts in the grasp of such gaming can only ever appear grandiloquent and garbled, their credibility instantly punctured by the laughter of the tavern or brothel, a laughing as old as politics.

Centricization: Detections of a Process

We are all assumed, these days, to reside at one extreme of the opinion spectrum, or another. We are pro-abortion or anti-abortion. We are free traders or protectionists. We are pro-private sector or pro-government. We are feminists or chauvinists. But in the real world, few of us hold these extreme views. There is instead a spectrum of opinion. The extreme positions of the Crossfire Syndrome require extreme simplification - framing the debate in terms that ignore the real issues....This polarization of the issues has contributed greatly to our national paralysis, because it posits false choices which stifle debate essential to change.

Michael Crichton “Mediasaurus”

When Congress returns to Washington, the battles will resume -- and each party will accuse the other of partisanship. Why can't they just get along? Because fundamental issues are at stake, and the parties are as far apart on those issues as they have ever been. Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal [are] political scientists who use data on

Congressional voting to create "maps" of politicians' ideological positions. They find that a representative's votes can be predicted quite accurately by his position in two dimensions, one corresponding to race issues, the other a left vs. right economic scale reflecting issues such as marginal tax rates and the generosity of benefits to the poor. And they also find -- not too surprisingly -- that the center did not hold. Ralph Nader may sneer at "Republicrats," but Democrats and Republicans have diverged sharply since the 1980's, and are now further apart on economic issues than they have been since the early 20th century.

Paul Krugman "America the polarized."

For many the suggestion of a diffuse centricization of the political will be frustratingly counter-intuitive. Those for whom the present is primarily characterized by an elemental "polarization" of forces will find the notion entirely incomprehensible, if not frankly offensive. Far from collapsing or converging the poles, they insist, have never been more active: politics is increasingly handcuffed by ideology, incapacitated by the closed filiative practices of partisanship. This far-flung political "groupthink"⁶ interrupts not just the formation of solutions conceived from the open judiciousness of the whole, but also, a "spectrum of opinion" presumed to be operative in the "real world"; such thought substitutes nearsightedness and collective delirium for the clarity of an interest alive on the scale of the nation itself. The United States--where this discourse is particularly common--is represented as riskily incarnate, a "fragile union" the viscissitudes of which threaten paralysis or even systemic failure. "Bitterly divided", it is suggested that, of "two Americas", one red, one blue. In one version of this story the problem is less the fact of division than it is its failure to have adequately evolved a "spirit of cooperation": it's not the passion for "truth" this divisive conviction should abandon

6 This term, used by James Surowiecki, describes the unthinking cognition of small, homogenous groups and is counterposed to the undeliberative intelligence of diverse, informed crowds and markets which operate their desire at the speed of pleasure itself.

but its refusal to "reach across the aisle". In another, it is "conviction" itself that must go: politics as such continues to get in the way of practically solving the problems faced by individuals in a world no longer characterized by the old divisions and attachments.

At the same time, there are many for whom the idea that genuine political antagonism has been replaced by centrist consensus simply lacks evidence; often it will be shrugged off as little more than the optical illusion of an extreme angle irritated by its historical peripheralization. From this perspective, the suggestion of an economic consensus subtending the sectoral difference that separates blue from red speaks less to the existence of depoliticization than it does to the changed conditions of a reality in which the economic as such no longer exists as an object accessible to the dominion of the political. To suggest that these differences are nothing but signs emptied of agonism or that their distance is in fact a far-reaching proximity is belied by the direct, affective responses convoked by existent political divisions; to insist that these differences, as well as the content of their affects, be historicized and held up against those which existentially plied the prior century carries with it a predictable whiff of nostalgia or even, paradoxically, an odd complicity with historical violence.

If this discourse, however, interestingly registers a quiet disenchantment with existent classifications of the political, indirectly noting their lack of utility or deadness, perhaps the key tactically is to displace the weight of this impasse away from the concept of polarization as such and onto the negating formalism of red and blue. How this potentially radical critique of automated political categories can be insured against the depoliticizing centrist eschewal of categorization as such is certainly a crucial strategic

concern for contemporary left analysis and practice. For now, however, it is enough to note the rich weirdness of this primary centrist withdrawal from the very hypothesis of its own historical universalization: as Leon Trotsky noted long ago “the centrist dislikes nothing more than to be called a centrist.” Though this resistance of the center to its own name has changed—itsself attesting to the transvaluation and increased currency of the middle as a vector for the political—the discomfort produced by attempts to capture its practice in a “label” or to chronicle its historical dimensions continue.

There exists an axiom by which the center sequesters every name for itself generated by critique; this is, of course, the magic of the parenthesis, that power to bracket the strange on the basis of its distance from vernacular alone. What matters, here, is that the radical center relies heavily for its exigency on the continual possibility of an irruption of the poles, an invocation and performance of impending or extant polarization which secures as indispensable the diplomatic betweenness of the center. Without the potential extremity of the poles the very *raison d'être* of the center collapses; it gains an aspect terrible in its positivity, one wholly incompatible with the requirements of flexible reason. No longer the simple peace of middleness or the humility of a between, the center stumbles across the threshold of its own visibility and is itself variably fixed: a language of governance, an investedness, a game or thing among other games and things.

Of course, the notion of centricization is just as likely to be dismissed from the Right and the Left as the mystification of a conjuncture much better characterised as *one-sided*. This narrative concedes the annihilation of antagonism denounced by the critics of depoliticization, but sees its cause as the destruction of balance by uncurtailed power.

The evangelical right, for example, will either deny outright that conservatives have any substantive say in the determination of the present--thereby counteracting the image of the center as a convergence of the poles--or decry the very idea of a movement to the middle as one of moral defection, a being lukewarm or half-hearted which endangers the distinctness of the Good. If, then, centricization is admitted it is only as evidence for the continuing hegemony of a permissive, "liberal" culture associated with the erosion of traditional values: the center in this sense is the indistinguishable swamp of a people without God or truth, the morass, paradoxically, of a planet which has lurched leftward culturally since the 1960s. Experimentation in lifestyles, a drifting of everything into the shapelessness of the middle, disappearance of every compass into the swamp of the betwixt: centricization becomes the paradoxical synonym for the absence or collapse of centricity itself, the destruction of the axis necessary to meaning. What matters, here, is the way in which the executive power captured regularly by the Right in the decades since Reagan is framed as a beleaguered tactic of the weak--the persecuted majority (white people, Christians, men, etc). From such a perspective, the rightist icons of the great neo-conservative movements appear like momentary exceptions to a rule, fleeting breaks on an otherwise unbroken sea of secularism.

Jacques Rancière's 1988 essay "The End of Politics or the Realist Utopia" is to date the single most interesting attempt to specifically think the Center as a form of politics. In it he argues that the scene of the political in the advanced capitalist states has been wholly subordinated to a form of utopian realism which claims to have left behind the grandiloquence, futurity and impotence of collective politics for a technocratic

pragmatism of growth, "an art of steering the ship and embracing the waves" (5). This political configuration has two aspects: a temporal dimension characterized by a present entirely bounded by the time of expansion--"the natural, peaceful movement of growth"--and a spatial dimension characterized by the utopic figure of "The Center", an arrangement or balance of social forces which neutralizes the anarchic, empirical risks of political division (5-6). For Rancière, the notion of the Center is a strategy of control, an instrument of pacification the primary coordinates of which were first described by Aristotle:

The ideal solution, the ideal reduction of the political by the social takes a homonym as the basis for an isomorph and dictates that the center should be at the center, that the political center of the city should be occupied by the middle class, by the class of those who are neither rich nor poor, who need not pass, need not travel, between their social space and the political center. Thus the center is no longer a pole of tension being pulled in either direction between itself and the periphery....The coincidence of the center and the mean makes it "altogether easy" to obey the logos, a logos which therefore appears less like the locus of a discussion than like a force which is obeyed, just as living things obey the laws of their own organism (14).

The Center, says Rancière, is not merely "a space relative to others", but rather "a new configuration of political space" itself (6). Rancière's use of the concept of the Center is that of a figure of structuration, a utopic project of stability that fails at the instant it makes contact with the real. "We are still searching for the center, for the coincidence of centers", he argues: "Government by the center remains the utopia of our realist politics" (15). In other words, the Center is for Rancière almost entirely exhausted by a will to morality or order always interrupted by the complexity of actual social formations. Against the desired "moderation" of centrism strains the untotalizable recalcitrance of the

demos, the *aperion* which never takes the form desired by the constraining One of political philosophy.

The error in this conception of the center as metaphysical will to power will become apparent in the next section. Though Rancière intuits brilliantly the fractal ontology of markets, he ends up propping up one of the oldest images of the center as pure governance, thereby missing entirely the newness of our conjuncture, to say nothing of the sophistication and slipperiness of his enemy. More importantly, it is precisely this association of the center with disciplinary power, rather than with the relationality of capital itself, which leads him into the solution of anarchism: rather than targeting the semioticity of capitalism—undoubtedly the horizon of any genuine contemporary politics—he trains his vision on the predictable bogey of “the Police,” a principle of order opposed to the rich multiplicity and uncontainability of true (anarchic) democracy.

For now, I would like to suggest that what radically distinguishes contemporary centricization from earlier configurations of the political is its unique minimality, a tendency, it would appear, *to a certain constitutive imperceptibility*. The globalization of centrism has certainly not been accompanied by the diffusion of a conversation about its political efficacy or meaning: even the fragrance and ubiquity in recent years of a near universal injunction to “bi-partisanship” has gone unnoticed by the commentators. Even as the law of the hyphen (center-left, center-right) perforates governmentalities everywhere, the center itself—though continuously deployed as a sign on the level of speech—remains nearly invisible as a concept, not only journalistically, but also within the disciplines usually charged with the task of registering historical and social change. That

there is to date no canonical history of the center as a form of political consciousness is astounding and deeply symptomatic. Compare this silent shift to the visible reflexivity and contention which accompanied the globalization of communism or even that of the "New Deal" in the decades after World War II and one cannot help but wonder if there is something in the notion of the center intrinsically resistant to its own problematization as object.

In other words, though the concept of the center overflows culturally in the present, its life as a strict political category has a working historical valence of zero. The absence of a history of the center has something to do with the ways in which one begins to sense that it is as ancient as space or reason itself, or as as old, perhaps, as the claim to have craftily bridged a political distance. Does one govern from the center as soon as one does so "moderately"? Is centrism distinguishable beyond the ostensible fact of "compromise", the art of weaving governance and peace from antagonism and difference: is it nothing but the mute exercise of power, a curation of the world as it is? What the center lacks is historical volume--a genuine distinction. It has no primary texts or manifestoes or even a single unambiguous master thinker. It has no paradigmatic moments or figures, no instant after which it can be said to exist in the form of a recognizable project or movement. The idea of a reflexive tradition continuously inflected by scrupulous inheritance or creative transmission feels wholly unsuited. Which is to say that the center as a political object appears in the form of a certain iconographical thinness, a politics without flags or masses, or even symbols of any kind at all. Of course this itself meets the requirements of the center's claim to have broken entirely with the

conformism of crowds, propping up and confirming its novelty. Its own historical slimness, its own invisibility to history becomes an essential moment in the production of the extreme center's viability as a discourse of sheer pragmatist experimentation, all “process” no “program”. But if we are to minimally historicize the center in its extreme form—and there remains an immense amount of work to be done here—we must first find a way to locate its specificity vis a vis the remarkable cultural diffusion of centrality itself.

The Bewitched Between: Apparatus of a Quandry

..in some sense all objects lie equally near to the center: that is to say, to the principle that everything is bewitched

Theodor Adorno *Minima Moralia*

A circle of circles, consciousness has only one centre, which solely determines it; it would need circles with another centre than itself – decentred circles – for it to be affected at its centre by their effectivity, in short for its essence to be over-determined by them

Louis Althusser, (*For Marx*)

Unlike railroads or pyramids, there are no intuitively necessary points of departure for a cultural history which aims to name the center's specificity. Of course, this has nothing to do with the rumoured insubstantiality of concepts vis-a-vis “real” things: ideas like “liberty” or “right” evoke quite precise regional and temporal signatures and can quite effortlessly be “filled in” with a whole complex of exceptional personalities, decisive historical moments, and relatively clear contemporary ensembles. The center, however, lacks this substantiality even as it utterly saturates everyday speech; it is a uniquely trafficked intersection, the crossroads for an intensely layered network of historical associations and frequencies. This should come as no surprise: “being at the

center” is as much the hall pass to an obscure set of metaphysical practices as it is the encryption and codeword for a way of styling the political. If this entanglement of the concept of the political center with myriad popular and philosophical resonances is dismissed as incidental to an unpacking of all that is local to political centrism, one gains, perhaps, a certain disciplinary clarity, but at the cost of effectively negating one's capacity to comprehend and detail the object's complex patterning. In fact, these resonances directly supplement the political efficacy of a move to the center, modifying and enabling the terms of its persuasiveness.

Take, for example, the notion of “being centered”. In its most common, urban usage this metaphor names a therapeutics of the self that draws on both geometry and an imagined “ancient wisdom”, often articulated to a physical practice like yoga or even mere “rest”. The conceit of centered being is one of an art of finally personal living; its spheres and energies sensibly apportioned, its consciousness a managed balance or the mechanism of a regeneration of powers, its thematics can be used to justify aggressive, “perfected” entry into the jungle of the market, a philosophy of vigour and self-knowingness which “gets what it wants”, or tilted to frame an ethical secession from or to the real, a depth or nothingness beyond the pale of mere “things”, money, games, selfishness, etc. Reached is either a locus freed from the trappings of the external or a being-at-one with the whole, a cosmic holism which abolishes the personality itself. Depending on the requirements of context, a good centrist can toggle between these opposed meanings or allow them both to signal at the same time, the presence of paradox never enough alone to cancel out or enervate the concept's diffuse resourcefulness.

When it comes to categorizing the center as a species of politics and not simply a concept active across a bewildering complex of domains and objects—from histories of theology and philosophy, to geographical and geometrical imaginaries, developments in the physical sciences, even hexical or gestalt considerations about the relationships between psychology, identity and space, unified temporal experience, the personality etc— one always ends up stumbling over the threshold of a certain exasperating metaphysical surplus, a gravitas which somehow seems to outflank and impede specification. *The center is not just the happenstance of a middle, nor is it exhaustively expressed in the form of a programme or platform, a standard “centrist” agenda.* To approach the center as if it were nothing but a sliding historical chesspiece--cynically occupied territory-- would be to badly bracket the immense epistemological authority of the concept, that well-known cultural naturalness and apriority closely diagrammed by the great meta-historical critiques today associated with the names of Louis Althusser, Jaques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others. It is easy to forget that what linked these distinct critical projects was in part a shared sense for the cultural primacy in the West of a theory and practice of centers. From the Platonic image of justice as balance to the disciplinary architectonics of prisons and states, the center could be seen to function as a tropological constant, a “master-signifier” which insured, as it were, the truth of truth-- truth's proximity to itself. Viewed from this perspective, the center ceases to appear as a determinate sector of the political and instead stands in as the point of departure for the very possibility of meaning itself, a will to power or regulative ideal coextensive with the historical adventure and practice of Being. The center, then, is that which must “hold” if

there is to be a world at all: it is the axis of essence, the indeterminable substance around which intelligibilities swirl like stars. This is, of course, the notoriously trumpeted “center of things”: it is the cross on which history has been hung as much as it is the throne, body, or palace of the king.

It would no doubt be possible to write a detailed history of the relationship between centripetal force and truth, to catalogue all of the historical axes, all of the subjects, systems, and dimensions thought to orbit points in circles or spirit. *The efficacy of such a project, however, would be badly compromised if it were to begin at the assumption that today's political center was nothing but the predictable shadow of an old metaphysical habit.* Having presumed as continuous what is in fact a complex nest of resonances, the center in its contemporary expression as a style of the political is here reduced to the imperious robes of metaphysical centrality: it stands--as it always has--for a truth indistinguishable from order, an ideology of essence which endeavours to force upon a diffuse plurality of experiences and identities the bad necessity of the point. Transcendent to being, aurally objective, the “Center” (now capitalized) as a political fiction is just the last in a line of pinhole rationalisms designed to protect order from the exorbitance and incommensurability of movement, complexity, democracy, etc⁷. The Center-- like Man and God-- is nothing but an injunction to obedience, a secular theology of progress and a moralistic equilibrium that must be continually menaced in the form of a horde of deconstructionist margins and traces. In other words, the task of critique is

7 As discussed in Section 2, this is Rancière's position. It mirrors in form the distinction he always draws between politics and philosophy, or, to say the same thing, politics and the Police. That this is an utterly conventional position matters less than the fact Rancière is too busy critiquing vertical systems—French Republicans and Monarchists as well as the scandal of primogeniture!—to get down to the difficult task of articulating the conditions of the reproduction of subjectivity under capitalism.

primarily figured as that of "de-centering" the centre, destabilizing or interrupting its smooth orbit.

Though this ethical vision of the relationship between critique and political centrism rightly acknowledges the project of control at the heart of every "will to center", it hopelessly misunderstands the uniquely "eccentric" coordinates of the radical middle as well as badly forgetting the ways in which the historical development of capitalism utterly divides, inflects, and shapes centrality, thoroughly modifying its code. Every political centrism fixes its frequency against the elevator music of an immense cultural compendium of centers--an apparatus of centrality--which is neither untotalizably plural nor conspiratorially one. *If this apparatus can never be said to have been utterly emptied of fullness, presence, essence, being, reason, harmony, substance, truth, etc it is nevertheless the case that the center as a political and epistemological category is today far more likely to be used as the signpost for a profane metaphysics of exchange, than it is a name for oneness or transcendence.* Embodiment and locality, promiscuity and inventiveness describe postmodern centrism much more thoroughly than that old bundle of nouns dominated by the dusty architectural and geometrical model of a stable metaphysical whole. Ultimately, however, there can be no question of choosing between an older center organized around the figure of the column or axis and a contemporary tropology dominated by the moving image of exchange: as will be seen, what enables and augments the supremely tautological power of contemporary political centrism is its capacity to transpose, trade on, and integrate these meanings simultaneously, binding the

certitude and objectivity of scientific reason to the jostling, embodied dailyness and relativity of the common.

Which brings us to what is at stake in this polysemy. The ability of the notions of Left and Right to name distinct political options is, of course, one born of their mutuality and reciprocity: they signal effectively only within the context of their susceptibility to opposition. The functioning of the binary is at every instant understood to be to the contingent semiotic trace of an historical adventure called politics. This is the case with or without the bare secularization of the political field, that is, regardless of the relationship between a subject's political identification and whatever personal or religious views it may hold about the nature of history, moral truth, the existence of Gods, etc. Whether one is on the right or on the left, whatever the depth of a commitment to the absoluteness of a position, *one can never mistake the very sign of that position for a truth outside the agonistic space delimited by the political proper*⁸. To affirm one's commitment to one end of the pole is to operate self-reflexively within a cultural apparatus—the spectrum—all parties tacitly concede is arbitrary and historical rather than apodictic or given.

However, just as Right and Left in physical space name semiotically neutral options, directions which can only be understood from the perspective of the concrete situation in which they function as guides, so too do their political meanings primarily

⁸The extent to which centricization conditions even the most intractable of “fundamentalisms” is apparent in Don Delulio's new book, *A Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future*. The first director of George Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiatives department Delulio calls for a “middle way” between the extreme position of theocracy and the total separation of church and state. He describes his text as a “centrist blueprint” which aims at a “moderate” and “rational” resolution of this unthinkingly polarized debate. Today, even the most convicted Christians are practical centrists, constantly beckoning to the need to “re-think” for example the dogma of evolution or even the “one-sided” nature of feminism. For a good example of this “skeptical” theism see Geoffrey Simmons book *Billions of Missing Links: A Rational Look at the Mysteries Evolution Can't Explain*.

function as compass points; they are hexical coordinates the contingency of which is worn, as it were, on the sleeve. Not insignificantly, one is ON the Left, not IN (the middle). On the level of the sign itself, there is very little in the contemporary usage of Right and Left which recalls the rectitude or weakness circumambiently proper to older employments of these terms. Though these signs bind political identification to the domain of space their meanings lack entirely the semiotic capaciousness of a drift or dash to the middle. These terms then do not have the diffuse associational networks of the center, even if their classificatory functioning within the province of the political is cleaner and better filled on the level of content. The center, if empty on the level of content, is full when considered from the vantage-point of form; the poles, however, never cease to spurt content in a way that can sometimes be strategically embarrassing even as they suffer quietly from a rigidity or poverty of form that leaves them feeling slowfooted and predictable.

Of course, deployed colloquially within the field of the political the concept of the center is governed far more regularly by the secular geometry of the line than it is the ontological magic of the axis or circle. Abstract and instrumental, the line is flat like the horizon of the earth: it places terrestrial matters soundly into the immanence and equality of a plane on which anything can happen. To transpose the distribution of forces onto the metaphor of the line is a way of placing the human into the open question of its contingency; however fixed its terms, however strong the second nature of its poles, the spectrum draws a picture of existence as autonomy and possibility not revelation or givenness. For Descartes, the line operated on the side of form and clarity; it could divide

the textures of the world, introducing calculability and relationality into that which appeared densely overwoven by particularity. Like the artificiality of the compass or map, the spectrum is a convention, a rule of thumb, which exhausts the field it structures. As a metric the line can be used to dimension the unique imbroglio of the local, casting its folds onto a template susceptible to comparison on a scale that is global, but never wholly stable.

Proof of the conventionality of the line comes in the shape of a crazy spinning of its poles as it makes contact with the form taken by local configurations of the political: Stalinist Russia was "conservative" relative to the position of the Trotskyists, American evangelicals regularly decry the "leftism" of CNN, etc. At its most schematic the spectrum is nothing but a device for counting objects (1, 2, 3), a neutral machine for the sorting of differences, an ordinal apparatus for the collection of political options. In the cleanest Enlightenment dream it would add nothing to the object it names but the facticity of its difference, noting only its place relative to another. But the line which we want to function like a machine, is bewitched. Instead of a voting booth neutrally open to the free cognition of an option, instead of the display case, its clasp an equal invitation to selection, the line malfunctions. It morphs at the last instant into a string or a see-saw, an optical illusion places it back into the beleaguered semioticity of things, transforming that which should be nothing but a transparency of templates into a form of space, a kind of affect and a game of prejudices. *Value infects the abstraction that is thought to sort the possible politically.*

Grafted onto the metaphors of the line it is possible to think a center position for which the resources of middleness play a minimal role. The yellow of a traffic signal, it is a point or span, a section or length the positivity of which bi-furcates the poles by being something distinguishable on its own terms. As such it is definitionally extended and has a content apart from the poles it separates: it is a 2 between a 1 and a 3. Such a center is best described as ordinal: it is a thing on a chain of things, an entity the form of which can be discerned on the basis of a singularity in shape or colour. This ordinal center would be a political philosophy or programme with an exceptional degree of historical separation, one with its own unique ideational and institutional specificity. In this context, one can think of the historical "Center Parties" with their unique iconographical orders and aberrant or diagonal genealogies. Insisting that its content was not a distillate or residue of the poles, but a self-engendered third essence, this centrism would argue for its right to be included as a "worldview" apart. Not derivative of but merely adjacent to the great nineteenth-century poles, this discourse could perhaps make the argument that its confinement to the "center" position has less to do with its philosophy vis a vis the "extremes", than its own "uncategorizability". Perhaps it was jammed into the space between left and right precisely because it resembled neither of them, a queer book hastily shelved between known quanta. In other words, this "center" is nothing more than a minoritized alternative whose location on the spectrum is really just an accident of history. This third essence, however, very quickly begins to smell fishily like an autochony carrying with it all of the dubious residues of every claim to self-generation.

It is also possible for a center to be positive, but not ordinal: that is extended, an entity, but one strongly inflected tropologically by the metaphor of the line. From one perspective, this "mid-point" can be seen to convoke a figuration of maximal activity and alertness. It is not an inert, pre-existing object nor is it there by virtue of an historical accident, thrown into the space between left and right. This center is a fine point, a minuet on the head of a pin: invisible to first glances it must be sought out and found, *geometrically pin-pointed*. Compare this to the bluntness and apriority of the pole. There is an obviousness to the place where a line ends: its termination at the poles has a certain intuitive clarity which easily resonates within an entire cultural ensemble of limits, borders and boundaries. At the end of the line it is possible to imagine a perimeter or edge, a *terminus*. Dusty ghosttown, derelict glory, a dead-end in the middle of nowhere: it is said that life vanishes and is absorbed into repetition and sameness at the end of the line. At best, left and right confined topologically to the poles are easily visualized as "camps", settled zones or bands visible from a great distance. Perhaps, they are black holes, ancient organs or vast agglomerating masses, passive attractors easily denounced as atrophied, torpid, or dead. Or do they anchor the line, holding it in place against the buffeting winds of difference?

Nevertheless, it becomes easy to shift one's focus from these considerations to a rapid sliding into an account of the poles as themselves responsible for the linearity of the line, *as intrinsically linear themselves*. Not just differentially coded, but instances of linear thinking the vulgar post-structuralist account of the poles allows for an indiscernibility between the properties of the line and the kind of cognitions it builds into

its agents. The poles, then, can very quickly be translated into grim physical weights, a bulky inheritance that would be better left behind in the march towards secular growth. What strain could we escape, what new possibilities unleash if these ponderous stones were broken and the line they code permitted to spin in wild motions around the living intelligence of the center?⁹ Immobile, bounded, their backs up against the wall of the limit, it is only a short distance from these predicates to an idea about the predictability, givenness, and torpor of not just left and right but "polarized" structurality itself.

Unlike the poles the center of a line is less discernible and stands in need of derivation. Before it can be seen to exist, it must be the target of a cognition, a calculation. To "center" something properly one must take recourse to an apparatus or craft--one must deploy a technique, extracting order from murkiness. This process discovers symmetry only after having first been disoriented. Rulers, levels, and compasses attach themselves tropologically to the center combining the abstraction of geometry with the experiential intuition and hardheadedness of the builder or carpenter. What matter here, is that the mathematical procedure needed to ascertain the precise center of a line, the discernment necessary "to put one's finger on it", functions as an ideological supplement to the skeptical reasonableness of the middle as an active political identity. The center "picks up", as it were something of the cleverness and precision associated with the act of extracting a determinate point from the undistinguishability and non-disclosure of the span.

9 Management theorist Roger Martin calls this integrative thinking: "The ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each" *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*, (Harvard Business School Press, 2007) 15.

In other words, the non-givenness of the geometrical center and the exactitude of the point, combined with the technical process necessary to plot it together function to allegorically complement vital junctions in the topological signature of the center as a political identity. Unlike the poles which appear relatively locked in and familiar centrist reason uses the initial elusiveness of the middle to shore up ideas about its novelty and non-conformism: it emerges out of a primary indistinction, like something being seen for the first time. In this sense, the center cannot be said to pre-exist its own ratiocination. Its positions, it claims, are not ready to hand or pre-fabricated, but freely developed in the space between the inherited conclusions. One can arrive at the center, but only through the rigor of a discipline, only after having scrupulously evaluated the merits of both right and left, balancing their arguments and drawing careful measure from their habitual disproportion. What remains at the end of this analytic reduction is the sparkling gem of a truth, a shining point polished and perfected by the friction of skeptical reason. The center, then, is at once invented and found; that is, it marries a certain artificiality (a technical procedure) to a precise figure of mathematical objectivity, something "actually there". These memes, as we will see, can be used to negotiate the antinomies generated by the "being-there" or "amidst" I discuss later with respect to the center as volume or empty space.

At the same instant, the geometrical line becomes susceptible to an ideology of balance linked to spontaneous intuitions of the physical world. Envisioned as a simple machine--in this case, a lever--this model places the pivot of the fulcrum at the middle of the device, literally causing the apparatus to depend for its existence on an immobile and

rigid “centerpiece”. The latter's fine point-- at once stable and “razor-sharp”-- is the pivot on which the static equilibrium of the whole is established and conserved. This weight-bearing act of balance is clearly amenable to a notion of the center as the long-suffering middle necessity of civil order: the glue or “tie”, as it were, of societies prone to fission, complexity and separation. The political center is here construed as a form of active caution, a will which limits and constrains excess so as to incrementally augment the existent. This is the prudence ostensibly local to every instance of governance, the bitter secret disclosed to power at the moment it is captured and no longer mere caprice.

Every government, in this sense, governs from the center. Such a vision, channelling some of the resonances I described in relation to the metaphysical center, connects “good governance” to the very life of the socius itself: balance is the technocratic soul of the body politic, the pragmatic hinge on which the totality must swing if it is to stay alive at all. The center, in other words, is nothing but sovereignty itself; it is the thing on which the matter rests, the hard thing which measures and apportions the dispensation of the whole. It is--to say it clearly--*level-headed*. To subtract the center from this system is to simply cast it into oblivion. What distinguishes the radical center from its run of the mill competitor is of course its capacity to bind the pragmatism of sovereignty to an idea about its responsiveness and flexibility. Here the lever is no less useful. As disproportions accumulate within the machine, the fulcrum has the capacity to shift in such a way as to ensure the requirements of equilibrium. The center in this sense shifts so as to offset disproportions that threaten to tear the socius apart. What should be noted, however, is the way the razor-sharp point--the cleverness of

the center-- here coincides with a figure of flexible stability: this simultaneously rigid and motile power is the supreme conceit of postmodern technocracy.

This image occupies a vital juncture in the imaginary of the extreme center: it is the fantasy which crucially protects its radical pragmatism from a closeness in appearance to the myopia of the bureaucrat. In addition to its geometric and machine configurations, the center is also obviously an immensely provocative spatial gesture. The extent to which a center suppresses its positivity for a claim to sheer openness or plurality is the extent to which it has come to identify with the pure volume of an empty space: it is no longer confined to the flatness of a span and gains full three-dimensionality. This spatial center configures itself as little more than the tumultuous site of a dissensus, a void porous entirely to diffuse flows of speech and opinion. In this usage the center is not an intransigent singularity lodged between the torpid repetition of the extremes, but a central territory traversed continuously by diverse ideas, suggestions, identities, and dreams.

This volume articulates the properties of a parliament with its judicious, procedural speech to those of the agora, a market-place tessellated by profuse forms of objects and action. Its meaning no longer confined to the "caged" abstraction of the line, this center no longer functions as a mere "between" and becomes an "among" or an "amidst". Its terms and coordinates are fragmented, plural, and too numerous for the calculus structured by the old poles. This center, then, is not so much a tradition with an identifiable set of programmatic positions, but a neutral, undogmatic site for the accumulation of viewpoints and perspectives. It sees its own practice as nothing but the minimal act of gathering together and placing into communication the decentralized and

spatially discontinuous plurality of visions. It is a vessel for tolerant dialogue and disagreement, the place where an extreme moves when it wants to forgo its militancy for conciliation and rational progress. In other words, the center ceases to exist as a determinate entity and transubstantiates in such a way that it is nothing but exchange itself, a pure form of relationality without essence or history.

With its transformation into exchange the center of course arrogates to itself an entire network of properties intimately bound to the theory and practice of trade. Connection, sharing, contact, interdependency, trust, cooperation, urbanity, curiosity and freedom all cling to this node like new skin. The open center de-emphasizes the technocratic and specialist knowledge commonly associated with centrist reason and instead foregrounds an image of itself as democratic complexity unfolding in the simple fullness of phenomenological space and time; the specialist's awkward separation from the scene of the common, the ease with which it can stumble into a joke about its remoteness from the real, is sequestered and replaced with a sense for the bustling, democratic intelligence of markets. On the one side, persists a Platonic epistemology of truth--"top-down, formulaic and close-minded"; on the other, the unrelenting skepticism of the market place--"bottom-up, open-minded, and empirical" (Taleb, 182). At other times this embodied "being-there" of the market-place, its tumultuous empiricism, grafts itself onto the decentralized efficiencies of the computer network, binding the real of trade to a hard rationalist processuality--a supremely effective figuration of centrist reason.¹⁰

10 See Don Tapscott's *Wikinomics*; Albert-Laszlo Barabasi's *Linked: How Everything is Connected to*

This notion of the center as the location for the arrival of a trading swarm—a paradise of choice as Chris Anderson frames it-- co-exists uncomfortably with the usual centrist cast of *unrelentingly self-possessed* mavericks and rebels. Relentless independence of vision, principled refusal of conformity, wholesale disdain for those debilitated by the herd: all of this finds itself strangely countered by the collective figure of the center as productively crowded volume. By draining its content of all but the practice of exchange, by replacing strong positionality with the scarce signature of a listening contact, the center self-imagined as trafficked territory or sheer dialogue leaves itself vulnerable to the sense that it is little more than a power of absorbency--a parasite. Rather than standing for something, it simply stands there, startled amidst the flux, incapable of clearheaded action. Its openminded refusal of "labels", its existence beyond the metaphors of the spectrum in a beyond of new thought and market innovation can suddenly appear like a dearth of vision or weak "liberal" appeasement and apathy. Very quickly the center as dialogically empty space can be re-interpreted as politically vacant or null.

This is the gravest terror of every centrism. Indecisive, a fence-sitter the centrist becomes the consummate opportunist. Its vacancy with respect to the possible can now be construed as a passivity in the face of constantly changing circumstances or even worse a gimmick of mimesis by which the center forever arrives belatedly at whatever consensus carries the day. This tension is generally solved by substituting the "invisible hand", that dusty answer to doubts about the perspicacity of crowds, with a postmodern, hyper-

Everything Else and What it Means; Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail* as well as James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* for excellent crystallizations of this perspective.

individualized model in which the market is posited as the space of personal, consumerist experimentation and self-creation. Here the stupor of the masses is replaced with a sense for the diverse intelligence and creativity of the multitude: away from the vertical structure of expertise and authority, decisions in this space are executed horizontally, thick amidst the ferment of people and things, at a speed which approximates that of pleasure itself. The capacity of new communications technologies to blur the distinction between users and producers, the penetration of design aesthetics into the body of even the most profane of objects, the re-calibration of finance as the site of professional expertise and analysis, along with the generalized sexiness of capitalist space all supplement the old "wisdom of markets" with something like a cyborg connectedness or artificial intelligence which looks more like a Blackberry than it does a deftly moving hand¹¹. So diffuse and variegated is the middle that it has the capacity to function as a space of infinite individualization: a vessel adequate to the idiosyncratic nature of the centrist maverick by which it's activated.

There are a number of formulas used by the center to protect its practice from accusations of parasitism or indolence. One of the most common relies for its intelligibility on the proverbial "two-sidedness" of truth, but adds to this an Aristotelian twist. In this model, the world is characterized hermeneutically by the universal reality of disagreement. About any given object or phenomenon one can rapidly accumulate a

11 "What's important is the way the colony gets to the collectively intelligent solution. It does not get there by first rationally considering all the alternatives and then determining an ideal foraging pattern. It can't do this, because it doesn't have any idea what the possible alternatives—that is, where the different flower patches—are. So instead, it sends out scouts in many different directions and trusts that at least one of them will find the best patch, and do a good dance so that the hive will know where the food source is". James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, (New York: Anchor Books, 130).

multiplicity of interpretations, opinions, and viewpoints. Confronted by the seemingly interminable contestedness of things a rule is formulated to indemnify action against the debilitating incertitude associated with a scenario from which the possibility of decision has been withdrawn or lost. Truth, this rule avers, is in the middle, always there in the space left untouched by the extremes. Between licentiousness and moral frigidity, tyranny and democracy, a status or virtue can be discovered. This position is quietly inhabited by the rhetorical milieu of classical Greek philosophy, complete with concerns about the difference between reality and appearance, the Many and the One, as well as the apparent impossibility of ever knowing for sure whether one has come to a satisfactory conclusion. At its roots is a conviction that something in the temperance of the middle rightly captures the harmony and cyclicity which subtends the sensuous complexity of human experience. In many ways it is a predictable solution to the question of what Galvano Della Volpe called the "problem of the manifold" and of the dissensus at the heart of sight and speech. It provides a universal template for the resolution of conflict and easily binds to the rhythm and directionality of popular notions of common sense and quiet living. Certainly, there is an intuitive, folkloric immediacy to this thought which places circumspection into the play of bodily pleasure and pain--one musn't eat or sleep excessively, or drink to drunkenness, etc.

However, this centrism of the mean stumbles when it is asked to solve contemporary problems foreign to the organicist ethical and political quandaries posed by the ancient lifeworld. By setting into motion a dominant two of truth, the splitting of the scene of an analysis into extreme interpretations, the centrist designs for herself a mean-

discerning tool that can be mechanically applied to every situation. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize the ubiquity and seductiveness of this discourse. The intelligent centrist will carefully modulate its use of this mode, foregrounding it during times of "drastic" change it opposes, and soft-peddling it when circumstances threaten the placidity of the order and "extreme" or unusual measures (war, bail outs, etc) are required. Not quite passive--and so free from the suggestion of centrist pusillanimity-- it nevertheless represents a kind of mechanized or automated activity executable across a remarkable gamut of instances.

This thesis takes as its archive *The Economist* magazine between the years 1950-2007. That I was only able to cover a fraction of this vast textual field hardly bears mentioning. With an eye to this difficulty I tried to read strategically, focussing on as many of the magazine's leading articles as possible. These pieces—3 or 4 of which appear at the beginning of each edition—concretize a week's events, but also treat less topical matters, in a highly compressed format that is sometimes unpacked later in the issue. The scope and editorial concision of these pieces allowed for a very clear discrimination of positional and stylistic mutations and shifts. I also concentrated on issues near the beginning and ends of years; these provided glimpses of the text at its most speculative and self-reflexive, often catching it in the act of retrospection or prognostication in a way that was indispensable. From 1975 on I was able to conduct targeted searches based around specific themes and motifs. At the same time, I purposely

incorporated the stochastic, often opening volumes at random points or stopping at intriguingly titled pieces.

This thesis does not endeavour to chart a global center thought to exist statically across regional differences and histories. Rather, it aspires to narrate the conceptual development of one textual subject located in a specific national and cultural context from the perspective of its self-identification with the political and grammatical space of the center. This is an identification as concrete and specific as it is abstract and global. To speak from the space of the middle is to have always already traversed world-history; at the same instant, it is also always a gesture made from the inflected contours of a locality. The precise valence of a center can never be separated from the speech act in which it takes place. This insistence on the specificity of usages, however, refuses the bare affirmation of a weak (untheorizable) multiplicity; on the contrary, I want to point to the iterable nature of these games and habits, their reliance on well-established cultural codes and conventions. Despite the common impression that the center is relativity itself, an object wholly absorbed by its context, it is precisely because these games are not infinitely plural that they can be understood in the first place.

Where does a center imagine itself being seen from? Who is its paradigmatic interlocutor? What are the limits it inherits in its attempt to remain in contact with what it has been and will be? What shifts in the conjuncture force it to re-assess or relinquish a habitual mode of being? What are the primary historical coordinates activating a center and what takes place within this identification during their mutation or breakdown? How

do residual or secondary coordinates still active on the inside of an identification stymie or enable it?

This thesis does not aspire to shockingly *unmask* the center. Rather, it exists attentively on its surface discovering junctures where two or more avowed values enter into relations of irresolvable attraction or repulsion. This attentiveness to the unstable interiority of a discourse, to its movement and self-difference, is as traceable to Socrates as it is Hegel. However, the center must be thought not just against the norms it sets for itself, but through a diffuse cultural ecology of the time in which it appears. Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, and Frederic Jameson have all immensely influenced the diagnostic sensibility which subtends so much of what follows.

The diachronic axis of this thesis comprehends itself not as an extensive history, but as an act of dialectical genealogy. The task is to map out the connections between the autonomy of the discourse and the historical ensemble which captures and displaces it without ceasing to continuously register the perspectival habits structuring the moment from which the narration takes place. I sincerely hope that such a writing convokes a sense of history as interconnected urgency, a process in which there is something at stake beyond the re-telling of merely existent things.

This is a work, then, which does not unmask, but which never ceases to judge. It is not because this voice lacks buried bodies that the strategy of expose has lost its efficacy. Far from it: this is a language the ecological and social consequences of which are unequivocally genocidal. Such statements, however, are simply not tactically available to those interested in de-mythologizing a rhetoric always ready to transform critique into

empty fuss and hyperbole. Rather than exposing to sight its dark prisons, all of the hooded or mutilated figures, we should instead begin at the simple deconstructive potential of *giving the center a name*. For a thought so close to the nerves such acts are the barest first steps towards critique.

Chapter 1:

A Well-Mixed Balance: Civil Centrism Inside/Out

The advocates of Socialism too often put forward their theory of nationalisation and public control as a matter of unassailable principle. The opponents reply by conferring the same in-violable sanctity on their theory of private enterprise. We appear to be faced with quite irreconcilable and opposing principles and with a situation in which nothing can be done except to divide into two uncompromising and opposing camps in order to prepare for a trial of strength by the ballot-box, by strike or lockout, or, if the problem of poverty is too long neglected, by civil war... It is because this is not true, because the form of economic and social organization has never been regarded, except by such extremists, as being based on abstract and inflexible principles, that we have expanded the productivity of industry, enhanced the liberty and welfare of the people, and achieved so much progress, already, without violence and civil strife.

Harold Macmillan, *The Middle Way* (1938).

Part 1: On Number Added to Letter

When Geoffrey Crowther died in 1972 he could in many ways be seen to represent a species of centrism already in crisis. The chief editor of *The Economist* between 1938 and 1956, he had remained actively linked to the paper and a strong public metonym for its style and content. His death, and its treatment, are important because it is in the slippage between the paper's eulogization of this figure and its own self-imagination that we can detect aspects of a centrist intelligence already being challenged by a whole gamut of new forces and contradictions. At the same time, there is a certain invariance: the construction of a methodological radicalism linked to the art of combining science and rhetoric, number and letter is already clearly established in the semiotics of Crowther and will remain a governing aesthetico-cognitive conceit of the text for the whole of the duration studied by this thesis.

Its liberalism notwithstanding, the center inhabited by *The Economist* in 1950 has about it a whiff of the country club. Its tone is hierarchical, authoritative and flush with a sense for its own indispensability to power¹². Its meaning lies very much within the ambit of the center understood as a bearer of metaphysical stability: it is a principle of architecture, a point from which order radiates like light from the sun. Or perhaps this should be slightly altered: if it can parody monarchical formalism as a symptom of senescence, if pomp is the vulgar outgrowth of inherited privilege and primogeniture, its gaze remains transfixed by a figure of secularized authority and power now long vanished, that of the *statesman*. A Man of Affairs who is also a Man of Letters; a figure adept at business, but also the masculine art of governance. The "extreme center", magisterially lived by Crowther is neither a wind of words nor the deed in all its blunt directness of approach (12.02.72, 13)¹³.

The prose of this voice channels an old association between language, authority, charisma, and beauty¹⁴. There is something aristocratic in this formula, a justification of rule by the beauty and distinctness of the ruler. Crowther, a student of Keynes, represented all that was best in the "English tradition of humane science" (13). Quoting the words of his teacher they characterize this tradition as marked by "a love of truth and

¹² It is very important that this historical morphology be seen as operative on a level of accent. The radical centrism practiced by *The Economist* today is no less authoritative than it was in the 1950s but the protocols by which it safeguards this effect, the context in which it is produced, and the gaze it solicits have all changed. Oftentimes, moments within the history of the development of the center exist preserved, but not destroyed within the body of younger variations: these meanings slip into productive conflict or can be wholly (but temporarily) restituted in what is an incredibly elastic semiotic matrix.

¹³ Henceforth, all references to *The Economist* will list the day, month, year, and page of the citation.

¹⁴ A sense for this formulation, in which power is expected to be charmingly articulate, is provided by an advertisement for Winston Churchill's *War Memoirs*: "Twelve devastating months of world history recorded in the matchless prose of Britain's greatest statesman" (21.01.50, 127).

a most noble lucidity, by a prosaic sanity free from sentiment or metaphysic and by an immense disinterestedness and public spirit" (13). What strikes us today about this nobility of the true is, of course, precisely its *falseness*, its obvious capture by an antiquated and inflated *poetry of the objective*. Elegies to the unsentimental qualities of a prose form or truth procedure strike us contemporaries as paradoxically florid, but also high-flown and elitist, the very opposite of the bourgeois sanity praised by Keynes. But it is in this strange tension between the domain of facts and the aplomb of expression that we can glimpse what the journal itself refers to semi-ironically as an "*Economist style*" (12.02.72, 13).

As a way of sorting out what is afoot here, we might paraphrase *The Economist's* description of Crowther (but also its own intelligence) *as reflective of an age in which numeracy has been added to literacy*. It is the former, passed through the perceived scientificity of economics which protects it from the hierarchicalism and vagueness of the literary, while it is the latter which offsets the technocratism and lifelessness of numeracy with something like a *belle-lettrist*, humanist *élan* very common to British parliamentary culture. This is an extremely contorted and contradictory endeavour, but as I will suggest throughout this dissertation it is the management of the tension between these (and other) poles that allows *The Economist* to consistently frame its cognitive hybridity as a singular inheritance, a quirk of birth or experience designated by the black box of character, the illimitable precocity of centrist intelligence¹⁵. It is, in part, this structural oddness which

¹⁵ *The Economist* excels at writing concise, stylistically satisfying, yet weirdly opaque (sometimes almost surrealist) sentences: "Of the Communist delegations, the Russian group will be painfully familiar to veterans of previous marathon wrangles; and the North Koreans need hardly be considered, except for

grounds the text's access to an idea about its freedom from ideological conformity and cant and which locates it within the "great tradition of British eccentrics" (14.11.81, 16). Stylistic eccentricity codes a distance from the soulessness of vulgar commerce, but also the torpor of the bureaucrat no longer energized by a spiritually genuine public zeal.

At the same time, the magazine's economic fluency is what putatively sets it apart from "run of the mill" publications. It operates at a level of abstraction below that of a peer-edited professional journal, but much higher than that of the average newspaper or magazine. It rarely defines the terms it deploys or does so in less than a sentence and relies heavily on the reader's presumed familiarity with the classical economic tradition. This presumption is the self-possession of a voice which knows to whom it is speaking and which can count on being recognized by the right people. Built into the text is an authority strengthened by elision, yet countermanded by an impression of colloquiality and everydayness: densely telegraphed economic analysis coincides with sentences comprised of "simple, utterly clear prose" and "words of one syllable" (12.02.72, 14). This is an extremely self-reinforcing structure: that which evades a reader's comprehension can be comfortably filed away under a notion of expertise even as a journalistic prose rhythm domesticates the frustration of unknowing in a stream of customary familiarity. One is left powerless and certain, always behind and catching up at the same time. Class anxiety and pleasure intermingle here; not abstract enough to wholly impede a first reading, yet just arduous enough to delay complete intelligibility, a whole

the fascination of seeing one dummy serving two ventriloquists" (20.03.54, 843). It also loves to begin its articles, especially in the period being discussed, with elegant, slightly confounding aphorisms. "Parmenides was right, all things may in the last analysis be one and the same thing" (06.06.64, 1071)

generation of middle managers have spent Sunday afternoons contentedly asleep in its pages.

So much of the cultural pleasure attached to carrying around a copy of *The Economist* hinges on this satisfyingly bemoaned feeling of difficult erudition. This, coupled to its eschewal of the image and its tightly packed typographical layout create a text for which tedium is internalized as proof of its distinctness from trash. “Boring”—a word it uses often as a predicate for the venerable stability of a phenomenon—applies just as often to the magazine itself, its exhaustive surveys and special supplements long in a way that tests severely the standard resiliency of the medium (20.10.98, 11). At the same time, *The Economist* adds to its compressed economic numeracy a whole compendium of accompanying knowledges ranging from the tensility of a material to the strategic composition of national militaries. This information is rarely distributed in the form of a quotation garnered, say, from a professor of biology or geology, but woven into the body of the article like a knowing aside; this, in conjunction with its infamous elision of the by-lines of its authors creates a sense of effortless scientific breadth, a stylistically unified consciousness without hesitation or fear. Editorial truculence, authorial anonymity and a strong “unity of expression” combine in such a way as to evoke a tremendous auratic presence, a charismatic prestige anchored in the incorrigible bulk of a *personality* (14).

The bi-valence of the center, its power authorized by both number and letter, reflects a mind uninhibited by the inherited disciplinary divisions, a rare hybridity thought to escape simultaneously both the myopia of the laboratory and the generalist humanism of the ivory tower. The number deprived of style deters the force of its precision in a

stiffness alienated from the round domain of things, postures, habits and relations. Such is the destiny of all of the bean counters, pedants, paper pushers, specialists, experts and human calculators the text will not tire of parodying across the entire period studied by this dissertation¹⁶.

Style¹⁷ is what happens to a subject when it passes through the field of affairs intensively: processual, engaged, it feelingly grasps the shape of things in an unrepeatable manner that is at once closed and open, set and searching, both finished and just beginning. Style, in this sense, comes from the world and from experience, but also somehow precedes and inflects it. Those without it are the specialists mesmerized by the impertinent detail, creatures lost to the quark or dotted I. Not only are they thought to somehow miss the whole (singularly clasped by the stylish subject), this maldistribution of perception contorts motivations, leaving the specialist ghetto a peculiarly nasty and narrow place, a brutish corner filled with careerist megalomania and malice.

But at the same time the number functions as a brake on subjectivity, a verifiable counterpoint to the profuse inaccuracy of the imagination. *The Economist's* numeracy allows it to part ways with the idealism and excess of the literary (even as it powerfully

¹⁶ “Devotees of Lewis Carroll will remember that in the first chapter of “Sylvie and Bruno”—when the mob was shouting “Less Bread! More Taxes!,” and the Chancellor was finding this very remarkable, especially at this time in the morning—a Professor bundled excitedly into the room and announced that the barometer was beginning to move. “Which way?” asked the Warden, “Up or Down?” “It is moving sideways,” said the Professor...“It means horizontal weather,” said the Professor and made straight for the door...On his next appearance after his forecast of horizontal weather, the professor was stumbling fearfully along with an umbrella tied to the front of his boots” (27.03.54, 925). And more recently: “Some boffins at Yale think game theory can help us lose weight” (17.11.07, 25)

¹⁷ “As editor, [Crowther’s] sharpness of mind and wit made the Monday conferences an inspiration for life, not just for the week’s issue...We envied him his stupendous facility in speaking and writing...It could not always have been easy for the true creator of *The Economist* to accept some changes that, we well knew, he could have done infinitely better himself” (12.02. 72, 13)

draws upon it). Here, style betrays itself, absorbing the mind it names into an infinite solipsism. A reality susceptible to being numbered, subject to commensurable repetitions and spacings, law-bound, positive, hard, often violent, sometimes unbeautiful delimits the parameters of the literary. In such contexts the latter becomes a synonym for a kind of self-besotted prettiness. The domain of nations, interests, and scarcity places sobering limits on the transfiguring power of literature. Scholars, poets, (some) politicians and philosophers suffer from the hypnotizing autonomy of the word; their separation from the tumult of money or power builds into their constructions a beauty born of blindness.

Numeracy, here, is not that of the abstract mathematician, but that of the dismal science itself and can be seen as the inheritance of the metrical turn in economics traceable neo-classicism. Between the fast, encircled calculus of the merchant and the technicality of economic science, the magazine (at times) envisions an unbroken continuum. Merely less immediate, the truths of supply and demand--worked up through the accumulated wisdom of a thousand real-world deals--are simply extensions of the terrestrial, intuitive mathematics of profit. The profanity of commerce in this sense tethers economic scientificity to the solid (because unbeautiful) world of desires, individuals, and things even as it manages to camouflage its dependence on the history of ideas through a bare rhetoric of biopolitical scarcity (simple trade in the commodious).

What most matters about this moment--one I will characterize below as that of the civil center--is that it still operates within an articulable tension between what it names as "worth" and "wealth": "[Crowther's] aim was no vulgar lust for money, but the strengthening of the group's one true asset, the authority and integrity of *The Economist*

itself” (12.02.72, 13). This is a flourish very foreign to the skeptical, postmodern centrism practiced by the text today. Value--be it the ideal of the unified nation, the moral substance of a citizenry¹⁸, the valour of the soldier, the industriousness of a work force, or the nobility of the true-- is still detectably present and counterposeable to a moneymaking not yet fully excused from impropriety. Some things—style among them—simply cannot be bought. Order remains a salubrious national ideal (and not merely the necessary condition of safe exchange); decency and with it fairness very strongly structure the moral valence of this discourse¹⁹.

Though its style is not exactly modest, *The Economist* in the 1950s and 60s can be said to function within a uniquely British variant of *aristocratic humility*. Mannered, distinct, there is something self-mitigating about its haughtiness, a Victorian fidelity to the good of the whole and to the excoriable condition of the poor which places it within earshot of One Nation Toryism. Value, in this sense, coalesces at an indiscernible point between the eccentric separation of the noble and the moral reliability and industriousness of the bourgeois. Superior, *but decent*, is perhaps the most pithy way of capturing this tone. The notion of a figurehead stirring a nation to its greatness²⁰; the cult of character;

¹⁸ “...a high proportion [of criminal teenagers] come from families utterly incapable of bringing up children—spoiling them outrageously to the age of five, losing all control over them afterwards, and entirely incapable of giving them fruitful affection. Notwithstanding their Mohawk period, a high proportion even of these youths settle down and become, if not model, at any rate quiescent citizens. They lose the ferocious mixture of childish savagery and instability which, allied to adult strength, is so terrifying” (05.03.60, 879).

¹⁹ The following quote also nicely illustrates the tone at work here: “The peculiar mixture of emotions and prejudices which passes for Bevanite foreign policy is neither *honest nor sober*. It is not honest because it is manifestly fired by disappointed ambition and personal self-seeking, and because there has been an unscrupulous whipping up of blind emotions. It is not sober because it rests on the deliberate ignoring of obvious truths” (02.10.54, 15-16). Compare this equation to my suggestion in Chapter 3 that the postmodern center trusts a politician only insofar as it resists this impulse to unabashed sobriety.

²⁰ “...Mr. Churchill showed ten years ago that he knew how to lift a whole people out of itself...[in him

the honour of dead soldiers; the literary symbolism of war; all of this marks the period and is diminished (though not absent) from the 1970s on.

If we can detect in *The Economist's* assessment of Crowther a voice for which the good has not yet become coterminous with money, an older moral substantivity in which value and worth are not yet indistinguishable, it should also be said that a dominant faultline--one that would come to emblemize the later sixties and seventies--is already visible. Concepts of "quality" and "integrity", as well as phrases like "illuminate the spirit" encode an idealist (really Platonic/Romantic) humanism still linked to the difference between the low and the high, the base and the true: "people like [Winston Churchill] come rarely to lift men's eyes towards new goals" (12.02.72,13). But at the same instant, a new tension, one very much endemic to the period discussed in this chapter, can be glimpsed. Though Crowther clearly channels an heroic (but also bourgeois) romanticism of excellence and honour, talent and power, *a uniqueness proper to rule by the best*, he is at the very same time framed in terms that render him palatable to a reader charged with new political experiences, desires, and expectations.

If, then, what can be deduced from these elevated utterances is a center not yet withdrawn from the horizon of Plato, a center still charged with essence and moral substance, a center for which truth and goodness are not yet separated and government is the opposite of chaos, it nevertheless remains that by 1972 this is a model in crisis. It is in the text's hyperattentiveness to its own production that we can glimpse, already fully

there is] at least the potential of leadership enough to inspire a great national effort to win back solvency and independence" (11.02.1950, 300)

developed, the mutational outlines of a center for which truth and order are increasingly divided by new protocols of legitimation and refusal:

[Crowther's] articles on post-war economic and foreign policy...brought hope and a sense of conviction to readers in a war-torn world...But he was preeminently the protector of the independence of the editorial process which has long been enshrined in the constitution of the company and the newspaper. Everyone who worked with him, both on the editorial and management sides, absorbed this guiding principle; it never became a matter of assertion; its integrity was preserved by reason and consent...As editor, his sharpness of mind and wit made the Monday conferences an inspiration for life, not just for the week's issue. He led, but never dictated. He made room, even in the paper itself, for strongly held differences of view...He was thought by some to impose an "*Economist* style"; he did no such thing. The paper achieved its unity of expression and content from the presence of like-minded people who tried to absorb, by some sort of osmosis, the principles and practical methods that Crowther applied to his own work—the simple, utterly clear prose, the perfect analysis and the solution in words of one syllable. This was Crowther's style, and his colleagues did their best to emulate it...He was among the first of the newspaper editors to appoint women of distinction to the editorial staff, until today they occupy some of the most senior positions here. (12.02.72, 14)

Renowned for its "unity of expression"—its stylistic regularity, positional clarity, and strong moral conviction—the text nevertheless goes to great lengths to insist that this unanimity is not imposed from above—pre-fabricated and dictatorial—but evolved in the laboratory of democratic practice, a process of "reason and consent," that incorporates a multiplicity of perspectives, subject positions, and styles (14). Crowther is at once Rousseau's lawgiver—a *deus ex machina* which founds the political machine through his moral exceptionality, a great leader, mentor, etc—and the open processuality of the law itself, a secularized equality which merely sorts and circulates the differences rather than altering or changing them. He is at once a charismatic leader—transmitting truth through the traditionalist logic of respect—and a pure openness to difference, a pluralist democrat;

that this tension is resolved only through the intermediating device of “some sort of osmosis” only raises our suspicions (14).

Is this emulation or mimesis, inculcation or experiment? What kind of differences does the “presence of like-minded people” exclude a priori (14)? Is the center a conviction or a listening, a perspective or a prism? Is it many things or one thing, democratic complexity or (paradoxical) traditionalist fidelity (to the market, to constitutionalism, etc)? It is in the wake of 1968, amidst new practices and definitions of political and personal freedom, that these concerns would come to anxiously dominate the horizon of centrist reason and practice forcing upon it a period of “self-examination” (10.01.70, 12). But if we are to understand the content of this crisis within the stable coordinates of centrist civility, we must first unpack the ensemble of centrality at work in the British context between 1950-1970.

Part 2: On Middle Civility

Lord Allen of Hurtwood was one of the many middle-class idealists who joined the Labour Party in the days before the first world war...His stand against conscription in the first world war was maintained with courage and self-sacrifice, but his pacifist position was not an extreme one. It was directed not so much against war in itself as against the use of state compulsion of the individual in matters of life and death. Not inconsistently, therefore, he moved after the war to a moderate position. In economic affairs particularly he was realistic, even hardboiled; perhaps his experiences playing the stock market had something to do with this...At heart Allen was probably not a party man. Rather, without quarrelling with his former friends, he just drifted to the middle way and found his level with a very mixed assortment of figures from left and right who shared a common belief in planning and economic progress—Eleanor Rathbone, Harold MacMillan, Geoffrey Crowther—whose work has powerfully affected the mixed economy of our time...we should not forget his contribution, all too readily overlooked, to the fully employed welfare economy we enjoy today. (16.04.64, 730).

The civil center, unlike later iterations, was relatively fixed, its meaning horizontally stabilized by the lucidity of a primary (though shifting) global binary. Its claim to the conceptual middle was rendered intelligible by the globalization of practices susceptible to capture by a logic of spectrum (a phenomenon, we should remember, which is not as old as we might think). This essential division--strongly fleshed out in terms of content in the aftermaths of 1917 and 1929-- lies between an incipient “authoritarian” statism and a laissez-faire capitalism--“the pure gospel of free enterprise”-- increasingly associated with the nineteenth century (06.02.60, 503); in this *The Economist* follows a distinction widely made in a number of well-known texts written between the 1930s and 1960s. Harold Macmillan’s *The Middle Way* and Arthur Schlesinger’s *The Vital Center* are here both touchstones.

That this binary could be popularly intuited as mortal-- as a choice between two styles of dying-- maximized the center's ability to pose as the arbiter of sensible existence. At each end of the spectrum lived the spectre of death by starvation or imprisonment; depression and forced collectivization both relied for the preservation of order on arbitrary state violence; both resulted in something like a massified immiseration of the human. Very importantly each was also thinkable as the one-sided hyperbolization of a dichotomous relation best left in harmony: both communism and deflationary liberalism purportedly suffocated "society" in forms of extremity, the first deifying the political, the latter automatizing the economic. The common-sensical notion of a position "taken to the extreme" was firmly rooted, then, in a communication between the alterity of death and a spectrum the poles of which were themselves effectively fatal. Radical was that which

crossed the threshold separating the mean of life from a strangeness thought to promise pain, poverty, and punishment.

This was a moment in which the difference between one “belief” and another was still mortal; ideational excess was imbued with the possibility of systemic morbidity and had directly corporeal consequences. It could turn out one’s lights or freeze a body cold. There was something architectural about ideology, a power to render unrecognizable an existing spatial totality. Whole lifeworlds could crystallize or vanish “overnight”. Memories of the depression, but also an awareness of the worldly musculature of communism allowed the center to appear—as I will discuss more closely later—like a spatial and temporal exception, a suspension or refuge in a world brimming with potential chaos. It could be imagined as chased from behind by economic collapse or ringed by violently de-colonizing, momentum-gathering natives. Though it is arguable that things had never been quite so “normal” in Britain—so well-provisioned and secure, so employed and entertained—the newness of this sensation, coupled to the eternalizing ontology of the commodity, rendered it (semi)-uniquely susceptible to that intensified terror of privation that comes with being consistently well-fed.

Yet if these options could be seen as fatal when radicalized the distinction between market freedom and state intervention also represented a relatively sober argument between legitimate economic alternatives. The difference, in this sense, was not mortal but theoretical. The mixed economy (or social democracy), as we will see, could be proposed as the logical middle solution to a disciplinary quandary each side of which degenerated into ideology when clung to too inflexibly. As one slides towards either pole

thought ossifies, discovering ideological comfort and locatedness--a sense of belonging--but not the determinate mixture necessary to produce effects (see below). The poles become *schools or sects*, self-reproducing institutions more interested in the procedures which regulate their numbers than they are those required to verify the effective. The middle, then, becomes the improbable site for the reconciliation of the difference between knowledge and practice, a locus of the practically true, discoverable only through compromise and an openness to the nuance of the real. A willingness to jettison one's ideas if they're not working coupled to a ceaseless empirical investigation into the manifold of the actual combine to reward practice with stable, profitable effectivity²¹.

Insofar as the spectrum tracks between nineteenth-century liberalism and twentieth-century state interventionism the civil center can be simultaneously thought as a mediation between custom and science. The poles, in this instance, are not just antagonistic abstractions (schools), but positions characterized by two kinds of epistemological error. Difficult to date exactly, we could perhaps trace the intelligibility of this conceit in the West to that strange and short span between 1917 and the early 1950s in which it became possible to imagine the interventionist state as the locus of a science still compatible with economic growth (and not yet isomorphic with genocide). Here, the center's civility plays out in the space between two refusals. On the one hand, is the moral clarity of a *letting be* which reads a deficit as the shameful outcome of a failure

²¹ *The Economist* especially likes acts of revisionist history which throw into doubt the mirroring ideality of competing schools. In the case of W.W Rostow, attacked both by communist theoreticians and free market apologists alike, it writes the following: "Professor Rostow has indeed put an empirical wildcat among the theoreticians' favourite pigeons. When the flutter in the sacred dovecots has died down, we may find that this new international debate has cleared the air of a number of ageing birds whose hovering served only to darken counsel" (09.02.1960, 504).

to balance desire and labour. On the other, is the scientific Prometheanism and abstraction of the state.

What matters here is that a faultline exists within this formulation between the center and the moral; the latter lies just a little too close to the grain of an economic immanentism – the undisciplined, intuition-based practice of the depression era banker or the Protestantism of the merchant--for the former to fully embrace without sacrificing its disciplinary authority. Whether it was an idea about the capacity of the state to rationalize the unproductive anarchy of the market or even the automatic stabilizers proposed by Keynes the twentieth century experienced a scientization of the state unpalatable to the presumed moral transparency of the balanced budget. Even as *The Economist* condemns scientized statism as a maximalism coterminous with Stalin – a knowledge fatally removed from commonsense – it simultaneously contests the self-sufficiency of the latter through the non-intuitive analysis provisioned by scientific reason (deficits are not sin, spending can increase wealth, rather than linearly depleting it, etc).

It should be noted that the middle envisioned as a third option between *laissez faire* and *autarky* is also a temporal figure separating past and future. Between a conservative letting be discredited as hostile to economic science (the new Keynesians) and an incipient statism entranced by the image of a fully rationalized future the civil centrism practiced by *The Economist* in this period is very much thought to issue from the present itself. This temporal groundedness could be posited as the condition of its access to the objective. Conservatism cloaks the world in the tones of apocalyptic deviation, an epochal wandering from the path of the true, the good and the beautiful. Its myths are

populated by Gods and rigid moral universals, codes and standards incompatible with the secularized, minimal truths of self-preservation and pleasure. This fascination with an idealized past prepares the ground for the wholesale extermination of a present the sum of which is evil, lost, or empty.

In the same way, Marxists are imagined to have replaced the complexity and untotilizability of the worlds stories with a structuralism that places suffering at the heart of being. There is a failure to have adequately assessed the present and its gains vis a vis older social systems: everyone knows for example that even the poor today live like kings when thought against the “penury” typical of what Locke again called the “original commons”. To the Right, then, stands a mania for the past sustained by the irrationality of Gods; to the left a “science” that has abandoned the terrain of the real for an abstraction intent on impossible futures. *Against these temporally displaced subjectivities the civil center purports a certain epistemological patience and presented-mindedness*; it refuses to reject the past *tout court* exchanging deadness for futurist euphoria, even as it abjures as cowardice an unselective resistance to change²². In both cases there is a failure of discernment: one throws out the baby with the bathwater (a phrase *The Economist* loves) (13.01.90, 15).

At the same time, the civil center syncopated with the popular intelligibility of the binary, cashing in on a middleness layered with connotations of prudence, moderation

²² “It is our custom not to jettison all that we find good in the past out of eagerness to experiment with the future. For example, while it is many centuries since we first began to curb the power of our feudal potentates, we still reserve for them an honoured place both in our constitution and social life... Yet our old country, with all its proud heritage from the past, is equally proud of its ability to revise its thinking to keep abreast of a fast changing world” (09.01.60, 84).

and wisdom. Grasped from within the reflexes of an enormously Christianized political culture, *letting be* invoked a bewildering memory of peoples spoiled by the absence of mastery, of sin which creeps through the holes opened by lapsed attentiveness, and of an entire philosophy of desire which posits order as the outcome of godly authority. Letting be, in other words, passed perilously near to an idea of moral ignorance and indifference, of drifting nihilation, decadence, and laziness. But interventionism could also be contorted to thwart a popular sense for the finitude and fallenness of human being. Here, the primary crime is a Babylonian hubris which fails to grant unto God control over the rhythm of the unforeseeable. *Intervention* is the opposite of peasant serenity, but also an affront to the moral transparency of a transaction between hard, self-reliant individual labour and identifiably accumulated spiritual reward (taxation muddies these calculi). Neither neglect nor obsession, refusing simultaneously the desire to choke and to ignore the object, the middle could be intuited in languages of *perfected pressure*, careful exertion and cautious approach culled from the common sense technics of patients, parents, hunters, lovers, teachers, builders and more.

However, when the spectrum tracks between poles the contents of which are deemed wholly (and pathologically) political we are in the presence of the distinction separating Lenin from Hitler. Or, rather, we are in the presence of a non-distinction, an ascription of sameness²³ which transcends the incidental destinies of national history and

²³ “There are more or less daily raids and forays, beatings and burnings, by small groups of politically organised hooligans. Some of this violence comes from the groups of the far left, a great deal from those of the far right. The young neo-fascist toughs are armed with knives, clubs and chains and have a good supply of hand grenades. The left-wingers missiles tend to be Molotov cocktails and hand-made bombs. Both sides have access to dynamite, and caches of explosives are continually coming to light...The police have been able to arrest a number of small fry, mostly psychotic youths who seem to drift from

ideological difference for a commonality born of the shared negation of a liberalism explicitly identified as *moral*²⁴. This is the “inbetween hope of liberal democracy” (27.03.82, 12). In contradistinction to the first binary in which politics and economics were framed as symbiotic aspects that could be divided only catastrophically, we now encounter a dualism symmetrically flooded by the political such that economic reason functions as a middle, moral palliative to the volatilized dangers of ideology. When suspended between mirroring political extremities the civil center, *in other words, becomes a morality inseparable from the commonsense of economics*. Caught between fascism and communism it is liberal democracy which combines constitutionalism and universal suffrage, rule of law and economic freedom, in such a way that jurisprudence and social feeling reflect, incite, and mutually reinforce one another. The soul of this structure is a legal order which aspires to nothing more than the perpetual securitization of the inherently socializing morality of commerce. The latter is the domain of firm handshakes, congenial grocers, and clean, hardworking employees: it is the veritable homeland of the good²⁵.

To repeat, the civil center is a moral rhetoric to the extent that the spectrum it inhabits is characterized at each end by an exorbitance that is properly political. Social

one side to the other for the sake of violence in its own right” (05.05.73, 34).

²⁴Though there is an angle from which this remains the case in today’s radical center, the latter is perhaps better conceptualized as profane. We will address this in Chapters 2 and 3.

²⁵ “...the most important [sort of law], which is inscribed neither on marble or brass, but in the hearts of the citizens, a law which forms the true constitution of the state, a law which gathers new strength each day and which, when other laws age or wither away, reanimates or replaces them; a law which sustains a nation in the spirit of its institution and imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for the force of authority. I refer to morals, customs, and, above all, belief: this feature, unknown to our political theorists, is the one on which the success of all the other laws depends” (Rousseau 56). Though the content of this commercial morality is different than that proposed by Rousseau, the form is similar.

norms, from this angle, are rules of thumb laid down by the spontaneous practice of neighbourhoods and nations. This happens beneath the threshold of what can be remembered by history. Morality, in conjunction with the rule of law, renders a space inhabitable, "decent" as *The Economist* never tires of saying (14.01.67, 100). Far from being opposed to commerce, moral substance is perfected through a recognition that it is in one's own best interest to play by the rules we make to live together (whether in the domain of politics or that of exchange).

Goodness is not a transubstantiation of a body that is mostly sin but a mutually serviceable customary arrangement. It is a habit which leaves the middle pleasures of food, drink and sex intact and unashamed. Goodness is not opposed to some unconscious rapacity, but grooved into the personality in such a way that it becomes an agreeable comportment, a way of being which unites individual desire, social efficacy and freedom. In direct opposition to Immanuel Kant's insistence on the disinterestedness of the good will, *The Economist* proposes a morality for which there is no ultimate tension between goodness and desire. Excluded as well is any notion of an exacting internal *Bildung*. Nevertheless, the good subscribed to by the civil center is socially normative and even thinkable as a kind of repression: one resists gratifying certain desires (theft, graft, murder), but only so as to more securely stabilize one's access to the fulfillment of simple pleasures.

The civility of liberal democracy is precisely its capacity to confine politics to a zone of pacified speech in which ideas never spill over into the Hobbesian logic of the feud. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than the emphasis placed by *The Economist* on

the multi-party democracy's ability to transition between opposed administrations in an orderly and peaceful manner. The transfer of power in a mature democracy indexes the widespread cultural diffusion of consent and a certain de-politicized congeniality of the people. This is what *The Economist* calls the "basic essential minimum of mutual confidence"; social conviviality and national unity here coalesce in the "spirit that makes it possible for Mr. Atlee to offer birthday congratulations to Mr. Churchill, and for Mr. Churchill to say 'that the things that unite us are far greater than those that divide us'—and for both to be completely sincere". (11/02/1950, 300). This is usually counterposed to the communist autocracy where succession is always a matter of crisis, fission, resistance and violence.

The civil center's ideal moral subject is not the saint, but the merely good MAN beset by circumstances beyond his control. Following the point I made in Part 1 of this chapter about style as a form of hyper-engagement with the real, this figure bears improbably one extraordinary talent, a power, so it is said, which is equal parts gift and curse; the singularity of this trait ushers into the personality an imbalance mandatory to the concept of "character". Sometimes his only gift is that of an impossible intransigence, a doggedness without precedent which manages to succeed despite the stinginess of nature. If he is "incorruptible", "loyal", and "high-minded" he is also a tippler or a womanizer; though we will see this motif extended and changed in the 1990s there remains here the notion of a talent the exception of which is tamped back into the domain of the common by the mediating universality of the foible.

Morality extended beyond the casual regulation of daily intercourse, beyond the civil appurtenances of commerce tends towards politics and its congenital lack of perspective. The latter leaves behind the salubrious centrality of the polis for terrains peripheral to the comforts and homogeneity of quotidian capitalist normality. Politics polarizes, rigidifying moral habits into ideologies which slide towards each end of the spectrum: *the extreme solitariness of virtue supplants the conviviality of social habitude..* If the civil center is, in part, a borough thick with simple norms, it is the abandonment of moral centrality, the closeness of one's actions to the normative mundane arbitrated by commerce, that signals the fatal first step in the direction of political autism. As it shifts to the poles, to the outskirts of the city and its norms, politicized morality loses touch with the preciousness of life and the quirky individuality of human desire. We will later explore the mechanics of this distance in our discussion of the political militant.

It is crucial to remember the role played in all of this by a geo-political context amenable to representation as violent polarization²⁶. Once the poles are figured as planetarily homicidal – zero sum games intent on the liquidation of opposition – the center can purport a tranquilizing ambassadorship. It matters that the center is the opposite of nothing: whether it is the suicidal dialectics of lordship and bondsman in Hegel or the aggressive obsessiveness articulated by Lacan's mirror stage the center excused from opposition immediately finds available to it a disinterestedness the

²⁶ Though the example here is taken from the 1980s it perfectly captures this logic: “If the United States now turns its back on Central America, two things will follow. The wars in El Salvador and Guatemala will grow even bloodier, as far right and far left slit each other's throats without any restraining hand from the United States or from local men of compunction who look to Washington for help...the likely result is that a large chunk of the American isthmus will be swept from right wing thuggery to left-wing dictatorship clean over the in-between hope of liberal democracy” (27.03.82, 12).

rationality of which is proven by its refusal to enter the terminal fray of the binary. Its gaze is not captured by the desire of the other, but tangential to the dialectical spectacle. But the civil center – “well-ordered and stable” – is not an empty wire transporting signals communicated from pole to pole, but a neutralizing force which mitigates the powers it mediates between; it pacifies the binary, but also, and very significantly, attacks it (23.04.64, 812)²⁷.

At the same time, questions must be asked about the relationship between civil centrism and the morphology of the mixed economy. The latter evokes a hybridity or bivalence spontaneously graspable as the moderate apportioning of an intelligence constitutionally averse to ideological hyperbole and inflation²⁸. The mixture is a child of protracted invention, something discovered in practice, rather than theoretically pre-conceived. Pragmatically prudent, rather than immodestly one-sided, a mixed economy is structurally "balanced" and to be preferred to the precipitously designed, conceptually unadulterated economies of the Eastern bloc²⁹. As mentioned above, what the mixed

²⁷ With respect to communism the civil center in 1950 is very careful to insist that is neither crudely anti-communist—calling for its wholesale destruction—nor beguiled by the comforts of peace: “It cannot be repeated too often that the fundamental aim of western diplomacy is not to defeat the Russians—certainly not to defeat them in another war—but to reach such a working agreement with them as would restore at least the necessary minimum of security to a terrified world...[However, the risk] lies in the preference of the western world for an easy, non-belligerent life, for normalcy, for the pacific conduct of affairs...[we must resist being lulled] into a false and lazy security” (04/02/1950, 241-242).

²⁸ “A very right-wing government might conquer inflation by retreating from incomes policy, price surveillance, the welfare state and support for industry, to return to mass unemployment and every man for himself. Evidence in Russia suggests that it may be possible to avert inflation (though at the cost of having desperately low productivity) by advancing to the full comprehensive controls of a socialist people's republic. Both are repugnant to the mass of the people. But most of the mixed economies in the west are going to have to adopt different mixes. Like petrol and air, socialism and capitalism mixed in the wrong proportions produce unstable economies liable to explode. Mixed aright they travel well” (31.07.76, 57).

²⁹ Interestingly, Yugoslavia's brand of liberal communism—“elegantly poised between East and West”—is also imbued with a sophistication seemingly derived from its middleness: “But what is more interesting, and in the long run more significant, than the exact extent of the Yugoslav planner's ambitions is the

economy rationally apportions is the optimum ratio of politics to economics: under communism the latter intemperately dilates burying natural volition and pleasure under grotesque pyres of insensibly planned output. That which has been well-mixed can be said to have arisen from the slow democracy of custom; co-operation, compromise and incremental tuning gradually evolve into a consensus informed to encourage institutional continuity, yet elastic enough to accommodate the nuanced styles and objectives of different interests and parties (as well as eventual shifts and changes).

Macrologically, the mixed economy could be seen to dispose itself in the mannered locutions of a shared meal. This was in part an effect of its peculiarly lucid corporatist imaginary, the tendency it had to divide its own complexity into a body comprised of three clean organs; “tripartite consensus” is the name given by the text for this form of governance (24.05.75, 83). Not yet dispersed into the atomized, hyper-individuated patterns of consumer liberalism, the social continued to be mapped in a language of molar “estates”—segments or planes of interest thought to be the basic levers of economic and political power. What Gregory Elliot refers to as the “industrial tripartism” of post-war Britain was the idea that labour, government and industry could be collaboratively integrated into the formation of national economic policy (143). In many ways it was an admission that the nation itself was composite, a structural compromise between theoretically discrete elements and interests. Of course, this virtual fissility –

realism and common sense with which they discuss how they may be attained. All administrative intervention is to be abolished whenever it has become a brake on the further development of the economic and social system; profitability and productivity are to be the chief watchwords and the wider and more rational use of modern techniques a principal goal” (07.01.61, 20). A sentence unthinkable 30 years later: “[the Yugoslavs] are energetically, even adventurously, seeking the adaptation of their Marxist beliefs best suited to their country” (21).

molar, visible, and well-thematized – was the condition necessary for the production and maintenance of an idea about the infra-societal. Without a logic of "estates" a society immediately loses the requisite spacing and syntax needed to visually engage itself in dialogue.

The coordinates of inter-sectoral dialogue varied according to the political temperament of the governing power. Across the 13 years of conservative rule between 1951 and 1964 the motif was that of non-statutory, yet openly conciliatory relationship between government and labour. The memories of 1926 and its bitter general strike were to be replaced by "consultation" and "co-operation". According to Peter Dorey, "the Conservative leadership was strongly inclined to exhort managers and workers to overcome the divisive 'them and us' mentality" (47). This relationship was not to be filtered through the coercive constraint of law, but fostered dialogically by increased "frequency of contact" between the parties concerned (48).

If the principles of the mixed economy's reproduction were speech and consultation – a kind of voluntary, national conviviality – the structure upon which its form was imagined to rely for stability was balance. Not only are the parts distributed in such a way that they are maximally vetted by consciousness and dialogue, they are continually arranged and re-arranged with an eye to their proportionality vis a vis each other³⁰. The fora of speech are themselves located like articulate, self-reflexive joints

³⁰ *The Economist's* coverage of Germany in 1960, here clearly reveals the productivity of social restraint and balance. Its precariousness *vis à vis* the outside of communism, but also that marked by historical hyper-inflation engenders a layered model of counterbalancing exchanges and deferrals: "There is the delicate political situation, the constant awareness of the proximity and danger of der Osten which makes west Germany even today something of a country on trial: there has been no national strike since

within a broader system of symmetries which impede the accretion of disproportions and provide the social body with something like hexical efficacy. Important to note, here, is the almost obsessive tradition of liberal musings on the relationship between balance and sovereignty.

What Spinoza--channelling both Aristotle and Hobbes--says about the physical human body is equally true for the body politic: "what constitutes the form of the body consists in this, that its parts communicate their motions to one another in a certain fixed proportion" (43). Though the extreme consensus described above does imagine itself as responsive to alterations in the *Umwelt*--much more so than the communists, for example--but also to interior modifications of forces it still remains very much within the liberal political equation of imbalance with death. Spinoza is unequivocal here: "I Understand the body to die when its parts are so disposed that they acquire a different proportion of motion and rest to one another..." (43). Order, in other words, requires in this period a minimum level of motionlessness and rigidity to remain what it is.

We should not hesitate, here, to state the obvious, that which suffuses *The Economist* throughout this period: liberal democracy is the soul of the world. This soul is unquestionably Platonic: its closeness to justice relies on the right apportioning of relations, a harmonization of incompatible or recalcitrant elements. Since at least 1939--

the war for fundamentally the same reason that there was no national strike in Britain during the war. Secondly, memory of the hyper-inflations after 1918 and 1945 remains alive, exerting a psychological impact of at least the same force as British memories of unemployment between the wars. And, thirdly, the resulting restraint in trade union bargaining has developed a logic of its own over the years. Wage earners see that their policy has paid off; and while west Germany today can reasonably be represented as a rich man's paradise, the public standing of the union's seems high...If German unions sensibly decline to exploit their power to raise money wages by more than the economy can afford, might they, say, drive for more progressive social and fiscal policies?" (20.02.60, 736).

but probably earlier--*The Economist* conceptualizes the "free world" very consistently as the middle thing upon which the existence of the terrestrial whole rests for continuing life and logic³¹. The inbetween hope of liberal democracy, like a precarious fulcrum, balances the world-contesting savageries of Left and Right, the "twin facisms", mitigating their centripetal passions with a pragmatism which refuses to relinquish the fragile individual to the ephemerality and violence of the good idea (07.07.73, 14). Not only is its balance *inter-systemic*, it is also simultaneously imagined as an interior orientation, a relation between itself and itself. Liberal democracy is a self-balancing balance: a being-balanced that begets balance itself. It is its self-reflexivity, its self-orbiting spin which precisely renders it capable of responsibly intermediating between systemic oppositions and tensions liable to tear the world to shreds.

We might say then that the mixed economy is the internal mirror of liberal democracy's externally projected relation of globally balanced betweenness. For *The Economist* such systems rationally apportion multiply transversal sectoral antagonisms in a manner utterly evaded by the top-heavy communist states. Not only are relations between capital and labour balanced by the third substance of government³²--their

³¹ In the background, here, is always the international collaboration and communicative networks of NATO, the rhythm of its meetings and summits, as well as the ideological work accomplished by a voluntary alliance of free nations...

³² Important here is the continuing respect accorded the authority and even cultural prestige of government, discernible in a relationship to bureaucracy not yet wholly mediated by neoliberal irony. The following excerpt, detailing the cultural interest of parliamentary clerks would be impossible after Thatcher's relentless pillorying of the civil service as stocked with dilletantish generalists and lay-about: "Clerks are not servants of the executive, but of parliament—although their pay is now tied to that of the administrative grade of the civil service. They display an interesting variety of outside talent—one translates Polish poetry, another writes detective stories, a third has published a well-received life of Lord Randolph Churchill, and several have brought out popular or more technical works on procedure. Taken together they display a remarkable spirit of zealous and totally non-partisan dedication to the service and smooth working of the House of Commons" (12.03.60, 971). The last part reads verbatim

antagonism blunted by the convivial relations described above--the tremendous growth in the economic power of the trade unions could be seen to have in many ways rendered obsolete the chiliastic drama of a Marxism linked to the fate of empirically obvious immiseration. In the mixed economy of the 1950s and 60s (though this changed towards the end of this decade) in Britain, neither labour nor capital it could be said "had the upper hand". Industry--here conceptualized as an indivisible two--relied for its operation on co-operation between "both sides", the desirousness of each checked by the good limit of rough parity³³. It is not simply the fact that labour and capital speak to each other, its that they are composed morphologically in such a way that such speech can be envisioned as a conversation between equals³⁴.

At the same instant, balance described the coordination between two species of industrial practice, each with their own moral *telos*. The nationalized industries in Britain, their ethos "public", linked popular arguments against the immorality of profit and market inefficiency to egalitarian associations of access to the primary; traditional commerce, its

like a piece of late 80s *Economist* wit.

³³ This is precisely the "Middle Way" described by Harold Macmillan, "an industrial structure with the broad strategic control in the hands of the state and the tactical operation in the hands of private management, with public and private ownership operating side by side" (quoted in Dorey 35).

³⁴ It's also important to note that in the period addressed by this Chapter *The Economist* is very careful to insist on the need for *voluntary*, rather than *legislated* control of the unions (a position which will change with its Thatcherite shift away from notions of consensus and moderation): "[industrial peace] cannot be implemented by tidy and autocratic decree. It can be achieved only by a broad mobilisation of public opinion—by harder thinking, and harder feelings among those who have been inconvenienced by the strikes. This may seem a dangerous doctrine to those who rightly maintain that a trade unionist—when properly informed and genuinely aggrieved—has an inalienable right to withdraw his labour; but the desirable limit of the public's harder feelings can, in fact, be fairly precisely delineated. The public should become much more indignant with those who continually foment these stoppages, but it should not go so far as to fall into the totalitarian trap of demanding legislation to suppress them. There is a right to strike against the public. And there is a right for the public to resent being struck without good reason. The best hope for avoiding future trouble is that leaders of public opinion—including both the newspapers and the Government—should help to impel the public out of its present hopeless apathy into a more opinionated attitude of mind" ()

ethos "private", could meanwhile be justified with reference to the idea of economic freedom and the inviolability of individual enterprise. Counterposed to communism's liquidation of the particular, the mixed economy could be seen to uphold a principle of control—a gesture to the sovereignty of the whole—without totalizing social space by withdrawing the dailyness of an economy from the provenance of wilful individuality. Free enterprise, then, was to be respected within the broader “assertion by Man of some mastery over his economic environment” (04/02/1950, 243).

War, here, is the horizon on which relations between part and whole are calculated. In the 1950s Britain could look back to the war as a period of driven national achievement, a coming together of the parts in a *frisson* of the whole; the capacity of governments to achieve full employment, but also to decisively manage problems was unquestionable. The threat of war also strategically necessitated public control over production. The nationalized industries provided the center with a solution to the problem of appearing feckless or “female” against the crazed masculinity of both fascism and communism; sovereignty remained alive, yet circumspectly checked by balance, controlled, yet still virile.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s *The Economist's* claim to the conceptual middle was powerfully underwritten by the magnetism of dyarchical consensus. The former's pragmatism, non-conformity and intelligence could be rehearsed in the form of a perpetual displacement between the particularities of its positions and the predictable ideological repetition of the parties. Its inbetweenness, in other words, was intrinsically linked to the omnivorous temporality and of the magazine and its difference from party-

thinking: “independently” scanning the limitless texture of the existent, always discovering ready-to-hand a new flow of editorializable substance, forever distinguishing its stance on an issue from those taken by either party or posing for a temporary alignment of forces, the text's freedom from the electoral requirements of visible consistency--the logic of the "platform"--allowed it to enact a mindful practice of distinction and selection within the broader stability and orderliness of the party binary.

Though the global political field was still iconically polarized, it was precisely because this antagonism had long been inoculated in the casual alterity of the Tory/Labour dialectic that a center position could appear without contradiction as *non-choosing choice*. The center in the 1950s refused to "take sides"³⁵, which is not the same thing as admitting that it had defected from the responsibility of choice or fidelity; rather, as was suggested above its commitment to liberal democracy as a system organizes the permanent *bricolage* it conducts on the inside of dyarchy, this commitment to the tacit doctrinal *telos* of multiple local alignments fitted to the specificity of the conjuncture: “The discerning voter will look critically at both leader’s election platforms” (13.01.79, 17). The center in the period under discussion here touches down on the either side of the dyad, making ephemeral contact with a party's perspective only in so far as it facilitates

³⁵ “A journal that is jealous of its reputation for independence would, in any event, be foolish to compromise it by openly taking sides in a general election. Those electors who look in these columns for advice on how to cast their vote on Feb 23rd will look in vain. Even if we had a decided preference, we should try to conceal it...What can be done, however—indeed, what the voter who takes his responsibilities seriously must do—is to survey the real issues one by one and form a judgement on the merits of the parties in respect of each. It is therefore proposed in this and two succeeding articles to review the main issues of the election and to attempt to form a specific judgment on each of them—but to leave it to the reader to supply his own relative weighting of their importance in adding them up to the final choice.” (04.02.50, 243).

logical solutions to well-modelled problems. Crucial is the way the division sustained by diarchy comes to exhaust a registration of the political, delimiting its meaningfulness in such a way as to render the differential arithmetic of the center convincing: a concession to the social here, a bone thrown to finance there, the spectacle of perspectival distinction is really nothing but an effect of the collapse of difference itself and its hypostatization in the two-party machine.

In other words, only in a relatively closed semiotic and historical context in which both parties vastly share objectives and political vocabularies can the center plausibly activate itself as a scavenging, middle intelligence. When the dyad is violently amplified, its stakes raised, its differences pronounced, the center game is often less convincing, though this depends on how broadly entrenched the social division is. In those moments when the binary fragments in such a way that no stable two presides over the social field the optics of ephemeral alliance are likely to deteriorate into an impression of emptiness or opportunism, the dead time of oscillation. What is interesting is how the logistics of the middle as a consciousness linked to rationally stochastic choosing, a certain homelessness of reason, gets thrown into crisis by the appearance of an end to consensuality and the re-cathexis of the political field. If solutions remain accessible to an older order and logic the centrist refusal of extremity can be played to calm or soften the antagonism and restore the social to sanity; if the situation is such that no solution can be found within the existing terms of the system the center is forced to gravitate across the threshold and invest on the side of post-systemic vision, often requiring a new rhetoric and subjectivity (which we will discuss in the next Chapter). But first, we must continue

the discussion alluded to in Part 1 about the disruption of centrist civility by new forms of organized radicalism in the late 60s and early 70s.

Part 3: Radical Incivility

“The greatest thing about 1968 is that it is behind us” (10.01.70, 12)

If in the 1970s-- as growth slowed, inflation refused to scab, and new, possibly permanent trade configurations began to threaten axiomatic expansion--one could perhaps begin to imagine (and many did) that capitalism as a mode of production had reached some novel, even terminal limit, what surprises is the extent to which this averted, though certainly virtual systemic mortality, is habitually forgone by *The Economist* on its way towards that older obsessional archive named in jitters by the sixties. Remarkably early in the decade there is a sense that something fundamental has changed in the physics of the instant, that the two great political styles of the 1960s-- mass protest primarily, but also widely dispersed national liberation struggles--were in the process of weakening and that some new and less volatile dispensation had appeared on the horizon: “There really has been less unpleasantness than usual happening around the world...”(10.01.70, 11).

Though this interregnum between the “revolutionary fright” (12) of the last years of the 1960s and the inflationary bulge of 73 was of course very quickly replaced with new speciations of anxiety, what astounds us is the extent to which the 60s continue to haunt the center as a juncture of maximal, even ideal anxiety and violence. “The world’s greatest achievement in the 1960s is that...it has survived”, it melodramatically opines (27.12.69, 12).

Alluded to in Part 1 was the idea that the kind of centrism represented by Geoffrey Crowther (what I called in Part 2 “middle civility”) was--by the early 1970s-- in a state of crisis and change. The primary vectors of this mutation were the politicized student—what *The Economist* calls the “revolutionary young”-- and the urban guerrilla (10.01.70, 11). While civil centrists gauged their progressiveness against the shared “religiosity” and formalism of Leninists and conservatives alike, the appearance on the scene of militant students--young, educated, and experimental—forced the center into a traumatic encounter with its own suppressed traditionalism and “backwardness”. Though its fidelities to constitutionalism, the rule of law, moral commercialism, and the mixed economy, as well as its stylish (vaguely) aristocratic individualism were “radical” from the perspectives of Christian Monarchists, gold standard zealots, and Stalin (all of whom could be derided as sentimental moralists or blockheads), the civil center discovered in the cultural production of students an articulate extremity capable of re-drawing the boundaries of its own claims to non-conformist liberality. Though “extreme” in the context in which Crowther used it would appear to have signalled the tenacious civility of centrist reason, the latter’s self-identification with hereticism insured that the cultural deconstructionism of the late 1960s would entice our text into a complicated dance card of desire and disavowal.

I will argue throughout this dissertation, that the radical center is a voice almost indistinguishable from an aversion to the traces left on speech by affect, specifically that generated by a religious or moral “conviction” (here understood to exist apart not only from common sense but the rigor of its empirically accountable science). This is true even

of the civil center which very regularly chides a position with being irrationally emotive. There is nothing less dissonant to the ear of the center than the warble generated in a voice by the hold over it of an untheorized postulate or attachment. For *The Economist*, the 1960s are never precisely separable from a memory of the noise of pigs, a speech so removed from sense that it borders on animal sounds. A great, ceaseless squeal, the decade is always arriving in the form of an aural cacophony, a jumbled, indecipherable chaos of demands and poorly clarified notions.

However, *The Economist* is never able to wholly bracket or dismiss the arguments of the students; the entire thematic of its openness to ideological difference hinges on its ability to appear capable of understanding and responding to their demands. Despite their equivocality, there is an eloquence and sophistication to these critiques wholly removed from the crudeness and seriality of vulgar Leninism: “the young really do have something interesting to say to the old and middle aged” (27.12.69, 12). They have the support of sociologists, economists, and professors of philosophy. Many of their ideas resonate with and extend the anti-authoritarian celebration of freedom always waveringly present at the heart of liberal thinking:

[they affirm] the desirability of a reformed society in which the individual would not be enslaved by institutions and machines; in which he would be freed from a political system which he can no longer really influence, from assault by mass communications, and from hopeless acquiescence in the dispensations of the governing powers (20.04.68, 31).

The center’s fidelity to democracy as a flexible alternative to the sclerosis of ideological extremism, requires that it think though the capacity of Western liberalism to absorb and

learn from these critiques: “the whole point of the democratic system is supposed to be that it has constructed a mechanism for [responding to change]” (27.12. 69, 12). In light of the students’ protest parts of this “machinery look remarkably rusty” (12). There are now, it admits wearily, “two versions of democracy” (20.04.68, 31).

There is, then, a very real way in which the 1960s mundanely confound the center. “Savage”, “a shapeless cloud”, the decade’s revolutionary turbulence understandably shakes a position for whom logic and patience are forms of each other (27. 12. 69, 12). Unlike the trade unionist—who would also become the object of intense vituperation on the part of *The Economist*—the students of the 1960s were calling into question the conceptual legitimacy of capitalism even as their experimentations at the limits of moral habit appeared to be ushering into existence the very outside they claimed to genuinely crave. What surprises a reader of today’s *Economist*, however, is the moral exorbitance and pettiness, the excessiveness and exasperation with which it grasps its target:

[some] of the ablest of the young...now reject the society that has been built up on the normal protestant ethic--of competitive work in order to support a family based on reasonably monogamous sexual relations--so that a large part of the world may be about to start a tiresome slide towards penurious and anarchic hippydom. As regards sexual morals, there are still shocks to come. The 1970s may well see some new patterns of cohabitation, with larger numbers of young people (and possibly, though rather more nuttily, of older generation groups) preferring to live together in what might be called affluent-style collectives or communes... (12).

Immediately discernible beyond (or really in!) the persistence and monotony of its tauntings is something more and less than fear: *it is a sense that its own (limited) claim to have abandoned the stupidity and backwardness of the moral is forever being undermined*

by a timbre very easily mistaken for a conservative hatred of the new by the old. Is it the political economy of the new left it reviles or the ease with which it sheds its clothes? The very possibility of such a question puts intense strain on a discourse which takes as presuppositional to its difference a principled distance from the distortions and opacity of religious conviction. What becomes disturbingly visible in such vitriol is precisely the moral normativity of the civil center: its liberalism suddenly ceases to mark the outer edge of a pure openness and instead appears sabotaged from within by a whole series of uncriticized mores, habits, etc.

In a formula we will discover at work again in its coverage of the urban militant, the student's experimentation at the limits of the moral is very precisely characterised as "tiresome" (12). That these experiments are represented as arriving from the past, a deviance more monotonous than order itself, tips us off to the fact that what is at stake in the debate is the legitimacy of a rhetoric's claim to the contemporaneity of the present. At the root of who is bored by whom is a struggle over the location of the line separating the alive from the dead, the awakened from the moribund, the futurally modern from the bad inertia of the past.

Viewed from the perspective of the student the kind of progressive modernity practiced by the civil center appeared antiquated, hierarchical, and conservative. If, against communism's technocratic grey, the center could enframe itself as liberal pleasure and openness the sudden appearance to its left of novel envisionings of freedom---new libidinal democracies, new styles of expression and togetherness, new intensities of experience and living--placed a great deal of pressure on the moral remainders still

normatively operative within its discourse. Its closeness to authority, order and productivity; its emphasis on efficiency; the perceived dryness and abstraction of its economics; its proximity to the cultures of business, industry and finance; the heteronormativity, whiteness, and masculinity at work in its commonsensical Britishness (there in spite of its putative radical liberalism); its fetishism of summitry (the balance of power), a definition of politics wholly confined to relations between governments and the jurisdiction of law; its militarism and technophilia, a certain obsession with the technical specifications of the toys of war (tanks, missiles, boats, and planes); its inability to say anything remotely interesting about burgeoning forms of youth culture³⁶; its literariness, which is to say, not just its *belle-lettrist* elevation of the written word at the expense of the image, but also the vaguely fusty quality of its wit; in short, its (liberal) Tory civility—all of this compromised the ability of the center to take up its position as the consummate arbiter of time, a sensible, discriminate emissary between past, present, and future.

A different set of tensions appears in its contact with the urban guerrilla. In the wake of changed political conditions new forms of revolutionary organization and strategy were evolved, tested and globalized in the seventies. The most concrete expression of this difference was the urban militant, “a whole new international category of men and women who were ready to cross frontiers to kill in the name of a cause”. Organizations such as the *Red Brigades* and the *Baader-Meinhoff* gang in Europe, the *Montoneros*, *ALN*, and *Tupamaros* in Latin America, as well as the *Weatherman* and

³⁶ “Perhaps the main thing is to make sure that [young people’s] choices of fun are as wide as possible, and not bounded merely by shop windows. Certainly, youth clubs, scouting and religious youth movements are not the only way of doing this.” (03.05.60, 879).

Black Liberation Army in the United States took as their object the whole-scale physical destruction of capitalism as an economic system ostensibly isomorphic with imperialism, exploitation, and inequality. Comprised mainly of radicalized students and professionals, often divided into functionally autonomous cells of 4 or 5 militants, the guerrillas were tricky tactical and symbolic challenges to capitalist democracies in both the First and Third Worlds. They assassinated government officials as well as agents deemed complicit in the exploitative state process; they kidnapped ambassadors, bankers, and wealthy business leaders often using their hostages to extort large sums of money from the state or from the families of the kidnapped; they planted thousands of bombs, robbed countless banks, and perfected the art of the stand-off, tense stormings of public buildings in which demands would be made in exchange for the lives of those held at gun-point inside. The possibility of one's plane being hi-jacked was a *frisson* and a fear new to the decade.

Neither the violence used continuously by states to repress or eliminate dissident subjects nor the incidences of demographical cruelty we like to call “social disturbances” (murder, rape, abuse, etc) even remotely approach the degree of affective distortion introduced into the pitch of measure so indispensable to centrist discourse by the urban militant. Certainly, the old religious militancies named new by the abruptness and magnitude of September 11th have tested the patient, controlled utterances of *The Economist* much less than the near simultaneous emergence of left armed revolt in the seventies. It would appear that the militant holds a special place in the ensemble of things that are disavowed by the centre. Why? What is it that pushes the stridency of its tone

beyond that reached even in its dealings with the students and the unions? What does its aversion tell us about some of its least articulable and theorized needs?

*Unlike the worker on strike or the agitated student crowd, the militant no longer has any recognizable relationship to social reproduction. Categorically ambulant, a subject for whom existence and movement are inseparable, it tends to represent for *The Economist* an extreme distance from the slow, consensual rhythms of common social being. The militant has somehow turned their back on all the convivial markings of social naturalness, the ease, propriety, and casual circulation of everyday liberal pleasure. So far has it traveled from convention that every militant must in fact be grasped by two names. The first is given at birth, an identification born of the family and its intimate domesticity; this is the trace left by a customary thickness of good, solid, neighbourly truths, the reality and immanent normativity of communities, businesses, and homes. The second is fake, self-fabricated, a codename: “Chairman Gonzo” whose “real” name is Abizmail Guzman; “Agent Zero” “actually” Raul Sendic “was captured last week”; Maurlanda, “known as Tirofijo by his troops”....*

This second name limns a dark, asocial collectivity, an underground corridor of half-way houses and dubious contacts, trade in contraband and whisperingly hatched schemes. Of course, having two names, two identities already immediately compromises the operational logic of liberal jurisprudence: the security of contracts hinges very soberly on the stability, referentiality and working accountability of proper names. The mere tactical requirement of semblance is enough to impugn the militant from the very beginning. There is a sense prior even to its first crime that militancy begins where good,

bourgeois transparency passes away into the suspicious requirements of plans, masks, and shadows. There is a way, then, in which shame is understood to mark the very birthplace of militancy, a way in which its very first act is a hood which only ever imperfectly obscures and forgets the face beneath. Anything undertaken apart from the transparency of the proper name, anything that risks outside of the stored, profitable value of capitalist excellence remains explicable to the center only through the categories of failure, inadequacy and guilt: the hood beneath which the militant passes is the shame of its incapacity to procure viable social usefulness, its failure to compete transparently in the games consented to by a law-abiding, less irritable majority.

Which is to say, that where there is a codename, there must also be a secret, implicating narrative, an explanation. In one iteration it is the shame of an ambitiousness unsuitable to the insignificance of an origin: a being too big for one's britches. It is best captured in the figure of the literate student who forgoes its roots in the simplicity of the peasant village for a self-ennobling and presumptive moral purity, the stilted, uncommon vitriol of the militant. In another version, the guerrilla who speaks in the name of the poor is exposed to the risible contradiction of his privileged upper class background; the itinerant, practiced squalor of the militant is in fact a conceit or pretension, a playing at poverty which benefits from the largesse of daddy's money even as it ungratefully denounces the conditions of its accumulation. Asymmetry, opportunism, and triviality are the secret birthrights of every militant. If the center is a subject that very regularly posits in-betweenness as an adventure in uncategorizability, the high stakes and slipperiness of the non-conforming maverick, visionary or entrepreneur it nevertheless connects the great

acquisitive game of invention, discovery, conquest and power to an absolutism of the proper name coterminous with an order established on the suzerainty of property: if you can't put one's name on it it's not worth doing.

The militant, then, functions under the banner of a mere sign that facilitates an act which is in some very substantive way disinterested insofar as it procures for itself nothing but death, torture or incarceration within the terms laid down by the dominant juridical order. The militant *operates*, this language of automatism and consumed abstraction revealing a psychology wholly removed from the motivational nexus common to everyday capitalist exchange. What ardor, madness or illusion could so thoroughly distort and reverse the liberal body's oldest flows, those lucid, primitive capillaries upon which its entire theoretical system lives or dies? Of course, the liberal tradition classically distinguished its own admittedly crude propositions from the “high”, insubstantial moral idealisms of the ancients. On the one hand, was an early modern psychology with its “low” but “solid” foundation in the substance of passions and its unbeautiful emphasis on the role played by self-interest in the unfolding of social life. On the other, were the prescriptive Greek constructions, dreams of cities with justice and philosophical happiness which chronically failed to account for the intractability and pervasiveness of instincts in human affairs. At least since Hobbes, the liberal tradition has commonly relied for its persuasiveness on a fear of death as natural to the self as its capacity to rationally calculate utility. It is for this reason that the psychology of the militant is simply ungraspable within the parameters supplied by centrist, liberal sanity: not only is its labour unremunerated, the requirements of anonymity a foil even to casual

symbolic “payments”, it seems to exist in direct contravention of the passions themselves, the fear of death certainly, but also that pleasurable tissue of daily transactions and tastes which make up and securitize the capitalist lifeworld.

There is, then, something weirdly plethoric about the body and labour of the militant. Engaged completely, militancy is a praxis which absorbs entirely the life, time, energy, and hopefulness of a body. The concept of commitment fails to reach the newness and scale of the absorption, the anti-humanism of the process: what was once a subject and its vicissitudes appears to vanish, leaving behind only a deed, a contrail, the trace of a speed or intention. *For a centrism the rhetorical fate of which hinges on an impression of decisiveness this is an extremely vexing and fascinating figure.* Often rigorously trained, its needs pared down to the slim necessity of hiding, the militant names a genre of labor, a way of being alive, deeply alien to a system of thought for which wages are the fuel of volition. Between the input and its output there is a misfiring or disproportion that takes the form of a surplus. So much of what makes up the commonsense of neoliberalism's critique of communism will depend for its credibility on this presumed equivalence between a labour and its wage, between an ardour and the lucid monetary incentive which finally masters laziness. In a decade pitted with shopfloor struggles, when work stoppages threatened both profits and governments, when wage increases—badly shrunken by inflation—seemed flagrant and interminable it should not surprise us that this figure of a labour without pay, a praxis without money or meaning should haunt liberal logic like something living and dead at the same time. How is this causeless force, this strange engine explicable within the terms laid down by centrist reason?

The first observation that should be made here concerns the solutions avoided or eschewed by *The Economist*. Rather than taking the practice of the militant as the signpost to a belief or framework axiologically exterior to the codes of liberal pleasure *The Economist* explains the difference by characterizing its singularity as epiphenomenal or derivative, a mere mimicking of the code with which it claims to break. In other words, the communist guerrillas is not anchored in a thought or language impermeable to the center, but the very logic it imagines itself to have superseded in militant politics. What the guerrillas want, says *The Economist*, is nothing more “than to see their names in print” (05.06.71, 20). Far from the anomaly it first appeared, an exceptional option in a game common to the present, it turns out—after all the fuss—that militancy is nothing but servile repetition itself, a whim empty for fame and notoriety. These lives--their truths very regularly coaxed into speech by the unremitting seriousness of torture--are here collected under the sign of a capriciousness internal to a centrism for which the primary modality of language is wit and no truth ultimately worth its persecution. Not only are their manifestoes and actions mere signs, fake IDs attached to proper names the truth of which reveal ulterior plans, but they themselves, so complete is their ingenuousness, aspire to nothing more than their own virtualization within the semiotic field designated by a dominant liberalism. This will later be used to great effect in the newspaper's treatment of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas: the mask here is nothing but a mania for the visible, a hypercathexis of the face. The cap and the pipe, to say nothing of his interminable poetry are the proof: *Marcos exists only for the day his pseudonym is unravelled and his proper name restored to light*. The difficult road of the guerrilla, its

life given over to risks repugnant to centrist pleasure, is revealed in the end to contract with the fear of death like everybody else: it wants nothing but immortality. Putting aside the middle class opprobrium of this immortalization, the way it forecloses casual relations and desire, the guerrilla in such a model plays the exhausting game of the political only to place into perpetuity the dull, flat bulk of the proper name, a sign, apolitical and insignificant, that gleams forever like a cold star.

This is an intriguing reversal. What once appeared from the outside as “chilling” automatism, a kind of alien and indefatigable labor, is here recombined to exemplify an extreme form of social conformity. There is a “vogue” for revolution (05.01.74, 15). Far from inassimilable, the militant is mimicry itself, social emulation followed unthinkingly to the absurd and empty pole of mere celebrity. Perceived from the differential space of the center, the militant, then, is nothing more than a child: prone to repetition, a copycat, it forgoes the difficult adulthood of articulation for the redundancy, simplicity and thoughtlessness of slogans. *The Economist* never tires of advising governments not to give in to the petulance and impressionability of this child³⁷. As new strategies become available to the revolutionaries of the mid 1970s—hi-jacking, urban kidnapping, the ransoming of embassies, and so on—the emergence of each is met with an injunction to caution: at all costs governments must interrupt and disable the “force of example”, the osmotic imperative, by which militants absorb and deploy the new techniques. By

37 “The experience of the 1970s showed how quickly a new terrorist technique, once proven successful in one country, is tried out in another. Brazilian and Guatemalan kidnapers created a vogue for abducting foreign diplomats, and later the Argentine guerrillas showed how to get rich quick by grabbing foreign businessmen as well. Now that their example has been copied—rather later than expected—in Belfast, where a West German industrialist has been abducted it is no longer safe to assume that London will remain immune from political kidnapers.... (05.01.74, 14).

detailing closely the geographical origins and dispersion of these strategies--the sudden appearance of political kidnapping in Peru, the bombing of an embassy in Uruguay-- a sense for puerility of the militant takes on the sharpness and evidentiary properties of the diagram. Emulative, drawn always to the new, the mechanistic guerrilla-child picks up the tactics and habits of others like a clean and stupid mirror.

The persuasiveness of this motif of the militant as child gains depth as a function of a second indispensable centrist theme, what we might call here, the comedy of smallness. This device relies for its intelligibility on a shared estimation of the disparities ongoing to any given configuration of forces. That which exists is held up against that which does not as evidence for the latter's continuing improbability. Magnitude and truth merge: the consensus of the majority, reinforced by institutional and political confirmation, operates in such a way as to delegitimize as spectral and inessential the merest stirrings of marginal dissent. The ambition of the numerically small to introduce change into the inertia of a dispensation immediately takes on the generic characteristics of farce, a comedic immediacy as old, one suspects, as the difference between the elephant and the mouse. Not only does the disproportion between a subject and its "vision", between the scale of an "alternative" and the poverty of its means deploy an instant impression of hubris (the proverbial "delusion of grandeur"), this comedy is corroborated by the spectacle of an activist energy the intensity of which always appears laughably excessive to the meanness and imperceptibility of its effects.

For example, the very existence of a communist party in Britain is the butt of a tautological joke. Nothing pleases *The Economist* more than to recite its always

diminishing numbers, the cumulative effect one of shock at the tenacious stupidity of those who remain. Which is to say, that when the desire of the militant ceases to function as a synonym for opportunism and finally acquires a certain positivity or content it is at the same time continuously negated as either unreasoning presumption or Sisyphean futility. Between the militant and its political respectability there is always an “only”, an “at most”, or a “no more than”; it is in the quiet iteration of these phrases that we learn to memorize the true irrelevance of the fraction, the impotence and miserable comedy of the number that is too small to count.

We should pause here to consider just what it is that is at stake for the center in this insistence on the redundancy of the militant. If conservatives cleave too near to religion to fit the progressive managerialism of the center, and if communism itself remains bound to unthinking codes, an “ideology” no less allergic to change than the traditionalist Right, then it stands to reason that between these twin stagnations the sudden appearance on the politico-theoretical map of the 1970s of an activist, intelligent, and equally “progressive” urban militancy would force a psychology cognate with the myth of its unique proximity to practical reason into prickly suspicion and defense. Like the students, the urban insurgents frame *The Economist’s* Tory liberalism as the height of banal inheritance. The center, remember, ceaselessly curates the historical gains of liberalism; it genuinely sees in the existence of liberal prosperity and freedom *anywhere* the contours of a precious, incomparable foothold, a trench of sanity the value of which is inestimable held up against the dangerousness and suffering that would return to human societies *everywhere* in its absence.

Not only did the militant contest the legitimacy of global liberalism, it did so—in Italy certainly, but also in many parts of Latin America—in a language equally opposed to the center's two primary antagonists, conservative traditionalism and state communism. Their ranks often filled with articulately critical professionals, writers and intellectuals the organizations of the 1970s in places like Argentina and Uruguay resonated with New Left critiques which explicitly denigrated centrist “pragmatism” as tepid, unimaginative technocracy, careerism without adventure or spirit at best. If, however, the student was a brain without a body (lacking “teeth”) and the communist a body without a brain (pure repetition) the militant, however, seemed to breach this difference by combining sophisticated critique with the hard-headedness and pragmatism of war. The gun of the militant, its male relentlessness, but also its evident capacity to organize a subterranean life parallel to the liberal order place it at a precise and sensitive centrist nerve. Where does the difference between obedience to the law and conformist docility begin and end?

Part 4: Liberal Democracy and the Extremity of Consensus

The main way in which the civil center countered attempts to frame its practice as moribund or conformist was its insistence on re-inscribing consensus as itself a kind of extremity. This becomes a position increasingly visible in the aftermath of 68, but one still present embryonically in Crowther’s “extreme center”. *From this angle, civil centrism was always already radical.* How? The consensus driven culture of liberal democracy did not signify unthinking concession to the existent, *but rather the firmness of a collective fidelity to dissent.* That which was consented to, in other words, was nothing but the moral priority of dissensus itself. This prioritization, however, required an

uncompromising commitment to the rules of civil engagement--a certain civilised militancy. The liberal architecture ensuring rule of law, procedural parliament and freedom of speech could not be passively assumed or allowed to lose its interlace functional crispness. The center's extremity, in other words, was in some sense the indefatigability of its commitment to organized antagonism. This is the “hurly-burly world” of debate, diplomacy, and exchange (06.06.64, 1071).

The conceptual distinctness of extreme consensus was consolidated against a backdrop of brightly articulated opposites. Domestically, consensus was a style of comportment counterposeable to the juvenile stridency of protest. Students, trade unionists, feminists, disgruntled war veterans, even urban guerrillas were seen to lack the mindfulness and self-discipline needed to transform inchoate antagonism into the managed, peaceful flows of speech. Protest lacked the rigor of restraint substituting enflamed gesticulatory bodies for the productivity and comprehensiveness of dialogue. Viewed from the extremity of consensus, the upheaval and disorder of street subversion was certainly never deviant or scandalous: *it was simply too easy*.

At the same time, democratic consensus distinguished itself exogenously through its difference from non-consensual totalitarianism. Conceptualized as a regime of passionate speech, consensus was the fragile and precious other to a communism the primary mechanism of which was the erasure of intellectual variety and freedom. What the latter strangled in the name of social oneness, the former incited even to the point of societal collapse. This was the extreme vigor and risk of democracy, the danger posed to social peace by the exacting complexities of liberty. The radical center's opposition to

communism has never been hysterical or inflationist. The fundamental premise of its critique of authoritarianism mirrors its relationship to the tactic of protest: it is not that it is evil or incomprehensible, *it is simply too easy*. The contempt shown towards communism by *The Economist* is less a question of moral outrage than it is the disaffection of a voice horrified by the unsubtle.

On the one hand, extreme consensus orients itself to the production and reproduction of the conditions necessary for decorous antagonism. It is not a proclivity to agreement and conformity, but an insistence on the inviolate nature of the institutions created to safeguard procedural deliberation. In this iteration, the qualities implicated in its extremity are steadfastness, foresight, civility and acumen: one might best locate it under the synonym *serious*. A creature of order, it elevates rule of law to the level of a deeply cherished subjective investment: it makes liberalism the object of its own kind of discriminate militancy. Seen in this light, the extremity of consensus is the vigor with its agents populate and indemnify a fragile system against the goring of its systemic competitors. *It is a codeword for liberal democracy itself.*

On the other hand, radical consensus in Britain could be envisioned in the seventies as a destructiveness coextensive with freedom. It is important to emphasize that this is not a variation of the common Conservative identification of permissiveness with decline. Rather, the right of a democracy to kill itself is a quiet rendition of Sartre's imagination of the human as ultimately condemned to be free. Radical consensus is a condition natural to a society without premises, a society liberated from the ground of necessity. Viewed from this angle, democracy is not a base on which order rests, a kind of

institutionalized rigor, but an intensification of the right to dissent such that order itself is risked. It is a principle so consistent it threatens to abolish itself.

Time and time again, *The Economist* will point not only to the capacity of a democracy to electorally abolish itself or to disintegrate as an effect of openness as the dark genius separating it from the motionlessness tomb of communism. It never ceases to reiterate the way in which a transferral of power to the people, to the cacophony and indetermination of the social often perilously threatens the very basis of political order itself. That is, radical consensus places sovereignty under the extreme torsion of a freedom liable to sweep it away. In other words, the union which cuts off the electricity, the government which tries itself for lying, the (near suicidal) preservation of press freedom (even in times of war), as well as its openness to mass protest all place democracy within the ambience of a radical fidelity to transparency and principle totally at odds with the sheer pretence of communist legality. So committed to itself is democracy that it threatens to dissolve amidst a wave of anarchic self-criticism and speech.

From this angle, the civil center, met by the vibrant critiques of students and the effective body of the militant, is eminently at home in the present, *but knowingly so*. If the political poles ontologize the virtual, taking as their objects epistemic zones and times outside the intelligibility of a dispensation then the center starts by methodologically affirming not the whole of the moment--accepting neutrally everything operative within its ambit-- but rather the laborious sum of the conjuncture insofar as it is aggregately good, *in the last instance*. Within the parameters of centrist reason, *the good sum of the*

present is not only a conclusion one draws at the end of one's analysis, but also a point of departure useful to the beginning of thought. As departure it is a rule of thumb or axiom, a methodological invariant which protects one's thinking from the dangerous exaggerations, asynchronous narrations, and ideological haze of the extreme. As conclusion, it is the function of a tenacious empirical encounter with the fullness of the real. This center, then, shares in common with Michel Foucault a basic methodological position: *thou shalt not hate the present*. However, to posit the goodness of the world, the basic soundness of its system is to simultaneously begin at the assumption of its curation by thought: it is a thing made, vetted and sustained by human awareness and circumspection, but never wholly conscious or controlled.

The good sum is abetted by the efforts of humans, but is a spontaneous and decentralized process and not one guided by an intention or will outside the play of complexities and forces. To begin at the good of the world is to take seriously the capacity of planetary agents to interpret its directions, pleasures, and failures. If the whole of the world were bad, if its sum was a minus, human action—presumably obeying the pleasure principle—would correct the trend and set it back onto the path of progress, what John Locke, in a beautiful and strange word named *increase*. Both the left and right—and this is the secret of their shared essence—forgo this first listening to the quiet contentment of the world, which is evidence of its goodness.

In contradistinction to those languages which spontaneously reproduce a time's common sense, the center denaturalizes its consent, placing it on the surface of its discourse like a badge or certificate of authenticity. *This act of consent is the locus of a*

continuous dramaturgy of renewal. Perpetual transaction, it is a contract assented to again and again, but always at the very last instant, as if the outcome were a final, surprising swerve at the end of a long, exacting calculation. It is imagined as a self-monitoring machine that is in a constant state of suspicion with respect to everything it thinks and says. Which is to say, that within the purview of the center, submission to the good sum of the present is an act of courage as laborious as it is rare. A testimony and a commission, a ceaseless activity, it resembles less the spontaneity of reproduction than it does the ritual mindfulness of a vocation or cause.

Its primary imperative is to protect that which remains precious in the present from the predations, elisions, and barbarisms of critique. *The Economist* sometimes calls this denigration of the present “rejectionism”, a habit of thinking it associates with the speed of nerves, rather than the patience and slowness indispensable to clear cognition. Far from the rarest of utterances, critique is thought to be the stupid reflex of a “pessimism” utterly general to the social. Shared by tenured radicals and cranky, unionized janitors alike it is a generalized curmudgeonliness with metaphysical dimensions. Taking causes for effects, anomalies for destinies, forever investing surfaces with the traces of an obscure malevolence, critique is the impatient and obstreperous practice of those insensitive to the fragility and preciousness of modern freedom. Parliamentary capitalism is not some historical gargantuan, a permanence insusceptible to regression and reversal; rather it is a tentative and fragile interregnum, a freedom muscularly risked between the idiotic penury of feudalism and a future the indeterminacy of which holds in play the possibility of new savagery.

Heedless of the jewelled complexity of management, inadvertent of scientific nuance, critique plays rough amidst the precision components of the liberal machine, risking its fine mechanisms in a game of words that always borders on demagoguery or violence. The inveterate pessimists fail to take seriously the precariousness of the present, mistaking for an eternity the peace and privilege that is a mobile, reversible function of the expansion into all parts of the globe of both bourgeois legality and integrated market relationships. Astoundingly, the forgetfulness which Marx imagines to be cognate with the transition between modes of production, a force Jason Read describes as the “normalization constitutive of the regularity and functioning” of capitalism is here taken up directly by centrist reason and re-conceptualized as the *fundamental process intermediating between critique and its mistakes* (36). Critique is made possible, argues *The Economist*, only by virtue of the power of everything it has forgotten! If the preciousness of the present is to be grasped in its immediacy and insured against the bleak totalities of critique consciousness must be trained to think the specificity of our time from the perspective of its material and technological abundance. A thought which begins at the gains of peace and the scarcities characteristic of earlier modes of production constitutes for the center a kind of ethical hinge, a viewpoint which renders all claims to the contrary dark exaggerations.

The shift of the conjuncture away from the oppositionality of the student and the guerrilla and its re-codification around the recalcitrance and hard-headedness of the trade unionist significantly modified the terrain on which the center cast its die. The student

was an institutionally authorized subject whose invocation of a pleasure de-linked from work, ownership, status, commodities, money etc, seriously disrupted the basic liberal premise of an identity between capitalism and democracy. The risk, of course, was that the “most intelligent of the young would opt out of all materialist ambition”. Under such conditions *The Economist*’s dismissal of the “idealism” of the student could only very tortuously avoid seeming old, conformist, and retrograde, etc.

If the student could claim as an effect of being young a mind not yet enervated by protocol, its youth a secret power of vision and scale, then there should be no problem imagining the usefulness to the center of its disappearance from the terrain of visibility in the early 1970s. A center indistinguishable from “innovation”, from perpetual circumspection could only properly root itself in the dust of an older and less beautiful body. This wasted and preposterous body, unheedful of its redundancy and obsolescence, it would find perfected in the figure of the trade unionist. Which is to say-- always--the miner.

Chapter 2: Partisan of the Manifold

It was neither Stalin's fault nor his merit that he never succeeded in sticking to the middle of any road; and that he was constantly compelled to abandon "safety" for the most dangerous of ventures. Revolutions are as a rule intolerant of golden means and "common sense". Those who in a revolution try to tread the middle road usually find the earth cleaving under their feet. Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin*.

Part 1: Party of the Center

The British centre's present prominence arises from the electorate's aversion to a combination of an apparently dogmatic Conservative government and an equally dogmatic, indeed extremist, Labour opposition. The electorate is turning to the alliance as a relief from both the experience and the prospect of ideological radicalism. (05.12.81, 12)

The emergence in 1981 of a seemingly viable third party was greeted by *The Economist* in a tone redolent of permanently altered relations. Britain, it opined, "should get used to having a new official opposition [and the alliance] should get used to supplying it" (05.12.81, 12). No longer would politics exist blandly enframed by the predictable shuttlecock of dyarchy: "as Margaret Thatcher hews to the right, and Labour teeters on the left, Britain's Social Democratic-Liberal alliance is streaming into the vacuum" (19.09.81, 14). Beyond the clogged Two, the impasse of the binary, could be glimpsed a plurality and a newness uncosseted by the transferential linearity and blindness of opposition. Detectable in all of this is the romance of a secular vocational destiny, the grandeur of the calling: "Thrust upon them long before they dreamed of having it", the SDP-LP now bore soberly an "awesome responsibility" (05.12.81, 12).

Viewed retrospectively, such portentions of an end to political dualism in Britain appear misplaced at best. A quick eye to the subsequent electoral fate of the alliance suggests an untypical lapse in the paper's signature prognostic restraint; the two parties

merged in 1988 and their successor has since played a relatively minor role in British parliament³⁸. Seen from this perspective, the investments convoked by the affair appear peripheral at best. Such a conclusion, however, obscures the ways in which the occasion extorts *The Economist* into an uncommonly explicit encounter with the skeleton of its own centricity. For the first time in almost a century, laid bare on the very surface of British political consciousness and discourse, the center appears as an openly thematizable event, an investigatable entity, rather than a shadow or a habit. This concretization of the center, its formulae exposed to the popular skepticism of election, its fate dimensioned by the dice of politics, provides us with a rare opportunity to catch *The Economist* in the process of spontaneously synthesizing the foreclosed conditions of centrist reason and habitude.

The Social Democratic Party was formed in January 1981, the outgrowth of a controversial fission within the British Labour Party. Its members coalesced around a shared discomfort with the perceived slippage into extremity of both major parties³⁹. On the one hand, Thatcher's post-consensus conservatism threatened to exacerbate an unemployment already broadly condemned as politically (if not morally) intolerable. Her aggressive anti-unionism was seen to lack nuance and to have perhaps too hastily scuttled the long post-war emphasis on non-statutory, "co-operative" relations between government and labour. On the other hand, Michael Foot's Labour Party was denounced for having putatively veered dramatically to the left. The party's institutional proximity to

³⁹ "The SDP's pet cliché is "breaking the mould": by this they mean that they hope to stop the regular swings in British politics between two opposing and wildly different parties" (05.12.81, 35).

unionized labour led many to conclude that it was structurally incapable of the “firmness” necessary for the pre-emption of inflationary wage agreements⁴⁰. Increasingly influenced by resurgent left figures like Tony Benn⁴¹, locally infiltrated by Trotskyites and militant activists, Labour was no longer thought to be electorally operable, its new “shambolic radicalism” incompatible with the need to attract undecided and “non-ideological” voters (19.09.81, 14). Rejecting Labour’s nominal commitment to systemic change, but also Benn’s proposal of a shift to greater centralization and state control of industry (the now infamous Alternative Economic Strategy), the SDP was a left alternative to Thatcher disencumbered of the Marxist baggage still carried by Foot and others.

By December 1981 the SDP—now allied with the Liberal Party—was widely forecast to replace Labour as the official opposition in the next general election. The appearance of a genuine third option was extravagantly touted by *The Economist* as the beginning of a new political order in Britain. Though the newspaper cautiously supported Thatcher, her government had not yet successfully activated the nexus of practices with which it would later become eponymous. Repetitively thematized across the entire period of hyper-inflationary growth was the bewitching disjuncture between “theory” and

⁴⁰ “The Labour party is at the mercy of block union votes, and block money, that are not representative of its electoral supporters. As these union hierarchies feud with each other and within themselves, the party’s parliamentary leadership can no longer rely on union bosses to get it out of trouble. And, as a consequence, the most likely alternative government to Mrs Thatcher’s is at the mercy of an irresponsible, inexperienced group of left-wing activists.” (08.26.81, 13).

⁴¹ “[Tony Benn] is the darling of a selfselected group within the Labour party which thrives on the fact that the mass membership of the party is in catastrophic decline. He is, equally, according to the sensible minority in the centre of the party hierarchy, a man whose policies have lost all love for Labour in that middle ground of fudged politics and social democracy outside the party where most national elections are won” (18.08.79, 11)

“action”: “reality destroys laboratories” (11.08.81, 16)⁴². The Idea was increasingly seen as vitiated, powerless amidst a monotonous bog of strikes, monetary crises, and depressed economic growth⁴³. Elected on an anti-inflationary platform committed to tax cuts, reductions in public expenditure, trade union reform, and authorized by an impression of strict monetarist science, Thatcher had instead spent her first two years presiding over a galling expansion of money and government, while at the same instant allowing unemployment to reach a post-war high. Heath in drag⁴⁴, sameness added to sameness, the magazine could not yet be sure that Thatcher’s vision would not itself be wholly spoiled by the opaque tenacity of things as they are.

It is important to remember that in 1981 *The Economist* itself had not yet stumbled upon that precise mixture of aspects we today organize effortlessly under the banner of neoliberalism. Though it continued to advocate a *laissez faire* of the *last instant*, democratic constitutionalism, and the rights of the individual, it increasingly argued from a sense for the redundancy of the state and the unequivocal preferability of private

⁴² “The damage has been done not primarily by outside forces, but by an apparent failure of nerve and judgement by the prime minister himself. He has put on a brave front. He continues to talk tough and uncompromising terms of his determination to stand fast. Yet his actions have consistently been weaker than his words” (27.01.79, 15)

⁴³ “What are the chances that a laboratory test of different economic policies could show the way out of the impasse? Good, on the face of it. Mrs Thatcher’s Britain is intent on fiscal deflation and private incentives, Mr Mitterrand’s France on reflation and nationalisation, Mr Reagan’s America on monetary restraint coupled with a still-unclear fiscal policy. Perhaps others should watch them all rip for four years, and then follow the policies which did least badly. However tempting, this experiment won’t happen. Reality destroys laboratories, forcing governments to trim and tamper. Wall Street and whingeing Europeans have already persuaded the Reagan administration to defer its tax cuts. Mrs Thatcher is pouring money into the nationalised industries’ maw. Pressure on the franc will probably keep France’s working week nearer this week’s first-stage reduction to 39 hours than to the promised 35. Politicians and their advisers have much less economic power than they did in the halcyon 1960s: which is comforting or disturbing, depending on your point of view. What is certainly alarming is that, when they look at the power that remains, governments do not really know what to do with it” (11.08.81, 16).

enterprise. However, it did not yet have a theoretically integrated solution to the problem of stagflation even if it regularly intervened with discontinuous corrections at local points within the crisis. It continued to offer “sound” economic advice and innovative (though non-radical) proposals to problems it still tended to see as adventitious and temporary. Though its impulses bent in the direction of de-regulated privatization they had not yet passed through the galvanizing coherence of an iterable model.

Its Burkean suspicion of reformist *a priorism*, in addition to its location on the outer edge of paradigmatic change, interestingly orients *The Economist* in this period towards the discovery of an exit strategy situated squarely inside and within existing relations. In other words, the moment functions to detail a certain kind of utopian centrist resolution to conjunctural pressures in which logics of consensus, reasonableness, and legitimate protocol are still flagged as viable epistemological, political and tonal registers; however, it is precisely the strain exerted on these coordinates by the intersecting crises of the 1970s and early 1980s which would come to transform them into code words for systemic obsolescence and failure. It is the inability of these values to deal effectively with the changed conditions of the conjuncture which would lead the center away from an older linkage with cautious progress, stability and balance and towards a new cluster of meanings emphasizing non-conformity, inventiveness and an “extreme” fidelity to change.

The SDP-LP alliance attracts *The Economist* because it appears to offer it a classical centrist solution to the problem of polarization; or, said otherwise, the appearance on the scene of this third party immediately makes possible an interpretation

of the situation in terms of violently antagonistic and irreconcilable opposites which are crucially *equal in their difference*. This move introduces into a potentially destabilizing contextual uncertainty the conceptual simplicity of civil war, of a whole endangered by the recalcitrance, narrowness, and extremity of its factions. At the same time, the prickly labour of choosing between dramatically agitated and amplified opposites-- the stakes of choice raised by the very process of intensified distinction--calms in the ascription of a sameness which cancels out and negates the decisional gap. The presence of a political choice made in what could very well be a state of existential and social exception, one with real corporeal effects (mass deflation ranged on one side, the possibility of a radicalized Left experiment on the other) is emptied of qualitative difference and neutralized by the image of a scale balanced by an equality of disproportion, a shared and dangerous lack of commonality.

We should see this for the magic potion it is: at an instant when there has never been less in common between two established options, when what is risked in their difference is finally (almost) a set of distinct ideas about the future of the whole, the center discovers a gesture by which to suture this fissure along the banal, quantitative fact of their distance from the mean of the usual. The disagreeable tension created by the sudden need to make a choice that matters functions as fodder to the legitimacy of the power which can resolve disorienting difference into a neatly dismissible pair of mirroring extremes (while at the same time offering a palliating third option). This is a tranquilizing, mitigating, difference-muffling procedure, one very far from the volatilization of distinction enacted by the center's later conversion to a logic of

“revolutionary” partisanship. In the first instance, one tactically negates a field exhausted by extremity by positing a sensible middle cure; in the second, extremity characterizes the field of the existent itself, with universal torpidity or illusion seen as approaching a terminal stage in need of emergency re-dress. In such moments, the center must style itself beyond the semiotics of middleness and fully embrace a swing of the pendulum in the direction of a revolutionary re-setting. How a civil center staked in part on the difference between its pluralism and the extreme “close-mindedness” of its ideological enemies survives its transformation into Thatcherite non-conformity will be a question dealt with in the next section.

The contractualism of the civil center, together with its pragmatist insistence on leaving be the unbroken, places it, despite the crisis, a good distance from complete reform of the system; instead, it longs to slip outside from within, or to leave by going deeper inside. Roy Jenkin’s new party models precisely this desire. The SDP is unfamiliar yet not unrecognizable: its birth in fission--a split in the established--allows for a reckoning of paternity liberated from the banal repetition of inheritance. Untainted by contact with extra-parliamentary excess⁴⁵, gestated on the inside of the party system, *the arrival of the SDP combines the frisson of a rebellious discontinuity with the respectable*

⁴⁵ “The party’s backrooms have a business-like air. The chief executive is Mr Bernard Doyle, aged 40. He started in September, straight from a seat on the main board of a sizeable sugar company and conglomerate, Booker McConnell. The party’s policy co-ordinator, Mr Christopher Smallwood, comes from corporate planning at British Petroleum; he also has Whitehall experience, having advised the Labour cabinet on devolution. Both these two have studied at American universities. A newspaper marketing man, Mr Anthony Martin, is in charge of membership and promotion. An ex-customs and excise civil servant is the national secretary”. (05.12.81, 35)

impression of a slow maturation or evolutionary leap. The schism was not impetuous or unexpected: it came at the far edge of a series of portentous public appearances and speeches which framed the decision as an unfortunate, but stolidly necessary response to the radicalization of Labour under Foot. In other words, its novelty could be utilized without faltering under the sign of the bizarre or the inchoate. Its project was less a dream in the mind of the margin than it was a principled defection within the fold of the prevalent: measured internal growth and development, rational non-conformity and independence rather than frantic side-show.

Fascinating, here, is the way *The Economist* transforms the numerical fragility of the splinter into a kind of dissident majoritarianism. The leaders of the SDP are not of the fringe or the periphery, but characters of "admirable priority-setting" and "able orthodoxy" typified by a "somewhat weary skill in achieving consensus" (05.12.81, 11). All experienced party insiders, some—like Roy Jenkins—with links to the treasury and to sound money, their rebellion gains credibility through an adjacency to the real of power and expertise. If anything--and the flourish, here, is essential--they should be enjoined to greater extremity: the newspaper encourages the party to avoid the pseudo-centrist traps of "vagueness and soft desire to set all minds at rest" (11). Freed as they are from "political debts" they have "no excuse for unradicalism"(11). The word radical, here, denotes not the sheer distance between a position and a norm, but the thoroughness and precocity of an ideation; it names a certain kind of methodological obsessiveness rather than a disposition of the body ranged against the corpulence of the old.

Dissident, yet contemptuous of revolution, the SDP paradigmatically expresses the classical (new conditions after the students arrived) centrist injunction to deferred or proscribed fidelity. Born in dissent, it functionalizes apostasy as inherent to alliance, placing at the very origin of community a certain constitutive recalcitrance or distance. The principle of a togetherness becomes inseparable from a process of abjural or solemn abandonment: what is shared is nothing more than a mutual inaccessibility to the shared itself. Neither grown insensately in the bacterial quiet of nationhood nor ritually inherited under the flag of party necessity and sameness, the SDP could be seen to represent a volition entirely extracted from the logic of corporatist consensus and reproduction. Unimpeded by entrenched interests and fidelities, freed to a horizon of skeptical immanence, the center could begin to be imagined as comprised of a network of apostasies without conviction, a holding space of suspicions in which disaffected energies from across the spectrum are called to deviant experiment. The multiplicity which characterizes this space is itself a coordinate in its pretension to pure rational combinatory: it is a group consisting of only differences and so commitment to it is nothing more than a commitment to difference itself.

If what organizes the dissidence of the center is primarily a shared antipathy for "conviction politicians", it is nevertheless clear that *The Economist* discerns in the unbound heterogeneity of positions the danger of a dispersion emptied of direction and content: "the problems arise [when] different groups of supporters--attracted from different wings of the political spectrum begin to demand their own items of radicalism within an overall consensus of as-little-change-as-possible". Envisioned as disorganized

difference, a pragmatist tumult of post-ideological perspectives, the center conceptualized as a "coat of many colours" here broaches the spectre of a decomposition incompatible with basic institutional efficacy. Though the SDP are "well placed to pick the policy plums from either side of the political divide" this discriminate betweenness risks emptying out into a chaotic plurality (10.10.81, 30). The center as the transparent locus of infinitely contesting individualisms--perhaps its most contemporary imaginary--must always acclimatize its ostensible commitment to the manifold to the limiting exigencies of the party system:" naked of history or recognizable ideology" the SDP will have to complement this ambivalent groundlessness with a binding aimed at the concrete demarcation of the future (05.12.81. 11). It must take its freedom from collectivist inertia and translate it into a new kind of conviction, that connected to actionable and precise policy. Not unlike certain contemporary post-structuralisms, the center, in other words, enframes its oneness as the contingent effect of "remembering from the future", a protocol organized around the disenchanting prescriptions of policy rather than some originary primeval belonging or source.

Such a center becomes nothing but a memory of deeds, a tradition comprised entirely of the echoes of concrete effects. Its past a chronicle of skilled interventions, its future a working memo of actionable targets and goals, such a party deploys its multiplicity like an ideologically transparent laboratory. But this form--in many ways an image from a radical center much more at home in the 1990s--worryes an *Economist* not yet capable of envisioning the fully realized secularity of the contemporary political party. Rather than relying too heavily on this unbound, individualized (really postmodern)

heterogeneity, (one still too close to nothingness and chaos), *The Economist* accents the descriptively composite nature of the new formation. It is not merely aggregated difference, but a determinate, ambivalently contradictory association of existing entities. If the SDP alone anticipates morphologically a later conception of the center as productive postmodern dissidence, the conditions of coalition temper its unboundedness without re-channelling its form into the banal positivity of the traditional party. How does this work?

The prospect of a formal alliance between ideological “opposites” is not quite the same thing as two parties merely collaborating nor is it very close in import to the pure accumulation of multiplicity described above. Such an alliance--combining unlike or antipathic elements--purports a de-naturing arrangement of existing relations. Inherited protocols it is said will have to be suspended to accommodate the hybridity and strangeness of this new political animal. Internally particulate, a Two inside a One (and not a Two *become* One), this structure designates a mature withdrawal from the infantile egoism and short-termism of “tribal” politics. Unlike the hasty merger which collapses pre-existing difference in such a way as to retrospectively impugn its meaningfulness (signalling a fire-sale or an empty strategic grab for sheer heft), coalition suggests a discriminate association unlimited by anxieties of proximity and influence. What prevents this symbiotic co-operation from becoming mutual appeasement or gridlock, a stagey love-in or an immobilized stalemate is precisely the electricity generated by sustained contact between antagonistic poles. But for this to work there has to be a semblance of ideological difference, a clash of political cultures extravagant enough to install at the

heart of the chimera a combatively dynamic engine. This dialectical soul is nothing but the optical effect of the explosivity projected onto interaction between ideologically distinct atomic structures. It might even be a reflex from a cultural sense for the energizing stimulus of hatred.

Long established political pathways will be altered as each partner enters into protracted habitude with its opposite. Each will be forced to shed presuppositions and assumptions; out of mutual frustration and exchange solutions hitherto unimaginable from within the ghetto of the camp will appear at their borders like contraband. The configuration of a party which at times resembles “the nostalgic summer schools of the Fabians in the 1960s” but which manages to still remain attractive to “Tory Wets” augurs a sense for a fresh and flexible combination of incompatibles, rather than a pure multiplicity the complexion of which is too diverse and bewildering to stage itself as surprising or innovative. In other words, there is a diversity which stands to unfold like pure dispersion or empty, undialectical singularity; it is precisely this tensionless complexity which the coalition avoids through a ritual of determinately negotiated difference. Of course, the postmodernization of social life will come to alter the viability of this first multiplicity; but for now what matters is that it can only really function within the horizon of our moment’s subjectivity as lack of cohesion, direction and narrative. Against this disoriented difference, coalition limns a concise political drama charged with the hopefulness of the new, a politics able to decisively arrest chaos, but in a manner which is non-dogmatic and practical, rather than ideological and visionary (a la Thatcher).

However, even more interesting is the way *The Economist* continuously enjoins the SDP to resist becoming a "pure party of the center" (19.08.81, 14). This is in part because it sees the new organization as in some sense too sophisticated for the established electoral tastes of the British public which remain dominated by the "natural constituencies of Tory Capitalism...and...organized labour" (14). Given existing conditions the party is susceptible to what the newspaper calls "centrist squeeze"; at the last instant, despite the desire of many to embrace a third option, voters end up reinforcing the old divisions to offset undesirable outcomes born of the new electoral calculus or simply out of fear of the untested (12.07.81, 15). If the SDP want victory they must perform "a complicated entrechat of a close alliance--in effect all but a merger--with the Liberals to capture the centre voters and then a brisk step leftwards to seize Labour's commanding heights" (15). They must avoid becoming "merely a party of the center", and instead "wreck Labour", totally supplanting its position on the Left (15). In other words, *The Economist* wants to move the center to the right (and to the commanding heights) without submitting the process to the conceptual clumsiness of an explicit centrist apparatus "a new center grouping" or a destructive amplification of either ruling party. It wants the center to be a pole, empowered and positive, but with its "eccentricity" and "novelty" fully conserved, and all of this without the irruption into visibility of the potential passivity and ambivalence of middle reason (19.08.81, 14)

Is there not a way in which this complex tactical manoeuvre betrays a need on the part of the center to forever postpone its transition into substance, its ideal habitat a state of provocative abeyance, a still to come or be, which permanently imbues its practice

with a messianism of the powerless and dispossessed? The interdiction against becoming “merely a party of the center”, in other words, is as much a response to the opprobrium of taking power as it is the shame of not having enough of it.

The moment is a confused one. On the one hand, *The Economist* frames the resurgence of the desire for the center as an effect of polarization and the unabated exacerbation of dyarchical radicalisms. On the other, it finds itself incapable of expressing the task of the center apart from a language of the radical: freed as it is from "political debts" it has "no excuse for unradicalism". Galled by problems for which there are no solutions within the existing system, not yet fully open to the potentiality of neoliberalism, *The Economist* finds in the SDP a utopian option endogenous to the order, one framed as singularly adapted to a channelling of the outside through the radical intermediation of internal differences.

In other words, in this intermezzo between Wilsonian socialism and the Thatcher of 1984 *The Economist* still believes its centrist commitment to discriminate moderation can provide a solution to the impasses of Keynesianism; Thatcher's repulsive moral certainty, to say nothing of the doddering rhetorics of Reagan offend entirely the tastes of a discourse dramatically committed to the optics of consensus. Not yet won over to the logic of a deflation it finds mildly barbaric, *The Economist* discovers in the SDP the possibility of a radical newness that does not require the mortgaging of its commitment to circumspection and custom. Its failure would pave the way for a complete re-drawing of the terrain on which the center thinks and acts.

Part 2: Inflationary Stagnation

Under such a rate of inflation, money is switched out of productive investment into real estate speculation, there is stagnation of industry and a rise in unemployment..., a sizeable underclass is created from among the retired and those who become unemployable, politics polarizes towards a battle between extreme right and extreme left (which in Britain would be won by the extreme right), and violence begins to stalk first the picket lines and then the streets. (13.01.73, 11).

It will be glum if Lancastrians during a water strike have to get appalling diseases, if Merseyside children during the social workers strike have to continue to be battered, if housewives in an island blockaded by lorry drivers have to go hungry, if patients deprived of ambulances and other emergency transport have to die, if many more small firms have to go bust, many more workers to go unemployed, more of Britain's exports and imports have to stay stuck in the docks, if sewage has to run in the streets, hyper-inflation has to escalate, before Britain's politics recognize [that they must be demonstrative]. (20.01.79, 11)

If the civil center was still in many ways a rhetoric of stability, order, and balance it was also very significantly invested in the rituals of cosmopolitan modernity. Located between revolution and tradition, the cautious progressivism of this voice aged badly in an atmosphere of student experimentation and rebellion. Resistance only accelerated this process, its vociferousness easily confused with that of the curmudgeon left behind by change it doesn't understand. Intimations of frailty, befuddlement, and fear dotted the outskirts of a discourse wholly staked on an appearance of bold contemporaneity. It was as much the style of protest as the content of its politics which undermined the legitimacy of the center's claim to liberal open-mindedness; but it was its hyperbolic reaction to left urban terrorism which left it looking scared and self-preserving--a class subject run round by chaos--rather than the bearer of a disinterested science of progress. This serious symbolic imbroglio would come to be mitigated by change in the constellation of historical forces; within a decade *The Economist* had largely shaken off its compromising obsession with Left radicalism and had secured a nemesis far better suited to the effective

reproduction of centrist identity. We are, of course, speaking of inflation, but also the subject most commonly fingered as its lazy cause—the miner.

Though inflation was not new to the industrialized economies--it had, for example, increased significantly as an effect of war in Korea in the early 1950s--what distinguished its resurgence in the 1970s and early 1980s was a curious sense that it had now become a pathologically permanent feature of the postwar system: “The main difference between today's inflation and its Korean war forbear... is that nobody now believes inflations are temporary” (11.08. 82, 16). Grasped within the parameters laid down by Keynesianism, inflation was the periodically logical outcome of accelerated expansion: it could be forecast and largely mitigated by regulatory control over the aggregate level of demand in an economy. This “demand-pull” inflation could be tracked to rudimentary macroeconomic relationships with an extremely high level of intuitability; it was and continues to be expressed popularly as “too much money chasing around too few goods”. The “overheating” of an economy required judicious intervention: scrupulous fiscal measures could correct this imbalance in the speed of an expansion without necessarily inducing large-scale recession. The objective was not primarily to extirpate or eradicate inflation, but to foresee, control and “cool-off” its growth. Inflation was an irritant structurally interior to the health of an economy; it was endogenous to, but not yet coextensive with the system itself.

As early as 1971 it became clear that something had changed in the nature and perception of inflation. In the United States, costs continued to increase despite the fact that interest rates had risen to levels unseen since 1929. In Britain, inflation was

uncharacteristically high and behaving strangely even before the cost increases induced by the oil crisis had been transmitted into the network of prices. The cogency of these first suspicions intensified as the decade unravelled. A sense grew that inflation had gained a new speed and seriousness, but also that it was no longer obeying the old rules of engagement. This quantitative spike, however, was simultaneously accompanied by a new incapacity of governments to even minimally anticipate the outcome of measures *vis à vis* inflation⁴⁶. Not only had the disease worsened, it had evolved unnerving habits; its behaviour confounded and outran the old etiologies, forcing new and less simplified variables into the process of diagnosis. As inflation spread throughout the global system it ceased to name a glitch natural to order and instead began to function as a metonym for the dysfunctionality of the system itself. The age of “inflationary stagnation” had begun (07.02.70, 56)

This change radically altered the terms upon which the center negotiated its own symbolic reproduction. Unlike the anxiety provoked by radicalized campuses and left violence, fear of inflation begat a countenance of wariness pegged to the informed concern of the expert. Those who inveigh against a coming terror never wholly slough off the suspicion that they are little more than amateur oracles: in part because the danger they presage is clandestine--linked to murky clusters of networks--but also because the periodicity of the bomb is itself paranoid--prone to go off, or not at all, everywhere and

⁴⁶ “Caught in this cleft stick, the world’s capitalist countries can offer their citizens almost naught for their comfort. Slow growth seems the indefinite prospect--partly because inflation remains an insoluble constraint, but also because these economies get locked into a vicious circle of inadequate investment causing, and being caused by, slow growth” (17.12.80, 9). Elsewhere: “inflation has defied the efforts of successive governments to cure, or even control it” (06.02.82, 13). The motif, here, is that of cycle, entrapment, slow down, and decline.

nowhere at the same time--their speculations reek of groundless supposition, an exaggeration freighted with the petty worry of old people. Fear of the bomb remained in close contact with a parochial hysteria connected to the ignorance of the masses. It always remained possible that its prescriptions were nothing more than the envisioned suddenness and drama of explosion--all of its pain and hotness--relayed through the worrying body and converted mechanically into equally incendiary, equally unstable expressions of pure fear.

Precisely the same structure is at work in denunciations of the protesting crowd; confused by new sounds and smells, new sexualities and styles of leisure, discomfited by the potential violence of the mob, the center's critique of the student inevitably strays dangerously close to the conservative senility it so frequently satirizes. In each case, what *The Economist* suppresses is the appearance of reflex affectivity, what it calls, contemptuously, "evangelical counter-spasm" (14.06.78, 14).

If the critic of terror takes on the bodiliness and locality of the explosion it fears, the abstract nature of inflation, not linked in any obvious way to immediate physical pain, (partially) withdrawn from popular scenographies of horror, endows its diagnosticians with the meter of science. Not reflex moralism, but circumspect reflection is the rule here. Admonition of that which encroaches imperceptibly, slowly deteriorating order, requires a symptomatology rather than the crude invocation of a body torn to shreds. Because inflation originates obliquely--never in a single localizable space--it mandates a diagrammatic intelligence capable of discerning beyond the play of appearances a dynamic matrix of causal factors and variables. This science does not merely react to

what surprises it within the field of the visible, a shocked and mechanistic body; it patiently foresees and assesses, demarcating relations inaccessible to quotidian sight. In other words, anti-inflation abjures from a basis in cognition and discipline, rather than the addled automatism and myopia of custom.

Inflation, then, does not emerge out of the lucidity of evil-- the moral obviousness of mass murder or even the deviant sexual formations of hippies--but out of a complex of economic relations and processes connected to the amoral actions of agents. Those who hate it practice a rare science; their critique stems from knowledge of an obscure economic whole rather than the reflex disavowal and transference of "polemical" relations. *The target, here, is an inflationary ecology, a state of affairs, and not an opposing ideology.* In all of this, *The Economist* gains the critical exigency of a consistent enemy, but without the de-legitimizing blowback of a properly political hatred; it gains sharpness and a coherent positionality, but without the optics of "bias" which come with any sustained ideological antagonism.

Even as *The Economist* de-hystericized its rhetoric, avoiding encounters liable to explicit moralization, it benefitted enormously from what we might call the structural hysteria of inflation⁴⁷. As noted above, inflation exists beyond the threshold of the visible; it cannot be experienced in real-time nor linked to a specifiable locale or milieu. It is nowhere in particular which is certainly not to say nowhere period: it is precisely its freedom from space which ascribes to it to an almost gaseous ubiquity, the anxious logic

⁴⁷ "Against the background of the present threat to British society all arguments in favour of wage rises on anything like the level of the past three years are the arguments of an unreasoning hysteric; and the freeze which was successfully imposed at the beginning of November was the right first treatment for a hysteric, a sharp slap in the face" (13.01.73, 11). Interesting as well the thematics of an inveterate governmental "failure of nerve" (27. 01.79, 15).

of the miasma. *Inflation is everywhere, changing life from within, ushering in a future none of us want. It is an expansionary, de-personalized inside (rather than an invasively political outside)*. In other words, this “nervous disease” operates on the same associational register as cancer and rot (13.01.73, 11). This anonymous, endogenous process shares with pedophilia or alcoholism the moral valence of an evil occluded by the mesmerizing normality of appearances; such rhetorics imbue the invisible with the collective shame of a complacency-abetted proliferation, a breeding made possible by the beguiling everydayness of the social surface. Anti-inflation, in this sense, functions like a prohibitionism from which the repression and normativity have been subtracted; it taps into widespread anxieties about cultural decay, significantly empowering centrist authority with a clear mandate, but does so without compromising its scientificity in a world-bemoaning conservative thematic of civilizational breakdown and decline.

It is with these linkages in place that *The Economist* was able to frame the fight against inflation as a kind of critical pedagogy, a radical fidelity forgotten and obscured by the comforting pattern of things as they are. This is where the capacity of the econometrical center to precisely record an inflationary up-tick plays an essential role. Eating income, a continuous gnawing on the stability and proprietorship of the owned, its extensivity can be accorded a manic number, a paranoid exactitude which casts the threat into a garish and highly scientized light. As *The Economist* never tires of noting, inflationary spiral—that moment in which wages and prices feed into each other irrevocably—leads to deterioration in the stability of value through which everyone can be said to suffer. It matters that the loss here is universal and Mobius-like. Imperceptible,

yet subject to measure, inflation is the fear of death outfitted in the precision of number; in it some of the oldest anthropological anxieties around loss, spoilage, and change coalesce in a psychologically charged index that basically begs authority into existence. Even today there is no better way of discrediting a nation's developmental model than to refer to its level of inflation as *unsustainable*.

Within the Weberian Marxist tradition it has long been clear that saving is a philosophy of time. The periodicity of a flow of income, its slow accretion, as well as the stored potentiality of banked money all intimately inform modern subjectivity's internal clock. It is in this sense that inflation can be said to compromise the transparency and *forward-momentum* of capitalist temporality; the spaced distinction between past and future, between an expenditure of energy (labour) and its socially actionable value (money), are meta-rhythms indispensable not only to quotidian subjective peace but to the cultural discipline necessary for stable regimes of production. The ability of a subject to plot their distance from a monetarily mediated "time of life", the personal bliss and clarity furnished by money in hand, the intactness of truistic ideas about a reciprocity between decency and pay vanishes during periods of hyper-inflation.

People, as it were, "lose ground", meaning not just a deceleration in speed, but the very premise and base of social efficacy. The figure of the "treadmill" is often used by *The Economist* to capture this sense of squandered energy and directionlessness; what should interest us is the way that at the very instant the futural "somewhere" of savings disappears, work should rush into vision in the form of an image of total futility and wastage, a going nowhere no longer even nominally consensual. Deprived of its monetary

telos capitalist labour appears in all its sameness and boredom. At the same time, the difficulty had by governments in dealing with inflation led to a simultaneous sense for a flattening out of politics. This occurred across party divisions: electoral politics, but also governance itself could be seen to have reached some terminal limit, an impotence for which there was no prior precedence. Whether it was price controls, incomes policies, or the kind of comprehensive “Social Contract” proposed by the Callaghan administration, government--its plans reduced to dust--could itself be fingered as an appeasing cause in need of sharp reduction.

One could also argue that inflation skins the commodity of its price, forcing the culturally-mediated nature of value onto the visible field of social relations in a manner that feels intensely violent. What disturbs *The Economist* is the way this irruption politicizes the distribution of income along faultlines segmented *above* the atomic inter-play of classical competition; sectors--and not individuals--endeavour to capture as great a portion of the national product as they can, labour and business--the one bidding up wages, the other raising prices--locked into a kind of economic civil war that threatens to dissolve the integrity of the whole⁴⁸. This intensification of inter-sectoral friction runs against the smooth antagonism of competitive self-interest; the former dislocates and interrupts, the latter spills over into a prosperity which pacifies the tensions between

⁴⁸ “Under such a rate of inflation...politics polarizes towards a battle between extreme right and extreme left (which in Britain would be won by the extreme right), and violence begins to stalk first the picket lines and then the streets” (13.01.73, 12). It also matters that a common refrain in the period is the need to invent a mechanism of consensus, a machinery by which the whole can be restituted: “There has to be a way of reaching some kind of national consensus: sometimes a centralised wage bargaining system (with or without the government airing its views) or sometimes mere respect for the law of contract. If, as in Britain, unions and companies take it in turn to reach agreements, with nationalised industries paying any wage rises that seem convenient out of huge deficits, the result is a chaos of leapfrogging” (03.01.76, 43).

classes. It is not surprising then that *The Economist* continuously invokes the spectre of Weimar (or the Latin American banana republic) as the repressed, but inevitable outcome of a society no longer able to protect the stability of value. As money de-commodifies, becoming less than paper or shit a frenetic movement to find objects capable of storing value takes place. Inflation, in other words, not only de-naturalizes value it denaturalizes the entire order which rests on it.

We should not be afraid to index the abjection at work here: between the brutal recrudescence of politics and the re-materialization of value we discover something like the unconscious of liberalism, a Hitlerian savagery imagined as its very antithesis. The prospect of wholesale civilizational regression constitutes the very heart of this fear.

Though the new concurrence of unstable money, inflation, recession, labour conflict, unemployment, and disruptions in the linearity of supply certainly complicated the politico-economic sensibilities of the center, forcing doctrinal transformation and undoubtedly inducing distinctly new kinds of anxiety, *what best characterizes the relationship between the center and the seventies is in fact the unique way in which the crisis capacitated-- not paralysed-- the center.* In other words, what matters is the manner in which the code of the center uniquely merged with and processed the algorithm/sign-system of the long disorder. If unforeseeable contingencies, but also undetected structural tendencies in advanced economies both compromised the predictive and analytical common sense of the center--shaking it, of course!--, it nevertheless was massively authorized and legitimated by its ability to speak *scientifically* about a conjuncture of phenomena that could be intuited as somehow connected or connectable

even as they occurred serially (even disjunctively), on different registers of visibility and familiarity. *It is by virtue of the crisis that something like a notion of the autonomy of the economic could be consolidated and the centre's capacity to function as the mouthpiece of this distinct object ratified.*

If inflation provided *The Economist* with a critical *telos* and urgency that was at once eminently specialist *and* popularly intuitable, an opportunity for authority with a high degree of mass cultural intelligibility, it was the specific figure of the miner--and unionized (mostly industrial) labour more generally--which functioned to causally ground this matrix. Though inflation could be plausibly linked to a whole ensemble of causes, it is the pressure exerted on prices by unionized wage increases which disproportionately consumes *The Economist*. There at the root of a phenomenon which threatens to undo society from within is the insatiable corporate selfishness of the miner. Though inflation convokes a sense for the unhinging of things removed from strictly moral anxieties around social directionlessness and change, it nevertheless discovered its origins in a paradoxically religious scapegoat—unregulated desire. To fully appreciate the difference between the conjuncture described in Chapter 1 and that of our present discussion we need to travel some ways into the semiotics of the Thatcherite mine. It is only there that a precise measure of this unchecked desire can be gained.

For *The Economist* in 1980 there is perhaps no site less flexible than the mine. Ponderously local, as fixed as the rock it laboriously machines, it is the very paradigm of rectilinear industrialism. Already the end of an age built around what Zygmunt Bauman called “the society of producers” is everywhere discernible in our text (28). Incremental,

extractive, its flows uni-directional and uncomplicated, mining retains a cultural memory of weight, size, shape and hardness wholly at odds with the incipient spirit of frictionless capitalism. A parity of foes at war, the modern nature/Man dyad attaches itself to this riskily managed violence; there are casualties, as it were, on either side, structural collapse and mass death the debt paid for the promethean barbarism of cutting drills and pick axes. At the same time, there is a finality to everything drawn from the earth by its labour: it is the very antithesis of (postmodern) holism. This agonistic physicality also finds itself awash in signifiers from capitalism's most brutal chapters: whether it is the mute body of natives worked to death in Peru or the infamously lax regulatory practices of the Victorian boss the mine provides the contemporary mind with something like the archetype of exploitation. The mine, in other words, arrives from a past that is exaggerated and savage; it comes from the age of a gigantism of the machine.

Viewed from the perspective of the *The Economist* in the 1980s the miner is an intolerable, archaic rigidity. Their numbers bloated by the misguided welfarism of the nationalized industry, maintained by political temerity and laziness, the miner's work--protected from the high productivity of new machines---manufactures less than it loses, spoils and destroys. There is something deranged and excessive about the miners' attachment to themselves, to their form of life and to their community. Their social stickiness vis a vis those of their own kind--what the left used to call class solidarity—is framed by *The Economist* as a disguised xenophobia, a conservative group-think which places the corporate faction above the life and well-being of the commonwealth. There is something sub-human, something irrationally collectivist in its mania to persist in. It is

this, coupled to the complete dissolution within the space of the mining community of the distance separating production and consumption, work and leisure, which renders the miner a supreme figuration of an entrenched, back-wards looking, and immoderate parochialism. The measure of this excess is the violence senselessly exerted in its rage to remain itself; like the spastic cockroach too stupid to recognize its low rank on the chain of being, the miner keeps on living and fighting despite its economic obsolescence.

At the same time, the miner exercises a power disproportionate to its world-historical belatedness. An incongruity exists between its organized force and the conventional approximation of its place on the hierarchy of values. A stoppage in the mines cascades into a thousand messily disrupted plans and processes. Under the pressure of unexpectedly choked supply exchanges orchestrated at a great distance from the blocked site break-down. Factories close; the lights of whole neighbourhoods turn off at the very same instant.

Viewed from the center, this is a dangerous and ultimately grotesque universalization of the particular. The mine, which is already heavily freighted by associations with matter, place, linearity, etc here morphs into a malignantly dilated uber-locality, a site, which in some sense comes to metaphorize the regime or era of the physical itself. The latter, however, becomes increasingly associated with an end to an older parity between labour and management, a kind of excrescence of the worker no longer amenable to the established rules of national civility and dialogue. Its work a vestige from another century, artificially conserved by uneconomic government indulgence, the miner unthinkingly guards its right to consume at levels no longer

justified by growth in the rate of its usefulness. Crucial in this is the unusual appearance on the part of *The Economist* of a class-based contempt for the striking worker's consumerist pettiness; already privileged relative to other sectors, *it wants even more*, its desire short-sightedly entranced by a taste for things it doesn't need in the first place⁴⁹. As economic activity winds down across the entire country it becomes easy to counterpoise the inordinate desirousness of the union, its scope provincial, but also mechanically wage-oriented, with the immediacy and scale of its effects, the unjustness of the situation grounded in a flouted functionalist insistence on the obedience of the part to the whole.

What *The Economist* finds so intolerable about this is the way it transfers power away from the juridically vetted mechanisms of electoral democracy. Within the architectonics of liberalism, the whole must be sifted through the intermediation of a constituency that is wholly atomised. Unions located at strategically essential points in the body of the economy side-step the established political protocols of liberal democracy. This is, in part, what renders the striking dock-yards or autoworker so intolerable to *The Economist* in the 1970s.

Their membership captured endogenously by communist minorities and extremists, organized from within by the implicit authoritarianism of the closed-shop, the union is framed as an illegitimate form of economic power, an inverted oligarchism, unvetted by democratic invigilation. Its power is accidental, linked to the happenstance of proximity rather than earned or won according to the rules of the game; it is exercised

⁴⁹ “The firemen came out because the militants had convinced them that a strike would bring them even more money, as it brought the teachers and the rest even more money” (21.03.1970, 11).

precisely in its refusal to accomplish the task to which it was contractually assigned⁵⁰. It is a power, then, that from the very beginning reads like opportunism, indolence and extremist illegality, a power born of negation, failure, and refusal rather than norm, protocol and consent. The very possibility of the strike plays out like a conversation interrupted by the promise of violence, a dialogue cut short by the sudden irruption into speech of massed bodies and fists.

Collectivist, antiquated, prone to incivility and childishness, the miner is to the neoliberalizing center, what fat cat capitalists were to the history of socialism. All of the senescence and backwardness projected onto civil centrism by the contemporaneity and youth of the student is here transmitted onto the redundant body of the miner. Its labour as linear and unproductive as its solidaristic nineteenth-century ideologies, its being still only imperfectly privatized, the unionized miner has already crossed into an historical time mediated by the norms of white-collar postmodernity. On the one side, exists herd complacency, industrial repetition, and an outmoded philosophy of class; on the other, the creative personalism of a knowledge labour increasingly imagined as *without limits*. Once the connection between the mine as sinkhole and government has been firmly grounded, the latter timorously appeasing the appetites of the former, the stage is set for a center able to configure radical opposition to consensus as a revolutionary end to the chaos-radiating limits of law itself. A call to balance then that will have very little in common with the kinds circumambient to the 1950s.

Inflationary spiral designates the present as a universal narrative⁵¹ of mass deterioration and crisis⁵². In the jittering matrix of inflation the basic relationship of an object to itself, the stability of its value is lost: *things cannot remain as they are*. The sense of gathering momentum⁵³ and disorientation perfected in the concept of inflation structurally necessitate the invention of a politics grounded not in the past, but in the future. This is because inflation itself is a present held hostage by history, by dead governmental bureaucracies, but also antiquated forces of production not willing to concede their objective redundancy. Chaos and sameness, *systemic tightness and friction*, replace an economic growth which opens and expands, cleanly marking time with evidence of technological and social progress. An excess of sectors, parts and pieces surpasses the potential infinity of relations (an openness inflation itself strangely presages). At the root of this directionlessness is an *ancien régime* in need of destruction, a system of sinecures, state indulgence, and complacently unionized worker aristocrat: in short, mass fantasia. This feeling of stalled time, a violently shrinking economic pie, and of an existing politics completely powerless to reverse disorder in Britain were the conditions necessary for the production of neo-liberal destiny, the signs of torpor required to enframe a pure, liberatory rush: “the gloom will be lifted only by pushing back the forces of inflation” (17.12.80, 9).

⁵¹ *The Economist* consistently refers to British trade unionism as a “wonderland” (21.03.70, 11)

⁵² “In the next month or two, motorists queuing for petrol could be joined by housewives faced with empty supermarket shelves, farmers forced to slaughter livestock because feedstock is not being delivered, commuters without trains, families without toilets to flush or running water in their homes, millions of workers laid off because of the strikes of their fellow unionists”.

⁵³ “...galloping further deterioration in our whole society” (13.01.73, 13).

Part 3: From Woolly Indecision to Thatcherite Resolve

She always appears in public poised, never haggard or failing to command. Only in her voice and conversation does her occasional exhaustion show itself. Politicians and journalists may scorn such talents as public presence and stamina but they are indispensable to a political leader, especially one under strain. Mrs Thatcher is still incapable of relaxing. She drinks in great draughts of paperwork every night, yet can appear as fresh in the morning as if she had had eight hours sleep. Much of this energy is still wasted: half the night spent redrafting an unimportant memo just to show she is boss, a whole day used up in scribbling over a lacklustre commons speech. But the psychology is right: always keep one step ahead of the cabinet, never let officials steal the initiative...She regards parliament as a legislative machine and its managers as often lumbering technicians...Her impatience [with Ministers and civil servants] is already legendary. She is ruthless against all forms of bureaucracy. Not for her Mr Macmillan's "Rolls-Royce" Whitehall machine, which does whatever you want of it. She knows this is rubbish. When most prime ministers would have happily sunk into the upholstery and let crisis management take over, she is still wrestling with the steering wheel and cursing the instruments. (10.10.81, 21)

We must take account of the radicalism of [Thatcher's] intervention. It has decisively broken with the politics of stalemate, with the whole repertoire of crisis management adopted by both previous Labour and Tory administrations, and with the very terms of the political and ideological consensus which stabilised the political crisis for so long. It has buried neo-Keynesianism, the cornerstone of the "modernist" strategy; it has broken up old-style corporatism; it has mounted an effective counter-offensive to social democratic and liberal conservative forms of "statism," both economically and ideologically. It means not to tinker with this or that mechanism, but to change the terms of the struggle...It is the only parliamentary political force resolutely committed to the view that "things cannot go on in the old way".

Hall, *Thatcherism: A New Stage?*

By 1985 the established centrist equivalency between consensus and reason had been largely displaced by a new configuration emphasizing non-conformism, individuality, and a recalcitrant fidelity to conviction. Centrist rationality was now effectively *revolutionary*; it measured its essence *against* consensually negotiated norms rather than *through* them. If consensus had primarily functioned as a metonym for liberal democracy proper, it was now increasingly associated with a categorical ensemble of failed post-war economic arrangements, practices and policies. In the first instance, the slippage between the two terms was a tactical counterpoint to both the gesticulatory unreason of the protesters and the silent command of soviet communism. Consensus was

the conciliatory comportment which mitigated the disjuncture between Tory and Labour, the substance of their shared remoteness from the extremities of uncivil political enemies. It was the very spirit of congenial liberality.

In its second major articulation, consensus was no longer the generic category of a system characterized by popular consent and parliamentary deliberation, but the name for a determinate historical sclerosis, a corruption or failure of the system itself. We have a situation then in which the concept which names a thing has become the sickness of its own referent. A positively appraised "government by consensus" was negatively inverted to become an invectively charged and pejorative "consensus government" itself a by-word for a despised "corporate statism" (10.10. 81, 21).

And so the word consensus by 1985 merges with the negatively assessed predicate "post-war". For *The Economist* this primarily signifies six factors: 1) the hegemony of Keynesian demand management and the misbegotten notion that governments can evade business cycles through discretionary fiscal and monetary control; 2) the mixed economy with its emphasis on state ownership of industries deemed strategically vital or nationalized on principle; 3) endemic government appeasement of the trade unions whether it be inflationary public sector wage settlements, the refusal to reform laws pertaining to the legal status of unions, or schemas for the incorporation of the "two sides of industry" into the formation of economic policy (these run the gamut from the creation of Conservative policy fora like Harold Macmillan's NERC to left-labour imaginings of full-scale industrial democracy, but were perhaps best incarnated by James Callaghan's "social contract"); 4) widespread suspicion towards and crowding out of free markets, an

orientation manifest in a continual impulse to over-regulation and bureaucracy; 5) the fetishization of equality and its prioritization over the requirements of efficiency and growth; the use of taxation to redistribute wealth from the productive rich to the consuming poor; 6) crypto-protectionism in trade; fear of international competition and open markets.

Consensus, then, comes to stand in for a particular historical conjuncture, while simultaneously expressing the etiological secret of its impotency and staleness: *the failure of post-war consensus is precisely consensuality itself*. Rather than functioning as hard virtue, a difficult fidelity, consensus is pried away from its associations with moderation, balance and civility, but also from its later linkage to extreme seriousness and rigor and instead conflated with an extremity now primarily characterized by deference, redundancy and sloth. Consensus is now the excessive attachment to itself of a temporal regime allergic to newness and mutation. Once counterpoised both to the jittery body of the protester but also the immobile corpse of communism⁵⁴, the rigorous speech of consensus metamorphizes into head-flopping agreement, legalistic inflexibility, and wordy repetition. It is at once unbending and utterly plastic, fixed, immotile, but also likely to follow wherever it is led. It drifts, but also stagnates, obeys, but also unthinkingly rejects. It marks a culture of mass sycophancy and pettiness⁵⁵. Its opposition

⁵⁴ *The Economist's* representation of Waldeck Rochet, a French Stalinist, perfectly captures this inertial hold of dogma on a mind and body: "big, solid, placid, monotonous, [he] seems to have nothing about him of the fiery revolutionary leader. He has neither the quick wit nor debating skills of M. Jacques Duclos nor the powerful voice of M. Thorez before his long illness. Nor is he an original thinker. He is the faithful organization man who, climbing the ladder of the party hierarchy, has reached the top at the age of 59" (23.04.64, 824).

⁵⁵ "For months ministers have been trying to move the unions with carrots, whisky, buffet suppers, sticks, flattery, insults, appeals to better nature by bonuses to old age pensioners, appeals to grosser nature by

to thoughtless corporeality inverts to reveal a speech that is itself now entirely withdrawn from the real. It is the universalization of fustiness, wholesale cultural deliquescence and decline, mass concession to the path of least resistance.

Consensus, in other words, comes to name a lapse in the spirit of the nation, a cultural languor seen to have infected the British system in its entirety. “You can’t print jobs,” perfectly captures its sense for the laxness and delusion, absurdism and complacency characteristic of the moment (24.01.76, 71). The inability of governments to recognize that demand management is no longer effective in a stagflationary context; the compromised, heteroglot, unproductive nature of the mixed economy; the insistence on state control of industries that were now little more than vast extensions of social security; the representation of government as a psychotic facilitator of consumption, a perpetual appeaser intent on setting all minds at ease with an eye to procuring their vote⁵⁶; all of the committees, experts, and fora previously articulated to the ideal of balanced speech and action; a system in which a huge proportion of the population was employed publically in the civil service, a pure layer of ossified, institutionalized, self-preserving language; the limp ideality of an egalitarianism which could be imagined as choking the economy’s “life”, an over-taxation which suffocated the effectively and directness of growth: all of this set into motion an associational network linking the present to an *ancien régime* of speech, appeasement, repetition, sameness, and fear.

proffering visions of great power, pleas for co-operation on any viable terms” (13.01.73, 11)
⁵⁶ *The Economist* characterizes this moment in British history as one of “sycophantic government appeasement” (17.01.70, 10)

This was a structure repeated for *The Economist* on the scale of international relations. In the 1980s a mutation occurs in the liberalism/communism dyad, a new division not incidental to the state of the consensus interrupted by the birth of monetarism in Britain. If the former domestically becomes articulable as such only in the wake of a clear oppositional tendency, a similar process of fission and re-calculation can be said to simultaneously occur on the terrain of the "foreign", though without the dramatic arrival of an extrinsic third element. This partition would appear in the body of liberalism itself, a fracturing of the sonorous "free world" into the still linked, but loosely self-differentiated dyad Europe/America. The nature of this shift, of course, remains intelligible only within the context of what *The Economist* regularly euphemized as the "breakdown of detente".

Here again, speech, co-existence, and negotiation, once seen as the markings of a sophisticated distance from vulgar anti-communism, are involuted to reveal a sclerosis or exhaustion, the decadence of a body sapped by illusion and prolonged immotility. Its purview emptily verbal and sedentary, deformed by an excessive reliance on the tongue, the negotiator risks entrapment in a disorientating cloud of signs. Not only is its proximity to the word automatically proportional to its remoteness from the field of forces--real actions and things--the equivocations of the emissary--its closeness to the enemy, an impression of protracted convivial exchange, its deferential rituals and strategies--place the entire system of detente under a suspicion of institutionalized delirium or sycophancy.

The tit for tat of compromise scales vision to the insignificant technical detail, the minor concession, blunting an attentiveness to the aggregate climate of relations, the "big

picture" in which a secret danger of appeasement lurks behind the counted bean. Add to this the growing significance of trade between the communist and capitalist economies in the 1980s and the ground is laid for tale of eroded distinctions and vigilance, an interdependence soporific in its slowness and scope. It is a testament to how seriously *The Economist* has breathed in Reagan--with certain very important disclaimers to be discussed below--that its usual skeptical delicacy around the difference between "ideals" and "things" is here largely lost to a re-moralization of the liberal *vis à vis* its communist outside. The equation of market interdependence with moral ambiguity is a rare one for *The Economist*; in part, the contradiction can be traced to the fact it hasn't yet witnessed the decisive synthesis enacted by the collapse of state socialism: thereafter, such tensions will be resolved on the side of a Trojan morality internal to the vulgarity and materialism of the market, an occult good which ceaselessly undermines from within every rigid political authority. This will allow the radical center to side-step arguments against the moral complacency of trade with dictators, binding their apology for the realist egalitarianism of markets--the populism of its common tastes--to revolutionary liberalism achieved less through active political resistance than through the quiet molecularity of the smuggled television.

However, it would be an error to assume as corollary to this re-spiritualization of liberalism an impassioned end to the restricted tonal grammars and habits of the center. Just as Thatcher would mark a path that was simultaneously repulsive and irrefutable, Reagan's syntactically foreign anti-communism--inflated, symphonic, plied by thick moral categories--would be modified beyond recognition by *The Economist*. First, it is

important to understand that despite its history of strong positional disclosure *The Economist* never identifies its stance on detente as openly American (or even anti-Soviet). Rather, it very carefully frames its position as "mid-Atlantic": having chosen to refrain from final contact with either land mass its betweenness names a skeptical hesitancy linked to the asubjectivity and freedom of the sea, the non-boundedness of ocean water (21. 01.84, 11). It does this, however, without forgoing determinacy, the precision of the mid-point.

Located between Europe and America, its position facilitates, a priori, a certain structural "bothmindedness". In other words, the middle spatially is already a kind of knowledge; the simple hexical orientation of the between, its gaze tutored by the mechanical plurality of middleness, is itself a supreme figuration of rational practice. Let us be clear: this formula is deeply rooted in the phenomenology of presence, in the spontaneous sense we have for a relation between experience, involvedness and knowledge, and for a less obvious idea that science depends for its efficacy on a rootedness in things, a deep insertion into the *Umwelt* of objects and their relations. The fixed position, its gaze trapped by the enchantments of antagonism, by the self-illusions of competition, its knowledge weakened by the power of hatred, cannot match for subtly the lability of a between that is also an unbounded ocean.

Unlike the poles, locked into transferential blindness and misapprehension, the center's affective temperature, cooled by multiplicity allows it to function as a go-between or interpreter. Seeing both sides of an issue, but also freed from the lust of the feud, it is

the place best suited to a negotiation of the question⁵⁷. And so the middle becomes little more than the site for a recapitulation of positions, a processing zone where the misperceptions of enemies can be re-translated into feasible solutions. Europeans need to understand that America's "ways of dealing with the world are based on moral attitudes" (11). An effect of its geopolitical separation and demographic composition, America sees the world in terms of its unrealized possibilities and through the idealistic lens of its constitution. Europeans, on the other hand, alive "cheek by jowl on the same continent...cannot afford either to ignore each other, or to try and change each other very much" (11). They survive through "accommodation, adjustment, and compromise", their skills perfected across generations of exact modifications in the balance of power (11). The Americans, in other words, are "romantics", moralists for whom there is always a solution, while the Europeans are "realists". Just as Thatcher's extremity would be translated into *The Economist's* centrism through a language of rectification (imbalance corrected), so too would the radicalization of its suspicion vis a vis the Soviet Union be framed as the temporary correction of a European realism that had shaded into complacency and indifference.

The shift from consensus to conviction, from a semiotics of speech to one of decisive action, from a pragmatics of cautious balance to the radical turbulence of *vision* is wholly linked by *The Economist* to the frenetic, unceasing, and irrepressible figure of

⁵⁷ "Third, there is no reason why this clash of incomprehensions should go on. The Europeans say that America's moralising romanticism about the world leads it into over-simplifications; and they are right. The Americans retort that Europe's habit of thinking in balance-of-power terms was fine for the nineteenth century, but needs adjusting today; and they are right too. It will take an intellectual effort to reconcile the two casts of mind. For both sides, making the effort is better than letting the drift apart continue." (11).

Margaret Thatcher. Her position--“radical to the point of revolutionary”--is “crystal clear”, a decisive, unequivocal break with the “woolly indecision of the past two decades” (04/10/80, 11). It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Thatcher vehiculates the center's re-orientation around a new set of values, that she allows the center to literally *think itself* across the threshold separating two very distinct regimes of signs. We must ask ourselves just how it is that a discourse inseparable from discriminate moderation manages to bear itself in a time of exigency and rhetorical inflation. Bearing, here, is at once a question of comportment and visibility, a co-ordination on new terrain, but also a subjective relation to one's own history, *a putting up with oneself*. In other words, how does a subject steeped in the erotics of taste, in the literary aside and nuanced caveat, but also *an increasing awareness of its difference from liberal conservatism*, bind itself to the sometimes pedestrian, sometimes exorbitant trajectory of this grocer's daughter?

There are a number of questions we must ask here. How does the deepening moral cynicism of the center, its putatively rationalist contempt for the language of good and evil negotiate the hyper-traditionalism of the neo-conservative project? How does its purported commitment to radical non-conformity and a classically liberal conception of freedom interface with the rhetoric of conservative moral homogeneity, the latter's taste for law and order as well as its strangely individualist communitarianism which is always putting women and men into correct places even as it denies the very existence of society? What are the tricks, tropes, and conceptual twists by which *The Economist* simultaneously affirms the doctrinal fixity of neoliberalism *and* the exotic experimentalism of the student? How does a voice intent on demonizing a system built

around dogmatic consensus—one which “nationalizes as if sleep-walking”—itself advocate a position which privatizes in an equally linear, doctrinaire and thoughtless manner (04.02.50, 243)? How does it avoid being tainted by the “free-market nostrum” it so consistently derides in this period (27.09.80, 33)? If the political center has always been suspicious of revolutionary haste and *a priorism* what are the tensions our text registers between this constitutive suspicion and a Thatcherism “committed to a fundamental shift in the character not just of Britain’s economy but of its society” (04/10/80, 13)? It is on the answers to these questions that the persuasiveness of *The Economist’s* centrism rests.

In part, it is precisely the incompatibility of this coupling which is put to work by *The Economist* as evidence for its ability to think beyond the parameters of inheritance and habit. The very oddness of its fidelity to Thatcher, not just with respect to its historical posture of political neutrality, but also on the level of discursive and tonal modes, charges its commitment with a *frisson* of eccentric novelty consonant with both the tradition of the errant aristocrat, but also the deconstructionism of the student. It is important to note that it is this disjunctive hybridization and not the common conservative motif of radically plain speech, which specifically designates the text’s difference from itself. *The Economist* does not endorse Thatcher’s spunky “tell it as it is” colloquialism, deploying it against the technocratism of post-war consensus, instead it uses its capacity to separate economic truth from its reductionist political shell as proof of its freedom from dogma.

If the late 1960s forced the civil center into a traumatic encounter with its own repressed traditionalism, the radicalized center's ability to incisively parody Thatcherite pith demonstrates the extent to which this moral skepticism has been fully endogenized by the discourse. Despite its absurd rhetorical packaging Thatcherism, nevertheless, articulates an economics the effects of which could be framed as inherently de-territorializing. It is this, and not some notion of a center scared Right by the 1960s which explains *The Economist's* conversion to revolutionary Thatcherism⁵⁸. We shall discuss this more fully at the end of this section. But for now, what matters is the way this frictional mid-space between parody and affirmation allows for a performance of conviction (even *vision*) withdrawn from ideological mystification or mere customary belief.

Part of the optical signature of this moment can be explained by the unique manner in which ambient ideas about the relationship between power and gender were violently inverted by Thatcher as an obstreperous sexual fact. Bracketing the effects on women of neoliberal economic policy, but also Thatcher's gendered traditionalism, the abrupt disjunction of this fact on a surface composed by serial maleness was effortlessly registered as the revolutionary intrusion of something fresh and untried into the smoky, defensive quarters of the old boys club. Resistance to her project, perceived against the

⁵⁸ This is a reading very common on the left, but which simply isn't applicable to the skeptical nexus of the radical center. In part, this is because the latter itself regularly thematizes Right moralism as a product of suspicion of the new or untried. With respect to those who want to return to the traditional values of the founding fathers they have the following to say: "[many Christians espouse] a fundamentalist call for a return to the sacred text of the constitution: let the words speak for themselves and when interpretation is needed, let it be guided by the intent of men who, nearly 200 years ago, framed the constitution...A return to the moral certainties supposed to exist in the world of Jefferson and Madison has an attraction for people disturbed by shifting mores" (05.09.85, 19)

ephocal newness and momentum of feminism, could be figured as the tired consensus of men interpersonally affronted by an end to sinecure. One indomitable woman here confronts an indistinct flow of resistant men--massified man--overturning the hegemony of the suit in a striking blue dress that is aesthetically singular yet completely extracted from the purview of critical feminist suspicion. This encounter between a woman that is one and a heap-like mass of men very easily re-composes itself as the tension between progressive individualism and a residually entrenched corporatism; the self-protecting collectivism of men overlays itself onto an image of the government apparatus itself, revealing the latter to consist of an equally instinctual group-think.

What should interest us here is the way in which the very presence of the women's body in power is thought to instantly enfeeble or divide power itself, introducing a line of displacement and bifurcation into something now totalizable as before and after. At work in this structure is a schematism, a chessboard of gendered pieces and quantities, an abstraction completely withdrawn from the theoretical concreteness of feminist practice. Indeed, what strikes us about the moment is the extent to which the center can consent to this inversion only in the form of a burlesque, a kind of temporary or comedic reversal of governing relations. A million folk tales about men being chased around by their wives with rolling pins, about the bossy matriarch and her good-for-nothing spouse provides the textural background to this gesture. Thatcher does not in any way challenge the gendered production of woman as a sign: rather, she represents the parodic inversion of patriarchy, an imperious, knowing, yet impeccably feminine woman who keeps her house in order

and refuses not to be "on top"⁵⁹. This inversion generates laughter precisely because it is improbable and rare; precisely because it leaves the field of gendered relations untouched.

One factor essential to the successful enactment of the center's abnegation of consensus as the horizon of action is the precise way in which it subtracts revolutionary immoderation from the historical formation of collectivist Jacobinism. Far from the mass in motion, the impassioned crowd and its always simmering destructiveness, the revolt against consensus, occurs in spatial coordinates and tonal registers the latter at least recognizes. Conviction is not the intransigent fidelity of a group bound by codes of sameness, but the beleaguered, precious, and heroic maintenance of the distance between a part and its whole: it is the provenance of an incorrigible individual psychology, unconquerable singularities, the power of the particular to avoid being subsumed by the universal.

In other words, Thatcher's revolution is grafted onto the idea of the "character", the colourful personality who cannot help but be itself and perhaps even finds it congenitally difficult to get along with others⁶⁰. Uncivil, Thatcher unsettles a dispensation

⁵⁹ Those with the "sauce" to mention Thatcher's "sexy ankles" would be "severely scolded" (04.05.96, 90). Or: "Margaret Thatcher made no secret of her contempt for the wimpish men around her. (There is a joke about her going out to dinner with her cabinet. "Steak or fish?" asks the waiter. "Steak, of course," she replies. "And for the vegetables?" "They'll have steak as well." (02.01.10, 12)

⁶⁰ "Yet the remarkable thing about this Mrs. Thatcher is that she has kept her radical enthusiasm, indeed if anything strengthened it. Her aggression and strength of will are extraordinary, aided by an alarming capacity for work. She seems more an external pressure group on her cabinet rather than the traditional resolver of its conflicting forces. From her early zest for monetary restraint to her rooted desire to end union power over the labour market, from her antipathy to common market subsidies to her loathing of bureaucratic jargon, from her passionate belief in individual self-reliance to her equally passionate anti-communism, she is now one of the free world's most unashamedly right wing leaders...She travels light and lives simply. As a result, she enters the **Whitehall jungle** clad in little more than her own strength of purpose and what must soon become a debilitating appetite for paperwork. She intervenes everywhere in a manner that is rude and direct...[and has an emotional disaffection] for the processes of British administration...She is more isolated at the head of her own team than any prime minister since Attlee. (04.10.80, 11). In another article, the newspaper discusses her "idiosyncratic style" and

of the social without deconstructing it in such a way that truth or authority is itself imperilled. Close detailing of the power struggles within her cabinet⁶¹, the heft and sway of personalities, relations between her certitude and the electoral appeasements of her backbenchers: everywhere Thatcher is rendered as rude knowledge and indefatigable political energy. The rarity of these properties coupled to the singular concatenation of the individual personality in which they appear, here does the work of signalling a single-mindedness that is extraordinary, tireless and sharp rather than docile, obedient, and predictable: the idiosyncrasy of the messenger negates the self-sameness and redundancy of the message it bears.

If Thatcher's militancy risked discomfiting the center's proximity to procedural patience (even liberal jurisprudence!) the optics of this imperiousness were nicely supplemented by a context which made it easy to present inflexibility as a new kind of reasonableness. This was in part facilitated by the readiness to hand of a paradigmatic

“innovative”, “controversial” performance in government:

⁶¹ “One permanent secretary has come close to breakdown as her personal pen has run rudely over his departmental brief. Another official has resigned the service after she said she would never see him again. A prime minister's intrusion into the normal channels of Whitehall intercourse may seem brusque, but it galvanises these channels into life. Ministers find it harder to “negate by delay”. Mrs Thatcher remembers: an invaluable quality in a leader. Her special aversion is reserved for the foreign office, hating its “Eurospeak” and deeply sceptical of its true loyalty to British interests (a view she shares with Dr David Owen). She will never forgive the hatchet job she is convinced its mandarins did on her behind her back at the Dublin summit in 1979. The foreign office is lucky to have Lord Carrington at its head, with enough stature to slam down the portcullis when required... Desperate efforts were made by some, notably Sir Keith Joseph, to resist the temptation to be over-specific. But dozens of actual policy commitments, many of them very radical ones, were entered into an advance of office. In the summer of 1970, this harness was strapped to the workhorse of government, and two years later it duly broke, with Mr Heath's conversion to incomes policy, lavish industrial support and eventual coalition centrism.” (10.10.81, 21).

instance of appeasement, a salient model of failed political volition which could be read negatively against the virtuous tenacity of Thatcherite resolve. Edward Heath's "U-Turn" of 1972 was a singularly legible example of political inconsistency, perhaps the most intelligible "about-face" in post-war British politics. Though Harold Wilson's 1964 vision of technocratic scientific innovation and economic growth could later be denounced as naive verbiage by *The Economist* its failure could plausibly be attributed to the restraints placed on it by perpetual balance of payments troubles and a large deficit inherited from the outgoing Conservative administration.

Though Wilson too came to power on the back of a conceptually integrated "idea"--something really not seen since Clement Atlee in 1945-- it was the content of Heath's 1971 Selsdon manifesto which would broker the cultural standard for largest distance between a theory and its action⁶². Promising a reduction in the growth of government expenditure, lower rates of income tax, and end to nationalizations and subsidizes for lame-duck industries as well as a new era of non-conciliation of the unions, Heath's administration faced intense resistance and a series of serious economic disasters. In direct contravention of its stated goals it came to preside over a series of notoriously

⁶² "The Duke of Wellington used to criticise the battle plans of his French opponents for being like a harness: they were, he said, immensely strong, but were useless once broken. His own battle plans were like a rope, perhaps weaker, but flexible and easily knotted together if they should part. The 1970 Heath administration entered office with a harness: possibly the most exhaustively researched programme of any government in modern times. Two years of detailed work, first under Sir Edward Boyle then under Reginald Maulding, went into a series of research studies which formed the basis of the 1970 manifesto, "A Better Tomorrow." Particularly close attention was paid to three crucial areas: trade union reform, taxation and public spending cuts. Systems analysts, management consultants and foreign experts were called in. In a famous seminar at Sundridge Park, prospective ministers were even briefed on how to meet the obstacle of civil service intransigence." (21.04.79, 39).

"uneconomic" nationalizations (Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, Rolls Royce) as well as increased in state expenditure and government employment; its signal failure was the move to an incomes policy at odds with both ideological conservatism and the unions' insistence on free collective bargaining. This relapse into the comforting coordinates of "coalition centrism", into a pattern of consensus and balance that was already increasingly seen as delusional or nostalgic, provides the single-mindedness of Thatcher with a straw man against which to deflect allegations of inflexibility and dogmatism.

There is also a way in which the center's conversion to the logic of the partisan could be seen not to break with, but to extend its commitment to a practice of balance. From this perspective the inflationary age, with its welfarism and coddled industries is itself an extreme in need of revolutionary rectification. Insofar as inflation can be thought as off-kilter or unbalanced, but also when considered from the angle of its causal origins in excessive desire, the center's decisive refusal of consensus government could be framed as the energetic tactic necessary to off-set extremity itself. In such a moment, the center refuses to play by the rules of the established political dualism, glimpsing beyond the free association of their difference a systemic one-sidedness which requires unequivocal intervention. To ignore the macrological complexion of the situation would leave the center the play-thing of existing electoral distinctions, a formalism without content or courage. The center, in other words, must periodically cease to be itself if it is to remain what it is. Without its spates of radicalism how could we be sure its moderation was not simply the worst species of political quietism? Occasional spectacular partisanship, especially when undertaken against the grain of its most cherished habits,

signals a center not afraid to make the difficult decisions, *a flexible thinking alive to the texture and stakes of the moment*. In other words, an imbalance that is temporary may be the tactically adequate response to a reality that is itself nothing more or less than time.

How is it, then, that the center is able to shift decisively to Thatcher without abnegating its claims to moderation, circumspection, and skeptical distance? We have seen the ways in which the inflationary context of the moment, but also its political history figured Thatcher's unequivocalty as the salutary antidote to indecision, impasse, and sameness⁶³. The exigency of the conjuncture, in this sense, could be angled to essentially call into being a need for authoritative political action; this decisiveness, in turn, could be framed as consonant with the avowed responsivity of the center, its constitutive openness to the texture of circumstances and events. However, it is the semiological composition of neoliberalism which allows us to understand just how it is a centrism staked on appearing simultaneously fixed and motile was not negated by the doctrinal uni-directionality of Thatcher. *This is because de-regulation, privatization, as well as strategic deflation, all have about them a sense of an end to uni-directionality itself*. They promise, in some profound, ontological way, a "new dawn" that is itself wholly emptied of the social normativity and *a priorism* of communism's equally total "new Man" (04.10.80, 11).

De-regulation, we should remember, is as much a metaphysics as it is a policy with delimitable social objectives. At issue in its project is not merely a libertarian eschewal of law, but an impulse to systematically disassemble the site of the failure of

⁶³ "...publicize or privatize, don't ditherize" (06.13.81, 51)

governmental reason itself. *If the 1970s were the decade of inflationary reversal and causal opacity, a time linked to the invalidation of projective logics and plans, what should command our attention is the remarkable affective immediacy and intensity convoked by this call to end law and the precise itinerary of its method.* The pleasure, here, is that of an unbinding, an end to torpor and gridlock, a cutting through the banality and sameness of the civil in the direction of something still to be born. Regulated British labour, for example, is more a “morgue than a market”; it is a cemetery in need of resurrections. However, de-regulation does not involve itself in a phenomenology of revolution, a violent mass abandonment of order, a setting fire to the palace. Rather, it dissolves the regulatory from within; it targets law within the ambit of its own processual speeds and protocols. In it a desire to utterly negate impasse, limit, and weight, an urge to free space from containment and restriction merges with the comforting eurhythmics of law itself, peace and its obliteration achieved in the very same motion.

De-regulation is where sovereignty goes to protect itself from the trauma of inflationary impotence⁶⁴, the planned effect which spins hopelessly into failure and redundancy. If governments on both the Right and Left in the seventies found their positions ideologically perverted by power--Heath's move to the left in 72, Hugh Gaitskell's preconception of monetarism in 1977--it becomes possible to understand the ease with which *The Economist* can transform de-regulatory fervour into an immolation

⁶⁴ For *The Economist* the paradigmatic figure of governmental indecisiveness and impotence is Jimmy Carter. The latter's choice of a “piece-meal, largely voluntary anti-inflation package” will time and time be counterposed to the mandatory, structural solutions made by Thatcher and Reagan. Similarly, his foreign policy will get coded as a “neutralism” (06.01.81, 11) charged with connotations of weakness, ineffectuality and fear: “The boast often made for Mr. Carter that he sent American ground troops into action nowhere in the world, was rather like a driver claiming to have kept out of accidents by staying off the road” (17.01.81, 17)

of the corpse of governance, a strategy of evading, abnegating or destroying the ponderousness (and danger!) of sovereignty. In other words, it restores decisiveness, but terminally, affirming the power of a government to act, but only as the agent of its own elimination.

At the same instant, de-regulation shares with Husserlian phenomenology the rallying cry: "back to things themselves"! It promises an end to the perverse effects generated by good intentions, but also an end to the captivity of things by ideas, visions and plans. Away from the artificial mediations of law, bodies, goods and incentives will be freed to themselves and their spontaneous promiscuity. What law held fast and separated, spacing and restraining, will be given over to its natural inter-relatedness and diffusion. The law in some profound sense gets re-framed by this discourse as timorousness, a logic of prickly distinctions, or even re-coded as the belatedness of mind *vis à vis* the speed and dynamism of a technologized Real⁶⁵. With this move we are readied for Malcolm Gladwell's solicitation of a thought which operates at the speed of action itself, a doing withdrawn from the horizon of old-fashioned preparedness. We are readied, in other words, for the epistemological matrix of the radical center.

A homologous pattern can be discerned at work in the meta-logics of privatization. Though the latter is at root eminently positive, engendering new regulatory bodies and procedures, consolidating novel corporate entities and social relationships, it is

⁶⁵ A few years later, as communist states attempt their "revolutionary" transition to capitalism, this motif of the relationship between law and fear, the plan and impotence will re-appear: "Mr. Gorbachev and his colleagues, career central planners with no central plan, have soothed their nerves by drafting copiously detailed blueprints for reform" (15.09. 90, 13). These are "full of waffle" and "overprecise about things that do not matter or cannot be controlled" (13). Rather, than giving themselves over to the vertigo of the new they ludicrously attempt to enter the pluralist ontology of capital on terms still dominated by the imaginary of stable control. More on this ontology in Chapter 3.

significant that its project was primarily designated by *The Economist* in a thematics of division, negation and deconstruction. De-nationalization, in this sense, unfolds within an ambience of political devolution; it arrives under the portention of a profound unmaking charged with new possibility. It was not primarily the construction of a new order, but the radical effacement of order itself. If the Thatcherite inducement to a culture of responsibility--a property owning democracy--complete with Victorian overtones finds itself reflected in the *The Economist's* frequent emphasis on the institutional and cultural pre-conditions of growth, it would be a mistake to place too much critical leverage on the valence of this echo (forever finding in it Weber's old ascetic Calvinism). Rather, the center's contradictory rapprochement with "one-sided" privatization was the latter's adjacency to an ontological emptiness linked to ideas about the fluidity and non-determinacy of markets.

The market as a sign is "full" in so far as it signals a chaotic efflorescence of objects, agents and exchanges, but it is precisely the quality of this plenitude which indemnifies a simultaneous insubstantiality immediately useful to a rhetoric of positionlessness. This can only be understood in the context of the opposition which secures as legible the link between non-being and capitalism. State productivity, once linked across the spectrum to a certain strategic necessity and mindfulness, its power augmented by the prestige of the industrial, now functioned as a metonym for stalled governance and inefficiency. Held apart and indulged, their lives grotesquely prolonged by the false and interminable nutrition of public money, the nationalized industries or "lame ducks" were portrayed as immense sieves, sites of sheer expenditure and loss. The

strong hand on the rudder of production, the integrated force of sovereignty capable of shaking earth and sky with its intentions, folding rail through rock, was replaced with an image of motionless torpor, a kind of undifferentiated materiality without meaning or strength. Supply without demand, its products inefficiently produced and undesirable, the nationalized industry becomes a psychotic consumed by the directionless command of its own reproduction. It lives only to conserve the parameters of its own existence.

Unlike private firms which are forced by competition into sentience and dialogicality (consumer research, innovative new products, aggressive market expansion) the public corporation plans without design, mobilizing its lumbering production on the basis of dim whims and eccentric schemes. It is locked inside itself, endlessly self-regarding, a spiralling apparatus comprised of paper, waste and unused office space. Its reflexes dulled by safety, its intentions are prone to a disastrous, almost comic⁶⁶ errancy. Lacking mechanisms of receptivity, the nationalized firm can only passively observe an increasingly complex environment too unpredictable for the insensate. Its mind is a tiny light on the inside of an immensely bloated body⁶⁷ or a squabbling committee incapable of direction: the model here is that of the giant whose size is an allegory of its distance from the ethereality of reason, the dumb clumsiness of a scale incompatible with tactical speed.

Within the terms laid down by this myth privatization divides and disturbs an inertial holism inimical to multiplicity, futurity and growth. It shakes up things by

⁶⁶ We are informed about “a national oil company where theft and blundering were of comic enormity” (07.01.84, 11).

⁶⁷ Here we encounter, in endless variation, descriptions of the state run factory as constitutively “flabby” (24.03.90, 11)

exposing the coddled domesticity of the national to the savage Real of the globe. A reflex urban contempt for all things parochial and blinkered subtends the immediacy of this move. The nationalized mine with its masses of ungovernable workers, perfects an associative chain binding protectionist nationalism to the aesthetic backwardness and racism of the working class. On the one side, clings a system of old allegiances and practices, an order timorously invested in its own illogical momentum, an *ancien régime* of sinecures, hoarded-jobs, and self-protecting budgets; on the other, unfolds an impression of newly challenged territory and untapped space, risky multicultural competition and dynamic exchange.

At the same instant, even as they are seen as incapacitated by micro-economies that are themselves uneconomic (the fiefdoms of bureaucrats), the nationalized industry is seen as the victim of political excess, a politicization of the economy. Whether it be a refusal to exchange expensive labour for cheap machines or the tendency to artificially restrain price increases with an eye to egalitarian consumption, the nationalized industries will come to be seen as having fatally confounded the difference between economics and politics. They are accused, then, of fundamentally supplanting empirical sight with ideological vision, but also—paradoxically--a selfish, cowardly evasion of the ideality of vision necessary to break with a bad status quo.

In other words, to advocate privatization is to in some sense become an apologist for a space no longer overdetermined monochromatically by the ideology of the public; its objective is not a finite axiom or dogma, not a one or a whole, but the *inherent plurality of things themselves*. Privatization divides so as to render the possibility of

division impossible; it cuts into sectors and guilds all of the clogged organs of the social so as to unpeel a space freed to its own immanence and plurality. In the wake of this division the Idea's body is paralyzed and its power to disastrously corrupt or negate the social lost: with the withdrawal of governance from executive grip, from actionable, palpable materiality vanishes the risk of the universal political crime, the danger of a One the corpses of which can be counted by the millions. This dogmatic conviction, in other words, takes as its project the multiplication of forms, beings, languages, and styles and so in some strange sense unravels its own uni-directionality. It politically wills--strongly and emphatically--an end to the power of political will itself.

But it is amidst the cinematographies of unemployment that we find the cleanest traces of this pattern. The power to control the disorder generated by its effects combined with the restraint necessary not to appease politically those for whom the former were unacceptable rendered the management of unemployment--no doubt a paradoxical phrase given the anti-Keynesianism of Thatcher--an extremely fruitful site of centrist synthesis and elaboration. If armed force was needed to protect scabs from the fists of the unions, if the costs of bent order swelled to anticipate the criminal inventiveness of the redundant, if punk shadowed all of this like proof of need for law, there was nevertheless an angle from which the violence of the state could be re-calibrated as an arduous midwifery, *the strict discipline of revolutionary conviction*. The criminal, the miner, the homeless, the unions, the poor: how could anyone with a glimpse of the new entrepreneurial body see here anything but the crudest metonyms for shit, archaism, and infantilism?

To concede to such forces was to relinquish ground to figures for whom concession was congenital: to give in under such circumstances would be to cravenly mirror the fecklessness of subjects for whom incontinence was the subjective rule. To police the crisis, in this sense, was to undertake in the name of the fecundity of the middle [class], a purgation of the residual; it was to arrest idleness and unthinking prerogative with an eye to unleashing the industriousness of the mean. It would be wrong to confuse this fidelity to the middle on the part of *The Economist* with the sanitary horror of a reflex bourgeois. This is not merely the defensive pre-emption of a return of the repressed nor can it be exhaustively explained as the effect of an instinctual class logic. Rather, its sympathy for discipline measures out the distance between a will and its intransigence, the comprehensivity of a value and the stakes of its intensity.

To avow unflinchingly the productivity of the middle is not to entrench a Victorian ethos of deferred pleasure and self-reliance, but to rigorously insist on the relation between accumulation and liberty. The individual's right to mobility and creative consumption, the material fabric of its sweaters and televisions and airplanes, the vast, untotizable playground of abundance can only be conserved in the leeway of expansion, in the space secured by growth. At issue in the strict policing of those hostile to managed deflation is the destiny of simple pleasure, one unequivocally linked to the fate of the science of economics. To strike in defense of an uneconomic pit or factory narrowly sacrifices the life of a remote whole for that of the immediately particular; its local colour, replete with mythological drama and personal efficacy withdraws from sight the numerical dryness of a growth rate nevertheless intimately indexed to national happiness.

In other words, viewed from the dynamics of the radical center, disciplined deflation is not asceticism or penury, but extreme re-structuration. It is the purifying astringency of chaos, a para-modernist involution and de-stratification of the established social body. It is policed, certainly, but what its sovereignty presides over and stimulates is nothing less than systematized entropy. It is out of this tectonic slippage, this elimination of the unviable, that new and stronger energies will emerge to fight and grow. Notions of a rot the ferment of which blooms life or a strength tried by incinerating heat gird popularly the intelligibility of this narrative. The Darwinian hypothesis of the supersession of the ill by the well-adapted is obvious, but what perhaps strikes us as paradoxical are the regenerative resonances of crucifixion and resurrection. The old, the rotten, and the dead; everything formed of air and false money; weaned and coddled creatures, all of the dependencies and sinecures; the comfortable and the idle; the dreamers and the ideologues; everything collapses and is absorbed into the recombinatory disorder. Only focussed, technocratic courage--uncivil civility--can abet this strictness in the face of political appeasement and the illogical immediacy of compassion.

Unemployment is salutary contact with the exaction of the Real. Its compass points involve the displacement of a vertical axis linked to unsustainability and ethereality with a horizontal limit marked by a thudding immotility. It is a floor which glimmers into view only after the vertigo of an inflationary high. Indiscriminate public spending, unrealistic social expectations, the wasteful privileges of bureaucracies, are all swept into the equation of ideology as a "good intention" as improbable and foolish as the claim to have repealed gravity. In the vacuum opened by redundancy, old skills are taught the truth

of their age and new ones evolved and strengthened. Minds and relationships are altered and norms mercilessly defiled.

All of this can only be understood against *The Economist's* representation of the communist labour as a pitiful cog forced to labour within a vast, stagnant, inexorable machine. In the Soviet Union formal labour was a constitutionally enforced obligation--not only a right, but a *duty*. This insistence--traceable in part to Rousseau's collectivist republicanism--is reviled by the center as a perverse echo of absolutist arbitrariness: in some very real way, the right to vagabondage, to the uncertain bareness of "life" and "limb" can be said to outweigh subsistence itself. Being out of work, in this sense, is part of what it means to exist in a society not overdetermined by a paternalistic collectivism.

By 1985 muscularly controlled money is the supreme figuration of centrist extremity. Its radicalism conceptualized as a savage fidelity to rectitude, monetarism's surplus value is increasingly its capacity to appear simultaneously *within and beyond* consensus. Disguised as interloper or Viking, it can frame its practice as the unwelcome storming of an inertial cosmos wholly inimical to the exacting difficulty of the new. Replete with an entire vocabulary of novel terms and indices it is a foreign tongue widely bemoaned for its abstraction and mathematical intricacy. At the same time, restraint was the consummate image of institutional discipline, a practice strangely collapsible onto the still, seated, cogitating body of a Treasurer before his books. The courage not to appease inflationary automatism is one closely correlated to the radical centrist insistence on avoiding the slumbers of dogma and inherited opinion. The radicalism here lies in a power of constriction, *a tightening that is also always an opening*. We must never forget

this: the neoliberal does not tighten for the sake of propriety or while fondly remembering the good old days of 19th C liberalism. It tightens, restricts, and chokes so as to open anew. At the far end of its constriction is an atomized infinity.

Anti-inflation—what *The Economist* calls “persistent restraint”—is a position able to combine aspects of a decisive return to order, stability, and balance with a certain diffuse sense for the irruption of a new regime of non-inflationary growth, a new period of expansion no longer limited by friction and sameness (15.11.80, 13). Authority, rectitude and position, but also polymorphy, openness, and extreme variation. Anti-inflation is not primarily the ascetic negation of the Christian, but a “No!” sustained so as to set free one irreversibly Nietzschean “Yes!”. It rejects and refuses only to unfold a new affirmative and tranvaluative fabric of being. This is a consummately centrist image of extremity; unbending, faithful, draped in technocracy and expertise, still redolent of authoritative governance, yet somehow utterly antinomian. The 1990s will see this figure extended, perfected and hegemonized.

Chapter 3: On Heretical Managerialism

It is almost inconceivable that Russia, with its burgeoning new [growth], could be stuffed back into the totalitarian straitjacket of old. The media, the Internet, the ability to travel, young Russians' appetite for knowledge have all wrenched the country open. Mr Putin is intelligent and a quick learner. Will he also learn that political pluralism and the broadly based creation of wealth go together? (25. 11. 10, 13)

Part 1: Neoliberalism and The End of Middle Tranquility

[*The Economist*] believes passionately in a steadily enriching society, based upon ever higher output and ever-higher earnings. (20.02.60, 692).

a) Quiet Living in the Age of Vulgar Reaganism

Between 1980-2000 was center is called upon to re-calibrate itself around a new set of instabilities, disparities, and contradictions. The increasingly volatile and oftentimes seemingly illogical movement of money posed obvious challenges to the common centrist equation of good governance with stability, balance and moderation. As discussed in the last chapter, *The Economist* in the 1980s had already shifted dramatically away from this dominant centrist code: far from cleaving to a middle characterized by pragmatist caution and safety circumstances had necessitated a compressed dash to the "fringe". One of the basic ironies of this shift was the manner in which its radicality was domesticated by a political morality wholly uncongenial to the newspaper's pragmatism: though Thatcher's partisanship radiated a lifeworld and decisiveness it needed amidst a context experienced as slough, the vehiculation of this difficult medicine in the messy affect of middle class proprietorship and 19th C Smithian dogma repulsed its claims respectively to both objectivity of logic and sharp empiricist hunch.

Neither the gooey nostalgia for a middle society of owners nor the primitivist mythopoetics of the family bound well to the text's putative skepticism. Though these

motifs ideologically attenuated the deconstructive thrust of neoliberalism, they compromised very seriously the credibility of the center's capacity to signal neutral economic management. How could revolution disturb convincingly without terminating the contract signed between the center and governance? What if the rigorous cut of efficiency could be seen to have lapsed into a nightmare of fundamentalism, inequality and widespread volatility? Surely, one of the basic axes of civil centrism (and arguably all centrisms)--the indispensability of balance to order--stood to be lost entirely.

Though its reader is often conjectured at the heart of executive and monetary authority, a “MAN of action” located deep in the organs of contemporary sovereignty, *The Economist's* civil centrism historically furnished the great heft of its legitimacy on its presumption of (and reliance upon) a *perpetually expanding middle class*. As Marx knew well, only in the context of the social optics of disproportion can a politics premised on radical transformation take root. To be of the center was always to be wrapped up in the fate of the class separating the rich from the poor; it was always to presume as intact the mitigating, palliating power of a socially generalized middleness. This can be said to be true of the entire span of consensus bookended imperfectly by the proper names of Atlee and Thatcher. Between the end of the war and the onset of hyper-inflation, and despite the ennui and torpidity ascribed to broken Britain towards the close of the 1960s, *The Economist's* perspective was always conditioned ontologically by the lucid and seemingly irreversible dilation of the middle class. Britain in the 1970s is less a pyramid than it is a diamond: rich and poor are exceptions to the rule of a middle which is not just

between--a bridge or intercessor--but *normal*⁶⁸. In other words, middleness can be thought of as stability in part because it can be thought of as *width*. It anchors socio-economically, but also intuitively and spatially a physics of order.

Insofar as the center signified sensible balance, a logic of centrality linked to stabilization and harmony, its reliance on the existence of a continually expanding middle class is obvious⁶⁹. What *The Economist* called for almost 100 years the “quiet life” named an irrefutable good, a peace⁷⁰ beyond concepts the basic truth of which was transhistorical (though fragile). The justness of the center rooted itself in the incontestability of commodious living and the inviolable right of the individual to enjoy it apart from arbitrary death and detention. The comforts of the quiet life were not just common, charged with a certain egalitarianism, they complimented the moral substantivity required by a corporatist order that could still be defined in terms largely unchanged since Plato (justice as the location of citizens in a well-ordered whole).

⁶⁸ Growth in the 60s was seen not only as blunting the edge of inter-sectoral competition, but also interestingly linked to a peace dividend by-passing the East/West cleft: “The “revolution of rising expectations” exerts a growing pressure for the transfer of resources from arms to civilian needs, most particularly in the communist countries and, through the demands of the under-developed world for more aid, in the West too” (14. 01.61, 110).

⁶⁹ “It is not impossible to re-create the political middle in El Salvador. The old idea of central America as a region polarised between land-owning oligarchs and landless peasants has gone into the dustbin of economic history...A new middle class has come into being...The armies are no longer always the servants of the oligarchies; and peasants who want land reform do not want communist collectivism or a one-party state. An alliance of liberals and soldiers with a conscience, against both the old right and new left, is not out of the question.” (27.03.82, 12).

⁷⁰ In 1954 *The Economist* addressed an article to the people of the USSR: “In your cities, we hear, “peace” is advertised on hoardings, much as soap is here. Does that really make your nation more peaceful? Do you feel that the absence of “peace” advertisements in British, American, Swiss, or Swedish cities, betrays a militaristic outlook? If you knew us better, you would know better. We are quickly bored, even embarrassed, by the repeating of ideas on which we all agree; and peace is one such idea. Our newspapers do not enoy the monopolies that yours have; they cannot force daily sermons of peace down their reader’s throats. Any one of them that tried to do that would quickly lose its public—not because the public dislikes peace, but because it regards that desire for peace as something as natural as air; and our peoples would have little patience with anyone who tried to sell them air on his own terms” (25/12/54, 1057).

Against the crazed asceticism of the militant or the deviant strangeness of the radicalized student, against their *ideological otherworldliness*, the quiet life named a solid material base, a world of stable objects and spaces that was safe, pleasing and normative. It grounded the difference between the tyrannical delusion of the Idea (the unreasonability of the militant) and the casual materiality of common-sense.

Neoliberalism has put to rest this centrist utopia of middle class accumulation and peace: it has rendered a discourse undertaken in the name of the quiet life obsolescent or impossible. Everywhere the coordinates necessary for its reproduction are being eroded. Whether it be the financialization of pension funds, the precaritization of labour, or even the dissolution of old familial patterns, the quiet life continues to exist in the West as little more than a codeword for illusion or banality. The management of economic risk has become an essential aspect of everyday life. At the same time, Fordist safety is today the very paradigm of administered (and thus tranquilized) “life”. Premised on repression, on laughable social ideals and expectations, a synonym for standardized labour and pleasure alike, middle class idealism is almost universally imagined as *anti-biotic*. Who today denies the mortuary at the heart of the bungalow? These shifts have cancelled or compromised one of the center’s primary signifying chains (with effects that are ambiguously enabling and threatening). But before we explore the consequences of this destabilization for today’s radical center, I would like to take a detour through some of the properties of this older middle mass.

Viewed against the corporeal extremities of both facism and communism, the civil center, as argued in Chapter 1, limned the domain of an axiomatic, safe, and pleasurable

domesticity: it was the very standard against which to measure the inappropriateness of the radical. The center does not in this instant claim to speak on behalf of the utterly rare, but rather articulates existence in all its simplicity and sameness. The middle mass is a dream in the body of all hitherto existing common life. Beef and bungalow, pipe and pub: such is the invariance at the heart of being that modernity has added almost nothing to the bare composition of these children of shelter and pleasure. This notion remains in the background today of any attempt to insist on the necessity of governing from the center: away from the insubstantiality of the poles that which is real in the last instant, everything we know and love, all of the coffees and naps, *exists in the middle*. It is where everybody is most of the time or where those still excluded from its fruits imagine themselves being at the end of the day: *it is that which remains conceded after the argument is over*. Even if it has been disarticulated from the intactness and self-certainty of the middle class, it remains an essential cornerstone of any centrist realism.

This vertically suspended middle, rendered possible by the ruins of a class imaginary *The Economist* regularly chides as abstract and imprecise, is superimposable onto the Cold War bi-polarity described in Chapter 1. The balanced betweenness of liberal democracy--its blocs dimensioned internally by consensus, its geo-strategic valence coded by the East/West binary, can then be supplemented by a third axis linked to the social logic of class. The corporatist, inter-sectoral dialogues of the mixed economy are in this sense distinct from the static liberal formulation of a division between classes that is descriptive rather than projective or tactical (as it was for Marx). Where the tripartite division of government, labour and capital demarcate relations of production--

politicizing control, ownership, and distribution (albeit contained by a language of parity and partnership)--the expansion of the middle class would appear to have disabled the very subversiveness of class logic itself, strangely disengaging it from the labour/capital dialectic. The middle class comes to be re-inscribed as itself outside the logic of class difference: it produces, certainly, but apolitically, its activity meritoriously rewarded by consumption. The expansion of the middle not only separates the poles, keeping their differences at bay, obscuring the schematism of the social, it comes to stand for the universal itself. It doesn't simply balance an unequal whole, it transforms it; its body becomes a metonym for the nation in its entirety.

Crucially, the middle as mass loses the rarefaction and exactitude of the point. The latter, even when fixed, remains charged with the possibility of motion. This can take the form, for example, of a lightness counterposeable to the mass-on-mass confrontations of the poles. Against their rote, traditional or linear formation, the point holds in place the notion of a baggageless, yet intelligible between (a conceit indispensable to the radical center). Always on the move, the center point is elusive, distinct and rare. It is sharper than the tip of a pencil. Even if it risks being perceived as the jittering of a mite, it more often than not grafts positively onto ideas about centrist flexibility, pragmatism and aliveness.

The middle mass, then, (unlike the radical center proper) is not a scintillating exception--it is the rule. It is common, rather than rare, obvious, rather than subtle. Though it may impart a sense of industriousness, self-reliance and restraint it is equally the signal for a slovenliness of the many. An indistinction appears between the sharpness

of the middle class and its absorption into what Jean Baudrillard calls the masses.

Between privation and opulence, saving and luxury, it lacks both the romance and the revulsion of the terms it separates. The colour of the bourgeoisie in its classical phase was grey; its modern consumerist husband steps out in clothing painted like a gaudy rainbow. The middle class may be comprised of individuals, but it is never the repository of the singular or strange. Anything fresh about it seems linked to an antiquated notion of progress, a memory of newness still flush with the embarrassment of its proximity to obsolescence. The middle mass is immoveable, comfortable, bloated and glib. The life of the capitalist whole--and this could be said for the entirety of the period designated by the hegemony of the civil center--rests not only on the metabolism of the middle but its palliating political temperance.

In the 1950s and 60s *The Economist* relied heavily on the middle mass to justify itself against the counter-examples of the various political extremisms. These neither produced economic systems capable of meeting the transhistorical needs of commodious living, nor respected politically the inviolable sanctity of life, liberty, and happiness: they allowed ideology--the otherworldliness of the Idea--to choke being of its simple pleasures and joy. In the late 1960s, these middle pleasures were used to marginalize and de-legitimate new left experimentation as bizarre and deviant, but they also suffered at the latter's hands, suddenly susceptible to sophisticated critical discourses which saw quiet living as de-politicized, over-fed, and spiritually empty. The shift of the center's attention away from the student and the guerrilla and towards the intransigent corporatism of the unionist, allowed for a situation in which the quiet life was in some sense positioned as

the cause of its own deterioration⁷¹. Middle safety and consumption dulled the union into a seriality of demand incapable of registering the long-term economic costs of its desire. In its haste to preserve the integrity of the quiet life the unionist unwittingly dissolved the conditions necessary for its achievement on the level of the national whole. It is the frequent invocation of inflationary Britain as a land of intoxication and delusion, coupled to the call for an almost Brechtian political gesture, which leaves *The Economist* in the paradoxical position of denouncing middle tranquility as a perverse impediment to its own reproduction. And it is this self-consumption of the middle—complete with all of its connotations of complacency and privilege—which would ground the revolutionary antinomianism of Thatcher (even if she herself continually gestured to its rejuvenation or perfection).

Neoliberalisation created a new matrix of tensions. The centrism practiced by *The Economist* has always been simultaneously reliant upon and dismissive of this middle mass. On the one hand, it has unequivocally functioned as the end to which all of its labours tend. It thinks and works, as argued in Chapter 1, to securitize this fragile good. It is the social telos of capitalist liberalism, but also the material base of democracy which needs growth if consumption is to be properly de-volatilized (atomised). On the other hand, its tone and mode are often very distinct from the elite disciplinary and literary tastes of *The Economist*. It has always envisioned itself as a newspaper of the political and corporate executive class. However, it is also a voice whose identification with skeptical reason places it at odds with the static, normative dimensions of middle

⁷¹ "...when the living is easy is never the time that men initiate change for themselves" (21. 03. 70, 11)

existence. In the 1980s the emergence both of new kinds of inequality and extreme financial volatility merged with the radicalization of the center described in the last chapter to create a new terrain of tensions. How, then, does *the Economist* navigate questions posed to its historical consistency by the new instabilities of disparity and finance?

As regulatory practices changed in the wake of the collapse of Bretton Woods, *The Economist* was quick to register the new order's disequilibrating tendencies. Tentatively committed to the circumspection of regulation, positioned ideologically between the double exorbitance of anarchy (*laissez faire*) and order (totalitarianism), *The Economist* had solidly anchored its claims to reason in the prudent management of money and its interests. In addition to this, the newspaper had always been careful to avoid framing the wealth of the rich as structurally inimical to the well-being and potentiality of the poor; such a position was seen as secretly luddite: it confused symptoms with causes and replaced complex systemic relationships with facile, yet satisfying moral immediacies. However, it must also be said that it was much more likely in the 60s and 70s to demonstrate sensitivity to any suggestion of an incapacitating adjacency to capital; insofar as the protocols of convincing independence require an appearance of discriminate betweenness, "big business" was often conceptually sequestered and its "pros and cons" judiciously apportioned⁷².

⁷² "One of the arguments that has so far made remarkably little appearance in this year's election is whether the middle-class salariat has prospered unduly during the Conservatives' last two parliaments of office and whether Labour would act justly if it now redistributed more of the national income back to the [working class]" (23.04.64, 813)

Interestingly, its arguments against Marxist attempts to portray Britain as egregiously unequal attack the empirical substance, rather than the sophisticated logic of these claims. Equality in the 1960s still had a certain cultural gravity⁷³: balance in an age of political bi-polarity was still too charged a value to be openly disavowed. What they refuse exists in 1970, they will have conceded but trans-valued by 1990: *inequality no longer distorts the actual state of things, but names a reality shot through with new creative potentialities and incentives*. As we will see, this will come to be represented by the text as the transgressive destabilization of limits, an ontological volatility much better suited to the dispersed uncategorizability of the individual than the jailing ideality of class⁷⁴.

The 1980s, of course, very seriously altered the imagination and visual culture of the distribution of wealth. The increased dependency of finance on arbitrage and speculation loosened long-standing connotations of a scrupulous (if not tacitly biblical!) stewardship of the invested. Capital was productive, industrious and spatially extended; it

⁷³ “We are proud of our claim that all are equal before our law, that our judiciary, independent and fearless, treats plain men and ministers alike” (09.01.60, 84).

⁷⁴ “Advances in technology, in particular, have increased the chances both of striking it lucky, and becoming very wealthy--but also of being unlucky, and becoming very poor. The likely outcome is both greater economic uncertainty and greater inequality... Advanced technology often means that a smaller number of skilled people supply their services over a wider area, producing a "winner-take-all" effect, where only the best do well, and these lucky few command enormous incomes. The invention of the phonograph did this for singers, and the invention of the motion picture did it for actors. Proliferating communications and information technology may do the same for many other occupations in the future... So far, a good deal of public resentment about increasing inequality has centred on the most visible highly paid people. Recently, public policy has focused on preventing a few unscrupulous top executives from unfairly enriching themselves at investors' expense. However, we are likely to discover that this, while helpful, does relatively little to mitigate the forces that make or break fortunes, which are much bigger than any fraud or malfeasance that we see today. Why? Because new technology produces far more pervasive and important changes in fortunes than those caused by dishonest boards or accounting shenanigans. Such changes stem from the very stuff of capitalism, undramatic events that unfold over many years: word processors replacing secretaries, industrial robots replacing assembly-line workers, and online-learning sites replacing professors.” (22.03.03, 16).

could be imagined as a vast concatenation of railways, flows of steel and automobiles; its output was calculable, social, and closely indexed to the expansion of commodious living. As money was increasingly de-linked from the national contexts in which its value could be localized and tested, the associations of finance with unaccountability and abstractness grew firmer. Exasperating these perceptions, were the material appurtenances of a stock market buoyed by historically unprecedented growth: the phenomenology of cities re-crystallized around a new class of professional the lifestyle of which came to be morally allegorized under the sign of cocaine⁷⁵. The image of the industrial magnate, still thinkable within the terms of a certain Weberian deferral and restraint, was replaced with that of the "free-wheeling" trader, a figure without weight or sense, morally afloat, a desire unchecked by, even contemptuous of, *homo faber*.

The Economist's refusal to denounce what we might call *vulgar Reaganism* plays an important role in its attempt to maintain a working distance from the social positivism of Thatcher. This is, of course, paradoxical given Reagan's own proximity to an illiberal (really Augustinian) philosophy of community virtue⁷⁶. It remains, however, that Reaganism was as much the name for a set of Christian values as it was the crude intensification of American consumerism. For many he became synonymous with the

⁷⁵ "A decade ago the sparkling new headquarters building and executive jet were corporate status symbols, sure signs your company had made it. HQ was the place to be and to be seen. In the leaner 1990s the headquarters glamour is increasingly seen as gluttony...(24.10.1990, 18).

⁷⁶ "Later in the same week, someone on the campaign staff sent Mr Reagan (or allowed him to go) to a gathering of Christian fundamentalists--the "Moral Majority"--in Dallas. These were people who were already inclined to support him. At one point, the Republican candidate could be seen applauding while an evangelist demanded that the American government should be run by those who shared his religious views, notwithstanding the constitutional separation of church and state. Indeed, Mr Reagan also sat through a denunciation of the "perverts, radicals, leftists, communists, liberals, and humanists" who have allegedly seized control of America. At a news conference in Dallas he delighted the fundamentalists, but worried his own aides, by questioning Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and urging that it should be taught in public schools only when side-by-side with the Biblical version of creation" (30.08.80, 20).

worst kind of capitalist banality and cretinism, a regime awash in the triviality and spectacle of commerce. By not critiquing this turn, *The Economist* manages to shore up its claim to a certain transgressive liberality strongly differentiated from the normative remainders still visible in our discussion of the civil center. Its refusal to judge the content of the choices made by capitalist subjects, then, is in part an extension of its (post-68) critique of paternalist moral didacticism. Its hesitation to condemn forms of culture it hates—Monster Truck Races, bad commercials, Bratz Dolls, etc—functions as more evidence for its capacity to deviate from the protocols of its own essence, a self-difference tinged with a measure of moral laxness perfectly suited to its identification with perpetual hereticism.

If, however, we can speak of Reaganization as a by-word for a freshly vulgarized consumerism at least stylistically at odds with the conceptual precision and high-mindedness of *The Economist*, how is it that the latter finds ways to avoid appearing like little more than a sophisticated apologist for wide-ranging banalization of life? Despite the caveat mentioned above, *The Economist* is not immune to the effects on neighbourhoods and schools of the new cultural conjuncture. It also recognizes with some anxiety the deterioration not only of the conditions of the quiet life, but of the very intellectual habits and psychologies it claims to represent. Its literariness--still mildly modernist, still quietly aristocratic-- registers with some concern a financialized culture increasingly inseparable from waste, debt, triviality and sameness. Certainly, its insistence on breadth of scope, rationalist non-conformity, and finely observed geo-

political nuance sat discordantly with the cowboyishness, exorbitance and group-think of Wall Street in the 1980s.

This discordance was a major barrier to the consistency of a rhetoric premised on an “extreme” fidelity to the inviolability of reason. This contradiction, however, was in part resolved by the postmodernization of the advanced economies, specifically their transition to affective, informational new forms of technology and communication. The tension between stupefaction and capitalism was, of course, always openly admitted by Adam Smith, but one contained by his recourse to moral and political rectification. As mentioned above, the radical center, has no such recourse to political didacticism.

This problem, however, was instead contained by a surprising shift in the optics of the conjuncture: *the transformation of capital into knowledge*. This includes not only the complexification of capital—the new scienticity and professionalism of finance—but also the metamorphosis of its habits away from Reaganite flash and towards the cerebral zones of personal computing, technological innovation, and new forms of communication. The Idea ceases to exist apart from middle reality, solemnly removed from efficacy by the utopic logics of the political, and instead becomes the very fabric of the material: *networked capitalism becomes intelligence itself*. The key move made here is a displacement of attention away from the content of consumerist culture and towards its form. By focussing on “culture” as a question primarily activated by flows of intelligent capital and technological innovation the present comes to appear like the site of a continual augmentation very far removed from the banal discursive infinity of TXTing.

One of the ways in which *The Economist* navigates the contours of the new disparity is by imbuing it with connotations of ferality, productivity and extreme individualism. The gap between the rich and the poor ceases to be an embarrassing exception to the rule of moderation, but a dynamic incitement to inventiveness. Disproportion and asymmetry electrify the system: the new proximity of gated community and ghetto, high rise and slum is not a galling symptom of social failure but real-world dialectical frission, *the introduction into space and time of ontological adventure*⁷⁷. Not only is the propinquity of these opposites new, but so to is the scale of their difference. A regime plied by such inequalities is one which infinitizes desire; everywhere that which is risked multiplies and deepens, the stakes of competition raised to a point of extreme intensity. This is nothing more or less than the eroticization of space, the setting into motion of conditions adequate to the multiplicity of desire itself. Egalitarianism, in turn, comes to be linked to corporatist rigidity, social greyness and mass conformism: what it lacks is the pluralism of inequality, its ability to populate social reality with colourful forms of distinction and difference, a whole panoply of newly volatilized desires and intensities.

We should be sure not to confuse this for an instant with the trite didacticism of Thatcherite self-reliance. The latter's emphasis on hard work, moral transparency, and social success are very much categories drawn from the religious imaginary of the 17th century. Fully visible within such rhetoric is Locke's virtuous commonwealth, a (pseudo)

⁷⁷ "The parallels between "the gilded age" at the turn of the century, when people like Rockefeller, Carnegie and Morgan made their money, and today are uncanny. There is the same onrush of innovation; the same straining at the social fabric as immigration surges, industries restructure and inequalities widen; and the same pell-mell creation of new wealth" (30. 05. 98, 19).

liberalism suffused with godly mores and expectations. *The Economist* largely dispenses with the conceit of a strict reciprocity between industriousness and worldly bounty; rather, it concedes the role played in capitalism by inherited wealth and chance, its agnosticism vis a vis the virtuousness of the rich the mark of its liberation from hegemonic delusions and narratives. Amidst the vast neoliberal combinatory intentions and outcomes are too multiple for such bedtime stories.

For *The Economist* those who inveigh against disparity as a social evil utterly neglect its inventiveness. *The rich are no longer parasites, but makers of new technological worlds.* If there was a time when their wealth entrenched, ossified, and froze relations it now primarily sets about to continually revolutionize them. In other words, a linkage is made between the retrospectively conceived technological backwardness of the age of equality and our own period of feral invention. Disproportion and creativity become measures of each other. The social unevenness of this process is seen as both cause and effect of this fecundity: in the first instance it is a stimulus to creation, in the second it intensifies competition to the point where whole markets are made and lost by the ability of a participant to minutely innovate its products. But what is truly fascinating is the way *the right to novelty* is seen to by-pass and negate questions about social access and distribution. From this perspective, a continually innovated social fabric--whether it be new imaging technologies within the field of medicine, or the right to exist of the new platforms and social media--is in some sense ontologically and morally prior to any question that might be asked about the global distribution of these

goods. The right of the world to be different from itself, *to be the complexity that it is*, exceeds that of a social equality that is in some sense *later*.

This is because the discourse of creativity taps directly into our sense for the objective plurality of forms, a plasticity related to being itself and in some real way antecedent to social life. To insist on restraining the process of innovation in the name of equality or sustainability, to lock it under the invigilation of a concept of the public or the critical efficacy of slowness, all appear like violent attempts to arrest the fecundity of being itself. Such a prospect resurrects the very bureaucratic elitism ecstatically overturned by Thatcherite resolve. Even if this were not the case a secondary voice insists that technological change, after all, *trickles down*; everyone knows the prices of processes have been cut exponentially and that in the long run all of us will get access to these gadgets precisely because we have done away with the sovereignty and bureaucratism of the Plan.

Compare this to the way *The Economist* consistently represents communism as a domain of total torpidity. Communism functions as a barrier to the inconceivable: *it is a crime against ontological openness*. Its inability to innovate technologically is not confined in its effects to the economic; its costs exceed those calculated on the balance sheet of the good life. What is lost to the lag between East and West is the possibility of the former maximizing its enjoyment; yet this lost pleasure of consumption pales against the squandered ontological effervescence of economic failure. The right of an entrepreneur to free economic activity is of course a basic extension of liberalism's identification of liberty with unencumbered motion; however, it is also the case that the

freedom to experiment within the domain of the economic introduces into being itself an openness inaccessible to people's withdrawn from technological innovation. Where the communist repeats, its economy extensive rather than intensive, extractive rather than inventive, flat rather than flashy, post-Reaganite capitalism moves in staggers between crisis and innovation, a vast, scintillating terrain of risk, colour, violence and delight. Economic freedom, in this sense, is a kind of extreme skepticism vis a vis the constitution of things as they are; it limns a right to alter—like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates—the very skin of the world.

The notion of entrepreneurial transgression, so crucial to the radical center's hereticism, is written into the very narrative told by *The Economist* about the breakdown of communism. If the market in the West subsists on the effortlessness of law, its origins in the East begin in crime. This is a narrative incredibly useful to the radical center. Long before its disintegration, so the story goes, communism had been weakened from within by the secret work of pleasure. Beneath the surface of the formal, transgressing proscription and surveillance, turning the vertical on its head, pleasure meets its own needs through the criminal omniscience of the smuggler. Here the cultural memory of profit as sin is passed through the inverted prism of 1968: with neither the grandeur of the industrialist nor the ascetic calvinism of the merchant, the smuggler is a hippie jesus of sin. Loaded with porno, rock music, and jeans (a copy of *The Wealth of Nations*?), its wandering comes to be imagined as the bare ambulance of desire itself.

It is precisely its remoteness from the sanctimonious literacy of the dissidents that does the work here. Sex, images, laughter, food and sound--sheer anthropological delight.

The transcendental folly of the human becomes the unsurpassibility of the idiotic diversion: truth will only ever collapse into its bed a hypocrite. Black markets, we are led to believe, are the permanently repressed truths of every church, state and system: they are the rhizomatic unconscious of every centralism, every verticalism, every fixed, institutional form or ideal⁷⁸. Capitalism, in this sense, comes to appear as literally grown in the interstices of Soviet bureaucratism⁷⁹, the insane torpor of its publicity never enough to wholly exterminate the virulent sociality of the human⁸⁰.

Yet the torpidity of communism is only the other side of its *safety*, a problem which itself poses questions to a post-Reaganite capitalism increasingly plied by inequalities. *The Economist's* admiration for the creative destruction of unemployment is not total. Convinced that in the long term it will rejuvenate economic life, the paper

⁷⁸ “COLERIDGE said that in politics what begins in fear usually ends in folly. In communist politics it was faith as well as fear that produced the madness... The most tumultuous campaign of all was the cultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. What might one expect from a generation that was told to stop for a green light and go on a red one because red was the revolutionary colour? It produced children who tore up grass and flowers because they were tokens of bourgeois thinking, and shoved people out of upper-floor windows because they dared to oppose the policies of Mao Zedong. And yet, despite the horror, all is not destroyed for today's 40-year-olds, the "lost generation" of that time. Jung Chang, the grand-daughter of this unhappy family, remembers that even during the depths of the cultural the spirit of individualism stayed flickeringly alive. The black market, awkward manifestation of that spirit, flourished. Today, garish badges of Mao are traded in an effort to make a fast yuan.” (28.03.92).

⁷⁹ “The idea that East Europeans need to be taught the basic facts of economic life was always absurd. Forty years of rationing, shortages and thriving black markets were an excellent course in elementary economics - better, perhaps, than a century or two of capitalism, whose beneficiaries take the miracle of supply and demand for granted. But anybody who still doubts that Eastern Europe is full of would-be capitalists need only look at the evidence, sketchy though it still is, of the spontaneous growth of private business since the revolutions of 1989 and 1990. Many obstacles remain. There has been next to no progress in privatising state-owned enterprises. And yet a large and bustling private sector has sprung up amid the rubble of the old communist system.” (04.04.92, 79).

concedes the full weight of its immediate social horribleness. The new scale of the phenomenon in the West, however, forces *The Economist* to polemically justify an uncongenial fact: totalitarianism isn't unemployed. Viewed from the perspective of a naturalized precariousness, it is easy today to forget that full employment was regularly cited by Soviet officials as clear evidence for the superiority of the communist system. Even more surprising, is how seriously this argument is taken by *The Economist*. What appears to us like a naive dilation of the jurisdiction of the political, an anachronism, perhaps better suited in tone to the 1950s, still carried in the early stages of neoliberalization a certain terrible newness.

What the newspaper discovers in a communism of full-employment is not merely an economic argument against market volatility, but the taste of a disturbingly alien milieu of labour, a cultural life with its own protocols of legitimacy. An old Soviet joke appears repeatedly in the text: "They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work" (26.12.87, 15). The colloquialism of the form combined with the idea of a strangely mutualized, almost contractual, deception creates the impression of a working arrangement, a code ratified by practice that is neither functioning nor broken. Of course, from the perspective of the efficiencies targeted by both command and market economies the statement damns full employment as a disincentivized hell. But a weird thread remains beyond the obvious reality of systemic failure: "you may not earn much in Russia, but then again you don't have to work too hard either. And you can depend on the comfortable thought that, come what may your job is safe" (15).

In some ways this merely strengthens the old distinction between productively democratic anarchy and communism as an immovable empire of safety. Communism kills to save, capitalism saves by letting die. Yet at the same time, one senses the glint of an unsynthesizable thread, the fragment from a different way of being that oddly overturns the logic of efficiency, even that of progressive modernity itself.

Unemployment in the eastern Bloc is "hidden" in the form of "overmanning": a huge proportion of the population, up to a fifth of those active in the work-force, "are employed for no useful purpose" (15). This spectacle of mass indolence links up with the common refrain of communist dysfunctionality. The intermittency and unreliability of the supply chain as well as the poor quality of the machines leave workers "standing around" (15). A demoralized "sloppiness" infects the labour process from within. Workers dance stumblingly drunk through the gates of the factory. Absenteeism is rife: employees choose sleep instead of work. All of this to a point follows the usual coordinates. What recalibrates our reading is a quote taken from a frustrated Soviet economist: for the time being he complains, "The workers are the bosses" (15).

Is the communist's body inutile because it is masterless? From one angle, this theme complements the standard liberal representation of communism as a land of magical reversals and absurdities. For all its militarized masculinity and strong centralized control, it remains powerless vis a vis its own captive workforce. Yet if fear is the mother of discipline, if there is a whip in unemployment, the lucid isomorphism of productivity and life, but also democracy and capitalism disappear, to say nothing of the moral superiority of liberalism *vis à vis* its authoritarian counterpart. Is there not a way in

which this bored, drunk and lazy kingdom is itself the utopia promised by an older civil center⁸¹? What separates the camaraderie of indolence, this shared pledge not to pay and work, this conspiracy of comic laziness from a British pub on Sunday? "Better, surely, to have some sort of job, however unproductive, than none at all. Nobody suffers the humiliation of being out of work, or of belonging to a jobless underclass?"

The soviets live poorly, but not abjectly. They are passably clothed, sheltered, schooled, and fed. They play sports and make love, join clubs, get drunk and watch T.V. A 1971 article, entitled "Swinging Leningrad" nicely displaces any doubt about *The Economist's* awareness of these facts. Ignoring the "boozy young Finns" who arrive in crowds to party on the weekends, its architectural beauty is such that it cannot help but "rub off" on those working there. "Amidst the curving, ornamented, pink, yellow and green facades", the average typist--living on 5 pounds a week (only 5 p of which is absorbed by rent)--eats cheap: the shops are stocked plentifully with a variety of meats, as well as affordable perfume, sweaters, lipstick and bikinis (!). Whatever diminution had taken place within the domain of Soviet consumption by 1980, people were still guaranteed the amenities necessary for subsistence: the quiet life, perhaps bordering on catatonia, nevertheless remained intact.

Which brings us to the point. Unemployment breaks an old contract signed between peace and liberalism. It applies itself to the body of the labourer in a manner arguably no less violent than imprisonment by a state. If this is true the categorical

⁸¹ "Having suffered more than any during the war, the Soviet people are also more attracted than most by the slogan of peace and plenty. They could be turned against a leader only if it were proved that by negligence he was inviting an invasion" (23.01.60, 288)

distinction separating a safety that is free from one that is caged, the civility of liberalism from the brutality of communism, stood to be erased by the irruption into quiet living of the new deflation. Even if the lives of a few were ruined at the hands of the state, communism in 1980, despite its mediocre growth and infamous queues, at the very least functioned to safeguard the commodious. It should not surprise us, then, that it is precisely during this period of indistinction that a transition should take place from the axiomatics of middle tranquility to one of onto-technological openness and flexibility. If the West could no longer win on the terrain of prosperous stability it could nevertheless be seen to curate plurality and social possibility in a way very far removed from the permanent grey and technological inertia of communism. It is from this perspective, that a chain of associations linking industrialism, communism, bureaucracy and torpor could be consolidated against the perpetual flux and ecstasy of the new capitalism.

The frequent mid-1990s invocation of grey or informal economies also worked to soften any of the tension thinkable between the center and the disparity engendered by neoliberal policies. In one form, this discourse emphasizes the cultural uniqueness of poverty, using a language of pluralist respect for difference as the point of departure for a critique of those who would develop the poor on the basis of an (apriorist and Eurocentric) middle class mould. At the same time, in an echo of our last chapter's comments about the metaphysics of de-regulation, the informally employed poor are posited as in some way freed from the discipline, regularity and oppressiveness of traditional work. Other times they are framed as radicals, poor entrepreneurs perpetually

impeded by state bureaucracy⁸². A new positive connection coalesces between criminality and production; in the grey economy old distinctions fade away and are replaced by the circulation of smuggled desires and goods.

However, insofar as the radical center retains, rather than rejects, older connotations of moderation, industriousness and balance it tends to re-crystallize around the narrative of an *emergent global middle*. In these moments, playing thrift and moral simplicity against the impugned casino ethics and volatility of Wall Street, it draws from this shift an almost Jacobin egalitarianism easily counterposable to the hierarchies and racial homogeneity of the protectionist welfare-complex. Old privilege stands mortified before the skilled competitiveness of formerly excluded new-comers⁸³. Not only is there a sense of complacency disrupted, archaic forms burst by creative energy, this rupture codes for *The Economist* a resilient, non-particularist fidelity to the revolutionary principles of Smithian economics: "Many Americans still find it hard to accept that they should be on the receiving end of that dread being, the "multinational company" (21.07.90, 12). Investing across borders or buying foreign companies are things that mighty American firms do to other people, or that foreigners may aspire to do to each other, but not things foreigners should do to Americans" (12). The arrival onto the scene

⁸² "In view of the ramparts that some governments place in the way of their country's entrepreneurs, it is surprising that enterprise survives at all. Mr Hernando de Soto's celebrated study of Peru's informal economy, "The Other Path", shows the remarkable persistence and ingenuity of its entrepreneurs -- and why they have chosen to be outlaws, despite the risks" (23.08.89, 44).

⁸³ "Until now it had been widely assumed that globalisation was driven by the West and imposed on the rest. Bosses in New York, London and Paris would control the process from their glass towers, and Western consumers would reap most of the benefits. This is changing fast. Muscular emerging-market champions such as India's ArcelorMittal in steel and Mexico's Cemex in cement are gobbling up Western companies. Brainy ones such as Infosys and Wipro are taking over office work. And consumers in developing countries are getting richer faster than their equivalents in the West" (17. 04. 10, 32).

of these racialized jacobins--Japanese, Koreans, etc--allows for the exercise of both the center`s principled consistency as well as its characteristic openmindedness: effortlessly avoiding the ethnic chauvinism of its (sometimes) unabashed Americanophilia, it takes sides, as it were, against itself, joining hands with subaltern capitalists against the xenophobic paranoia and ignorance of borders.

Citing the tendency of free trade to spread new management practices and innovative technologies (a claim buttressed with evidence from America`s investment in the global South), but also the relative rustiness of American productivity, they winkingly insist that `Nothing works such wonders as a dose of cultural imperialism` (12). This is a remarkable formulation. The multinationalization of capital rewinds imperialism, cancelling its asymmetry even as it retrospectively justifies its intentions. The very concept of imperialism is reduced to farce: denounced by left nationalists in the 1970s its transfers now return to the sapped metropole in the form of an invigorating echo which belies conclusively its purported malevolence. The power of the ironical inversion of colonizer and colonized utterly negates the historical violence of the imperial project and replaces it with a sense for the fecundity of the other, the restorative energy of infinite variety: these are mutually advantageous pollinations. Knowledge difficultly internalized abroad, often naively resisted by luddites and particularists, boomerangs to the now lagging site where it was first begun. Side-stepping the world-historical role played by corporate influence in places like Guatemala, we are left with the carnival smile of a surprising, but pleasant turn of events. The mere penalty of irony haunts Americans scandalized by the sudden intrusion into their political process of foreign money. This

"splendidly ironic" situation instantaneously reverses a hundred years of American hegemony; the formal neatness and euphemism of wit--look, the shoe is now on the other foot!--itself passes into the tone of the reversal, adding a paradoxical sense of finally restored rectitude to a barbed radicalism of equals (12). Things are back to normal; things will never be the same!

b) The Punctual Chaos of Finance

In addition to the strategies used above to negotiate post-Reaganite disparity, the radicalized center discovers in an exacerbated instability of finance a figure of *asymmetrical* or *dynamic equilibrium* with a high degree of semiotic flexibility and usefulness. Able to name a balance which is neither holistic nor static, an order composed entirely of change, or even merely a traditional relation of disproportion or instability, the cycle will function within the imaginary of the radical center as a kind of metaphysical heartbeat, structuring its semiotic openness in a way that allows it to shuttle between older ideals of balance, progress, moderation etc, and the new dispensation of postmodern risk, openness and fluidity.

The indeterminacy of contemporary finance is a punctual kind of chaos. Its change never approaches the finickiness of a relation between substances; whatever its complexity, however exotic its form, relations between money and itself remain ultimately determined by the decentralized binary of bull/bear. It is precisely the un-simplicity of finance which strictly encircles its interpretive field. This is not to suggest that this semiotic closure impedes the possibility of surprise or error; rather, it is to insist

that within the closed world of money the unanticipated itself is a predictable concertion. It is a moment in a system for which the cataclysmic outside of collapse is itself *all the way inside*. Games of misery and plenty, presentiments of disaster as well as injunctions to caution and calm swirl *indispensably* around the binary vortex of money.

I want to argue that these oscillations function in some profound way as spontaneous evidence for the exigency, rectitude and liveliness of the new centrism. Not only does this instability call into being a desire for the moderation, balance and orderliness of its civil antecedent (still regularly tapped by today's configuration), it simultaneously engenders an ambience of risky, ontological openness--an adventure commensurate with the whole of being--for which the extreme centrist itself becomes a kind of ethical ideal. This is a complex, contradictory configuration: on the one hand, the exorbitance of postmodern "risk societies"--be it the rapidity of urban development or the volatility of finance--activate metaphysical echoes suppressed by the radical center's insistence on the libratory potential of change; on the other, this instability itself becomes a figure of a new kind of postmodern equilibrium, a consistency fashioned out of newness, which is imbalanced, ecstatic, egotistical and unequal, but which *realistically* reflects the innate limitlessness and freedom of the human animal.

How does this work? Just prior to Black Monday, as stocks are reaching levels not seen since 1929, *The Economist* clearly postures itself in such a way as to eschew both *doing something* and *doing nothing* (intervening or letting be). Refusing the bad alacrity of alarm, but also the stupor of a position locked too closely into the rhythm of the present, it chooses instead the involved neutrality of the map, sketching a configuration of

outcomes which are carefully stipulated as simultaneously possible *and* necessary. The latter is less a certitude than it is a sense for the thoroughness of the map. By imagining the possible, but without withdrawing into the sterility of an enthrallment to multiplicity, the newspaper styles a relationship to contingency never wholly removed from the necessitating rigor of judgment. This matters: financial instability ceaselessly calls into being a scenario for the expression of centrist decisiveness (but with none of the debilitating effects of accountability or responsibility). After having thoroughly parsed the conjuncture, *The Economist* transitions into a set of carefully articulated enjoinders and caveats. Growth having accelerated as quickly as it has, Wall Street stands to be sobered by "hard times": "the only question is whether it will make a soft landing or come to earth with a bump" (11.07.87, 33)

This judgement, however, which follows a close technical analysis of the composition of forces, is immediately demarcated as distinct from those of the exhilarated (Christian or Marxist) populisms: " [the] bores who complain about the "instant gratification" society and who moan about the \$ 500,000-a-year 28-year-old yuppie investment bankers, will enjoy their moment of glee" (33). These critics are tedious, prone to droning repetition and predictability, but also glibly vengeful , the puerility of their "glee" an index of those too stupid to spy amidst the spectacle of disproportion the elegance and apportioning of a cycle: "Their downfall will result not from excessive greed but because the cycle will turn, as cycles always do" (33).

The lesson is quickly learned: an analytic grounded in the opprobrium of greed is the opposite of one married to the methodological schematism and patience of the cycle.

Its eyes averted from the moral drama and phenomenology of the market, contemptuous of the platitudes born to pre-empt its precocity, the cycle-wielding economist achieves a translocal rationalist spacing that clarifies without devolving into the bad separation of the Idea. This mechanism freezes reflex from the vantage point of discipline, but only on the basis of a customary wisdom the latter refuses on principle. On the one hand, the cycle throws peasant flesh around a hard skeletal core: it adds to an impression of science the colloquial orderliness of tides and seasons, behaviours and planets, times, epochs, lives and days⁸⁴. On the other, it demarcates a skepticism vis a vis the tired moral formulas used to vilify financial flux. Its power is precisely the indiscernibility it creates between knowledge and custom: *somehow both leave discredited and validated at the same time*. Abstract, but not ideal, distanced but without separation, the cycle immobilizes the social simplicity and short-sightedness of admonition, but in a way compatible with the anti-utopianism and immanentism of the center. Blame, it suggests, is the animism of the child: its purview is the spirit-filled grove and the impatience of a body not yet disciplined to slower, less pleasing patterns.

The cycle is at once fully disclosed, utterly present to itself, and always on its way to being somewhere else. Here and Now, but also permanently There and Then. The enormity of its presence is that of everything that stands to be lost or gained in its difference from itself. No measure of a quality inherent to the Here even tracingly resists the future's power to erase what has been. Yet out of the misery of all that is lost emerges the suspended imminence of a return to health and growth. Geometrical inscription, then,

⁸⁴ With respect to the truth of the cycle: “The older hands recognize this; too many of the younger ones do not” (33).

of methodical doubt, the total reversibility and uncertainty of value, wedded to one of the oldest anthropological constants--the wheel. Utter fluidity and relentless orderliness coalesce around the same indestructible center. The simultaneity of eternity and change, certainty and doubt, expresses precisely the epistemological ambiguity of the radical center. At once, completely at home and restlessly homeless, utterly normative and sceptically contemptuous of rules, technocratically efficient and deviantly plastic, the radical center discovers in the contingent infinity of the cycle a temporality which in some sense spontaneously narrativizes its own necessity and value.

Configured as an axis, the center is a fixed or spinning point, a site amenable to both ideas of stable intellection or involved, activated engagement in the motion of the whole. When imagined as stability it renders the latter structurally possible, bearing the heft of the work of revolution, even as it escapes the shakiness and delicacy of the orbiting edge itself. It is an instrument of architecture, recognizable within the Western metaphysical tradition, easily reconciled to modern principles of stable governance, managerial efficacy, and peaceful authority. The center, in this sense, becomes the bearer of the orderliness of the cycle; it is the technocratic logic which delays the onset of panic during moments of crisis and a sobering consciousness of excess during periods of self-forgetful market effervescence.

Cautionary, almost prophetic in times of bounty, *The Economist* draws on the vestiges of Christian Idealism, focussing the gaze on the worm in the flesh of excess, on the subtension of life by death, even as it wholly denudes itself of the moral infrastructure of good and evil. Similarly, it draws on the cultural memory of the resurrectible Christ

amidst the dreariest and most stubborn of sloughs. It is in a continual state of parallax, glimpsing the bull through the eyes of the bear and vice versa. Such a structure systematizes apostasy, creating an infinitely reproducible machine for the production of non-conformist opposition even as it leaves untouched the meta-theoretical contingency of the cycle itself. In other words, the cycle creates an iterable sense for the spirit of an age, a feel for its pith and directionality, from which to endlessly differentiate the positional singularity of the radical center. This is a contentless dialectics, a pure formalism which powers its difference on the cultural linkages drawn between the integrity of a trend and the repetition-prone logic of the herd (“overheated emotional nonsense”) (09.08.90, 21).

Perceived against the background of a market visualized as vertical, the center very quickly comes to appear like the occluded outcome of the secret arithmetical essence of up/down. These poles do not merely inertly exist: they are thrown like dice, their outcomes uncertain. Equilibrium, in this sense, arrives as nothing more or less than the play of instabilities, a never-disclosed, wholly dynamic mean. “Things even out in the end” is the quiet centrist lesson drawn from this motion of highs and lows. A dynamic equilibrium, then, which is somehow never, yet always balanced.

However, the functioning market does not tack towards the middle, the mean of up and down, but oscillates between these points within a broader secular expansion. It circles *upwards*. Not only must that which rises fall; within the vertical field of neoliberal ontology that which falls must also rise again. At the bottom of down is resides always a trenchant certainty of rebound; at the top of high subsides the necessary rounding of the

curve. This feeling clicks only because the globally distributed memory of a deflationary lifeworld has vanished (even if, paradoxically, that lifeworld itself has not!). Its task is not to cluster around a middle point between up and down, but to oscillate between these poles within a long secular expansion. This is the telos of the radical center: not an orbiting around that which is, but a continual, restless opening in the direction of newness and growth. In other words, *all of the safety and comfort of oscillation with none of its monotony.*

We should also linger for a second with the strangeness of the fact that somewhere tucked deep into our knowledge of the vertical is a spontaneous hexical centrism. The adventure of the human feels like a compromise formed between the ground and the sky: the precarious bi-ped is neither worm nor bird; its locomotion depends precisely on the imbroglio of gravity and musculature, jarring upward will and momentarily grounding downward pressure. The rigor and necessity of the binary is such that the vertical cannot be unmade or tranquilized; its poles do not simply face one another in mute opposition, but charge the space between them with a with a fibrillating necessity that feels alive in a way they don't. What political lessons do we learn from these resonances?

Finally, *The Economist* refuses to denounce the volatility of the market in part because it imagines its radicalism as a hatred of transcendence. Its "materialism" is precisely this openness to the risks--sometimes global and even terminal!--of contingency. This obstreperous freedom--one liable perhaps to tip the world into catastrophe--is the destiny of a human animal limited only by its imagination and its addiction to pleasure. Against this short-termist delight *The Economist* portray those who

would envision a politics operative on the scale of millenia, a politics premised on planetary stabilization or control, as dupes of the worst kind of reflex conservatism.

Part 2: The Drifting Centrist Multitude: Complexity after the Ruins of Politics

Political scientist's sometimes refer to the process by which individuals disengage from strict party affiliation as "partisan dealignment". They point to the fact that the party is no longer a casually generalized aspect of the daily life of citizens: party-based clubs have long vanished in the "advanced democracies" while membership rolls have declined across the political spectrum. Surveys have found that individuals all over the world are less likely to define themselves as unequivocal adherents to any existing party or ideology.

For *The Economist*, the death of the Party is simply the last spasm of the molar order described in Chapter 1. The party's corporatist universalism--its form marked by the fossilized traces of antagonistic class relations--no longer symbolically enchants subjects for whom private life has dilated in unison with their purchasing power. As discussed above, the center could for a long time rely on this story of incrementally increasing income as an alibi for the disintegration of old, outworn ideologies pitting "them" vs "us". That this is no longer the case, however, is side-stepped by a twist in the narrative: even if wages have stagnated and inequality exploded, the texture of the lifeworld has qualitatively evolved, a culture of customized, technological delight and play inducing phantasmagoric new privacies inaccessible to the bland publicity of the Party. In other

words, *privatization has extended into subjectivity in such a way that mass representation stinks of smoke stacks and shipyards*. The joyful multiplication of ways of being--inter-medial, experiential, often personally "extreme"-- has rendered the discursive monoculture of the political intolerable: "Why join a political party when you can go fly-fishing or surf the web?" (*Empty Vessels*).

The Economist foregrounds its resistance to "telling citizens what to do" as a basic ingredient of its avowed anti-authoritarianism, its radical fidelity to individual freedom (13.01.90, 15). However, it turns out anyways that this *subjectivization of the individual* is not a passage into solipsism or close-mindedness, not a defection or autism, but an *engagedness born of difference*. As subjectivity expands so too does its taste for the exotic and the hitherto eschewed; increased sensitivities deepen its connection to the world in a way unimaginable to the old egalitarian nationalisms. Globalization--imagined as a vast exodus of multi-coloured peoples and cultures, a gigantic miscegenation--has so altered the demographic composition of the socius that this alone is thought to render inutile a party system founded not on identities, but class. Left and Right are posed as sociologically outmoded remainders outpaced by the inter-cultural complexity of a world shrunk by sheer, unbound pleasure. The dilation of the subject, the singularization of its tastes, does not abolish social being, but spills over into a swarm of desires, propinquities, and hybrid ethnicities. Popular memories of a Tory/Labour dyad tinged in an antiquated White combine with the impression of a crush of colours, the market wildness of exotic spice and sounds framed as boldly transgressive of the dead categories and practices of the political.

This is an incredibly significant paradox. Privacy, it turns out, may have abandoned the state's public culture, but it does so on the inside of a pleasure redolent of planetary intimacy. It is not that politics has died, rather, *it has learned to speak a language separated from the chauvinism and social homogeneity of the nation*. In a supreme centrist manouver, the choice between public and private, between codes of togetherness and unchecked desire is annulled on the premise that it is only by allowing one half of the equation to absorb the other that the spirit of the equation may be conserved. Two goods seen to be mutually exclusive are here revealed as utterly consonant with the absorption of one pole into the other: *privacy unbound becomes a deeper, less problematic form of publicity*. The ideologically loaded role played by the tertiarization of society can not be over-emphasized here: the entire process of globalization can be represented as little more than the messy diffusion of multicultural images and sounds, a personalization of service, and the integration into the act of consumption itself of the clumsy ancient architecture of the Good (buying a coffee = water for Africans).

For *The Economist* the floating center is either all of the plurality indigestible to di-archy, a fractional multitude of skeptics unconvinced by first glances, or the middle mass described above. When viewed as the majority the floating center consists of normal people of the middle marked by a strong independence of mind, family values, and pragmatic commitments to balance. To capture the middle is in this sense to appeal to a majoritarian sensibility often uncongenial to the skeptical technocratism of the new center. It is the purview of a triangulation susceptible to allegations of opportunism or

emptiness. When viewed as a smaller cohort it is framed as the decisive fraction, *a kingmaking margin*. As the mass of the center contracts its value expands to approximate its rarity. Their patience the mark of a refined circumspection, too sophisticated for the programmed to and fro of the talk shows, the undecided are the breeze of reason which tips the scale at the last instant. Some variation on this motif is encountered in the European systems of proportional representation where small liberal corpuscles coalitioned with the entrenched parties often hold deciding ballasts. In diarchies, however, this fractional center is thought to queerly outweigh the corpulent poles, its small, but disproportionate power a secular encryption of theist providence. This holy spirit of rationalism is what prevents the pie-throwing of the parties from total burlesque and provides for centrist elites a sense that they are still in control of things (rather than the beneficiaries of cultural randomness).

If the poles no longer match the multiplicity of the social, if even their hold on the consciousness of the subject has been loosened by variety in motion, what remains is an image of *a drifting centrist multitude*, coalescent independents, whose will is no longer captured by corporatist fidelity and instead retained only the basis of results:

Independent voters have been marginalised over the past decades. Armies of partisans have marched over the political battlefield. Elections have been much more about energising the faithful than reaching out to wavering voters...[However, the new independents] are younger and better educated than the average American. They are pragmatic, anti-ideological and results-oriented, hostile to both Big Labour and Big Government but quite prepared to see the government take an active role in dealing with problems like global warming. (16.02.08, 42).

The swing voter floats between parties, a discriminate virus which attaches to a mass only after having closely vetted its options It takes a side, but warily, staking

nothing on the form of the means by which it creates a desired cluster of effects. Its truth is secured by its belatedness, but also by the ease with which it switches teams (its lack of “tribal” attachment). Envisioned as a majority it is neither the stable middle mass described above, nor the kingmaking margin, but a combination of the two: it is at once stable and dynamic, circumspect and normative, effective and utterly utopian. Crucially, there at the root of the swing voter is an idea that better educated populations are no longer so easily taken in by the predictable solicitations of the parties, but also the corporatist apparatus of molar interests (big labour, big government).

The centrism of the mixed economy balanced parts that were themselves molar and fixed. Society still had a concept of its generic difference: both its domestic anatomy as well as that of its international context could be seen as intelligibly composite and relatively stable ideologically. One could say that these structures were viewable from space. The center's radicalism was both its openness to change (the precarity of democracy vis a vis communism) and its masculine refusal to despise force (its contempt for the bleeding heart). Balance resulted from the unstable relation between labour and capital, public and private; liberal democracy could itself be imagined as the fulcrum upon which an entire polarized globe relied for its orderliness: one teetering scale located on another. The center was where contact between these organs could be staged through the intermediation of speech, a parliament as flexible (ie open to change) as it was sovereignty centralized. The center was still an intentional node, a point of governance that radiated efficacy, but the One of its decisiveness could never be separated from the Many of the procedure by which it was made possible. Remember that all of this was

continually parodied from the left as a colossal banality, stuffy, male, homogenous, frightened, managerial, vertical, protestant, violent, moribund and empty.

The new center is at once the neutral locus where differences aggregate and the machine or device which processes them. Difference does not just fill the space of the center, that zone relative to other zones, its variety collected and placed into relations of exchange. If this were the case the center, as we have seen, would be reduced to the neutrality of traversed space. Of course, this aspect of the concept is indispensable when foregrounding the center's post-ideological properties. The notion of the center as a place close to everything, however--useful as it may be--crucially leaves it susceptible to allegations of vapidness and opportunism. But the center is not just volume, but an apparatus of mediation. Sometimes this is considered as the topos of an intellection which changes or re-distributes a configuration of parts and flows. The center in this sense is much more closely linked to a systemic intelligence or a concatenation of nerves, than it is the hollowness of space: it somehow adds value. The seductiveness of this model is that the center can accommodate cultural and ideological multiplicity, allowing for the retention of the distinctness of its participants while at the same time refusing to merely transmit their contents unaltered. Agora and network, wild promiscuity of contact and wired inter-relatedness, trenchant individuality and digital collectivism: these are the supple dimensions of the new center.

The shift away from a binary logic of the political to that of the floating centrist multitude is always undertaken in the name of complexity. We can begin to trace out the resonances of this concept in *The Economist's* relationship to nature. It would be easy to

imagine a political center oriented ecologically around a stable and quite readily available package of centrist meanings. Balance, wholeness, moderation: the center's historical and conceptual adjacency to these values would be simply switched on within an environmental crisis formulated as kink, excess and disproportion. Following a division as old as Plato, disorder reveals itself as an aberrant exception to the homeostasis and continuity of system; greed tips balance into a disorienting withdrawal of pattern, an unpredictability wholly at odds with the boundedness to law of things as they are and should be. Nature and change are rendered opposites, the latter's infection of the former an effect of human deviation from common sense. With these premises intact, it becomes possible to refract the center as deep essence or core, a re/centering of the world the basis of natural values we have learned to forget.

At no point does *The Economist* seriously flirt with this vision of nature as a violently desecrated whole. It sees the transformation of our environmental history into a story of punished transgression as a typical instance of mythopoetic thinking; overly curious, a creature of pure avarice the human must be chased from the garden for having flouted nature's clear limits. At work in such a narrative is the standard religious contempt for self-interest, invention and profit. As we have seen again and again the radical center's refusal to decry greed is at the very heart of its claim to have exited ideology. Moderation is to be praised within the jurisdiction of the political, it speaks to a certain vocational prudence, an awareness of the line separating politics from life. But nothing is more suspicious to the newspaper than the politician whose moderation extends into the domain of privacy; to change concretely the way one lives--forgoing plans for

travel and good quality steak--is to immediately succumb to the dogmatic asceticism and otherworldliness it associates with political theology (Robespierre as much as Calvin).

For *The Economist* nature is not a balance ruined by the disproportion of greed, but a dynamic system always in the process of learning new ways of differing from itself:

Only two things are certain about the world's climate, and one of them is that it will always be unpredictable. The forces that govern it are preposterously intertwined, linking the chemistry of the deep oceans to the physics of the stratosphere, the ice-fields of the Arctic to the forest canopies of the tropics. It is difficult to find a single cause for a climate change as it is to pinpoint the sneeze on which to blame an epidemic of influenza. Such complexity leads to the other certainty about climate: it is in perpetual flux (07.04. 90, 13).

This quote accomplishes a number of tasks at the same time. First, the insistence on climate as a structure of continual change undermines the capacity of critics to oppose growth and culture like purity to sin. If nature is always already different from itself the enormous industrial signature of the human can be integrated as merely the latest in a succession of planetary ecological events. Second, though *The Economist* clearly intuits the immense interconnectedness of nature, *this knowledge terminates in a declaration of complexity, rather than totality or wholeness*. Meshed causality gives rise not to an intuition of soberly shared risk, a precarious continuum or oneness, but to a consciousness of epistemological finitude and limit. The bewildering interrelatedness of things proscribes etiological certitude, even as it functions as a brake on political exigency: who is to say that what we do to fix the problem will not create problems of its own?⁸⁵ The

⁸⁵ "The climate changes constantly, and once man thinks he has seized the controls to avert some disastrous man-made alteration, he will be forever jiggling them to steer his world through natural changes that will follow" (07.04.90, 13).

inscrutable complexity of the system defuses not only the factual anger needed to generate a political will but also the lucid comprehension of concrete tactical alternatives.

To demand a green future on the basis of a repression of infinite human desire is to immediately betray the phenomenological fullness of being (described in Part 1) for a collectivist delirium founded on pure speculation. Here the mentioned tendency of the center to posit the marvels and comforts of the present as in some strange sense inviolable⁸⁶ plays a role. The notion of a world-girdling layer of environmental regulation--“planetary management”-- coupled to the almost certain drag on growth such a system would imply strikes at the very heart of the center’s agoraphilic nervous system (13).

What does it mean to speak in the name of complexity? Such a discourse needn’t comprehensively map the imbroglio; indeed, it more often begins precisely where an idea about the probability of full disclosure ends. All that is required is the appearance of a technical relation to the unchartable whole: it is enough to have discriminately revealed a small segment of its confounding mass. These are metonyms of the incalculable, patches the size of which irritatingly contrast with their inordinate populations of factors and variables.

However, the unknowable is not used by *The Economist* to validate a frontier inaccessible to scientific investigation; on the contrary, a full sense for the scale of our powerlessness and ignorance can be gained only through the applied specificity of disciplined knowledge. Such a rhetoric draws on the conservative radicalism of people

⁸⁶ The horrible neologism I want to use here is “un-de-inventable”. I promise not to ever use it.

like Oakeshott and Gray, both of whom insist on the imperfectability of the human without grounding it in an innate essence or nature; at the same time it adds to this skeptical realism a technocratic carapace which protects it from charges of an anti-intellectualism or fuddyness.

When an identity forms between complexity and markets, the only emergencies unsusceptible to disintegration at the hands of a logic of the incalculable are those directly opposed to capitalism itself. *Critique of the latter becomes nothing more or less than a fear of the multiple as old as monotheism.* Simplification, in other words, is the necessary form of appearance taken by any attempt to totalize a system isomorphic with plurality. Efforts to theoretically organize capitalist reality under a dominant set of traits or predicates immediately offend the phenomenological mansidedness of a lifeworld that is simply too diverse and big for a concept of itself.

Any “solution” to capitalism can only play out like a laughably reductive displacement of actually existing complexity; no subtlety can remove from critique the bad complicity with bulldozed forests. Having divided and specialized competencies, decentralizing production and knowledge, capitalism appears to democratize intelligence even as it practices a kind of epistemological humility vis a vis the power of an agent to comprehend, guide or direct the whole. Anti-capitalism comes off feeling intrinsically hubristic and monumentalist.

If the center’s dominant contemporary resonance is a certain de-polarized (yet never tepid) multiplicity, a metaphoric of exchange and spatial complexity linked to the involving busyness of markets; if the center is the fullness of the space, a cluttered milieu

of deals, learning, pleasure and trade, but also the perfection of its emptiness; if the hegemony of the amidst carries with it the danger of a horizontality no longer distinguishable from flatness and prostration it matters that despite the collapse of the center's primary structuring binary—and all of the libratory post-communist euphoria it made available—that there nevertheless remains on the part of *The Economist* a frenetic need to re-activate the discriminatory posture of a fully binarized between (we saw this in our discussion of the cycle). What the center loses in the loss of the givenness and entrenched objectivity of the poles is the effortlessness of a between pre-packaged as it were with a clear catalogue of binary-derived predicates. Neither Stalin nor Hoover, but also BOTH Stalin AND Hoover was a baggy middle ground intelligible to a whole generation.

One way *The Economist* energizes this older between is by endlessly transposing its code. Excised from the jurisdiction of the hard, political object, no longer confined to extent geo-political divisions, triangulation re-appears as an inveterate subjective praxis, a way of writing and thinking which re-fertilizes the binary with an eye to feeding off it. *The Economist* is a relentlessly taxonomic text; whether it is the costs and benefits of bio-fuels or contrasting approaches to a nuclear Iran the newspaper excels at transforming the issue's interpretive gamut into a restricted field absorbed and negated by a paralyzing dualism. Two parties or interlocutors both of which are equally errant or fixed exhaustively divide the space in which the terms of the problem are proposed and discussed. Keep in mind that the polarity, here, needn't be intuitable along recognizably "political" lines; far more often the dualism grafts itself onto schools or clusters

engendered by tensions within the technical or disciplinary infrastructures endemic to the object or problem. It is not simply that these two parties appear incapable of solving the problem; rather the binary actively impedes the elaboration of a solution. The outcome of this impasse is always the same: a third option is generated, culled from neither of the schools, which is at once eccentric, ideologically baggageless, and “risky”. Three, in other words, becomes the place reserved in number for that which resists anticipation: it is a portable, infinitely re-useable device for the distribution of rhetorically useful newness. Again, the radical center is seen to thrive on what we might call a formalism of the incalculable.

Part 3: The Heretical Manager: The Radical Center Hegemonized

Throughout this dissertation a fairly stable set of oppositions has consistently structured the site of centrist identification. Fixity and openness; activity and passivity; rarity and commonality; sovereignty and democracy; tradition and innovation; expertise and intuition; radicality and moderation: time and time again the center finds itself navigating these and other predicates on the basis of its determinate insertion into an historically spatialized instant.

During its neoliberalisation the center passed through a period in which it was forced to attempt the extremely difficult task of retaining a hold on its claim to pragmatist circumspection even as it championed a position located on the margin of consensus. Even when it styled its Thatcherism as an exigent rectification, a temporary, but necessary exception to the rule of balance, it simultaneously posited the fixity of its partisanship as acceptable only in so far as it was the arbiter of an end to the entire regime

of stability—it was, as argued, in Chapter 2, nothing more or less than a partisan of the manifold. The post-war order had inflated from within, metastasizing in such a way as to necessitate authoritative action; but no one could ignore the cost to its skepticism of this dalliance with a resolve that always threatened to spill over into dogma or cant.

It is in the shift from Thatcherite exigency to what we might call the technocratic neoliberalism of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama that *The Economist* would perfect its radicalism of the center. As the phase of militant neoliberalism waned a distinct style of governance coalesced around the project of intelligently managing the new conjuncture. All of the qualities necessary for the production of a revolutionary break were re-calibrated. Idealist vision, which is to say the power to project a consolidated, non-actualized imagination of things to come; the thematics of authoritative action, with its emphasis on execution, decisiveness, and an integrated, realizable Plan; the whole rhetoric of intransigent fidelity; the truculence and indefatigability of character; the figuration of consensus as an ancien regime characterized by sclerosis and rot: all of these to varying degrees were either jettisoned or transvalued under the conditions of full-blown neoliberal hegemony. Keep in mind that all of these coordinates spilled over into impressions intolerable to *The Economist's* centrism: vision always risked becoming the purity and irreality of ideology (“mad monetarism”); authoritative action risked devolving into authoritarian blindness; fidelity stood to be lost to irrational attachment; truculence risked becoming boreishness; and the image of the present as sclerosis proposed a real threat to the Burkean sensibility and slowness (really a Conservatism) still always operative on the inside of any center.

As neoliberalism trickled into the commonsense of transnational networks, think-tanks and governments the neo-conservative aspects of “reform” uncongenial to the center’s pragmatism were replaced with a new thematics emphasizing bi-partisanship, cooperation, balance and flexibility. The Thatcherite break was increasingly conceptualized as itself a moment of excess, a disproportion at odds with the measured syntheses of the new center. Revolutionary intransigence, however, far from being dispensed with was instead inscribed into the very ethos of centrist management. Bi-partisanship was not the tepid consolidation of a consensus, but a radical ethical fidelity to the singularity and intensification of differences. Balance was not static or normative, but a continuously refreshed dynamism of temporary alliances and connections. It is the “exhausting grind of consensus”, combined with the ecstatic interchange and pluralism of the market.

The managerialism of the radical centrist does not preside over an egalitarian moral system, a national machine, or a population it seeks to paternalistically control, but rather, but a perpetually revolutionary social fabric that introduces dissensus and electricity into the very heart of being. It controls only to set free the incalculable.

One of the basic conceits of today’s radical center is its claim to have exited the dialectics of big and small for a non-conforming third option premised on intelligent solutions. Blair, Clinton, and now Obama regularly intone that we must move beyond the stultifying rigidity of the government/market dyad to a regulatory framework which escapes the limits of each. This is perhaps one of the clearest markers of the difference between the neoliberal logic of the partisan described in Chapter 2 and the dialogical (yet extreme) centrism practiced by today’s political elite. The radical centrist styles the end

to Thatcherite market fundamentalism as a moment in the process of its own secularization; yet this shift to the middle is not in any way a return to the social democratic ideals of the seventies (now wholly discredited as appeasement and ideology), but a dynamic sublation of opposites powered only by the differential potentiality of middleness itself. This is an arithmetic the sum of which exists entirely the qualitative dimensions of the terms of its equation; it is mutation under the sign of addition.

The 1990s provided the center's sense for its own hereticism with a tantalizing array of paradigmatic subjects. Fernando Cardoso, once a Marxist sociologist of uneven development, later Brazil's finance minister and architect of the anti-inflationary Plan Real; Adam Michnik, tireless debunker of ideological thinking, formerly a critic from the left of communist Poland; Michelle Bachelet, a consummate Chilean moderate once tortured by Pinochet; and Tony Blair himself, among countless others, repeat a remarkably linear formula. At one pole exists belief, ideology, and youth; at the other, experience, pragmatism and the terrain of the (revolutionized) actual. Won is the right to knowingly dismiss one's former political exuberance as of a piece with an error in the choice of once fashionable pants. Caught up in the spirit of it all, one gave over to easy temptation in a body still blistering with childhood and orgasm. Personal shame at the sloppy grandeur of pubescent imagination, the clear disparity between the remembered hallucination and its botched ontogeny, becomes the working alibi for a laughable utopianism of truth.

Though this will sometimes express itself as an abjural both of the form and content of these ideals, many radical centrists claim to have smuggled into the body of

their new moderation objectives effectively identical to those practiced in their youth. What has changed are not the ends, but the means. The drift to the center is not simply somnambulance or attrition, but a prudent modification of tactics scaled to the immensity of the existent. The benefit of such a position--unlike that of Thatcher's for example--is its ability to remain believably flexible and convicted; those who dispense with both means and ends gain the skeptic's trust but with the risk of veering into a certain de-personalized technocratic directionlessness. Those who retain the latter while jettisoning the former demarcate precisely the methodological orientation of the heretical manager. Its motto: the only thing better than being despised by a church one has left is being hated by two one never joined to begin with.

Here we can clearly distinguish the difference between a Clinton, Schroeder or Sarkozy and a Thatcher or Reagan. Where *The Economist* finds in the latter a decisiveness venerable despite its formal parochialism, a radicalism still hobbled by folkwisdom, the former manage *to act without the encumbrance of a conviction*. Paradoxically, it is precisely the sleaze of these figures which reveals their freedom from the untruth of politics; jazz, yachts, and sex signpost an unconscious unburdened of Robespierre, all of the archaic moralisms and dualisms congenital to the political⁸⁷.

Between 1990-2007 the centrism of *The Economist* finds in the ontology of a newly technologized capitalism a strange incitement to a novel way of synthesizing its

⁸⁷ “[Schroeder] is a business-friendly, barely left-leaning Protestant from Hanover... whose instincts draw him not just to Paris and Rome, but also to London, even to Washington. He has a beautiful fourth wife, once a columnist at a tabloid newspaper, and he seems unabashed about his three divorces... He has attractive, lively-looking candidates for some posts--a computer entrepreneur, Jost Stollmann, to take charge of the economy, Walter Riestler, a forward-looking trade unionist, to deal with labour, Michael Nauermann, a civilised publisher, for the arts.” (03.10.98, 20).

own practice. The notion of the flexible factory, its infrastructure multi-modal and fluid, available to instant adaptive re-arrangement, functions as the form through which the radical center construes a point without premise, a substance emptied of atoms, that neither stays the same nor changes nothingly in the winds. Postmodern production functions as the machinery through which the radical center can think its own *non-situated positionality*. Itself modularly integrated into a labyrinth of untotalizable relations, this factory retains its hold on the virility of output while at the same time registering environmental vibrations with a sensitivity that borders on etherealization. *It is resolve and openness at the very same instant*. Such is its command of its own body, its supreme portability, that it can dismantle itself effortlessly only to emerge re-materialized on the other side of the planet. In a state of continual surveillance, always researching space for fresh interstices, its orientation equal parts spontaneity and strategy, the flexible enterprise represents a mode of ideation which not only instantly discerns the desire posed to it by the real, but also immediately collapses the time between the registration of this demand and its satiating supply. This is the age of the three-dimensional printer in which between the Platonism of the form and the Nietzscheanism of the deed there is no longer the merest shadow of a gap. Circumspection and decisiveness are magesterially united.

In the postmodern factory that which is proper to itself belongs as much to the idea as the idea does to the world. It comes from without, sensing an idiosyncratic need, but also from within where it is gestated by an immense energy of post-industrial curiosity. Powered endogenously by a shopfloor that doesn't merely transmit orders, but

itself informs the practice of management, forever breeding from below sharp short-cuts and tweaks, egalitarian flexibility does away with the rigid hierarchies of the Plan replacing a clumsily embodied, even impotent Mind with the intuitional intelligence and hexical savvy of the networked body. Or rather, mind and body, intention and action coalesce in a pragmatism wholly extracted from an association with miserliness or common sense, but also weirdly compatible with an inventiveness and idealism of the real which is worlds away from any prior metaphysics of the actual. The seemingly miraculous transformation of social space by new technologies; the ascription of play to the kind of work we now deem affective (the ingenuity of Google or Apple), but also the interpenetration of whim and expertise, casual open-mindedness and highly specialized knowledge associated with immaterial production encodes a figure of centrist thinking which is popular without being populist, connected but also distinct, refined but not elitist, creative but also practical, and dynamic as well as disciplined. These, again, are precisely the coordinates of the heretical manager.

Its inputs maximized by the rigors of efficiency, the postmodern enterprise fantasizes an industrialism that is always drawing more from less⁸⁸. Nature is conserved within the manufacturing process by technological innovation that increases productivities, but also left unspoiled by a biodegradable output which dissolves back into the earth from which it came⁸⁹. Unskilled labourers are taken on or shed as needed; teams

⁸⁸ “One aim of design is economy—to cut down on the amount of machinery, materials, and manpower needed to manufacture a product, as well as costs entailed in its transport and warehousing. These days, energy conservation is an important aspect of economy. In cars, this involves better aerodynamics and lighter parts; in washing machines, too, lighter parts are involved, modern washing machines using plastic tubs that need less energy to drive them” (06.02.1982, 86

⁸⁹ And so it calls for the innovation of “new industrial processes that squeeze more output from each unit of

of creative professionals are assembled in clusters that are dissolved when the task is finished. Everything hangs together like a fragile dance: supply chains snaking onto a murky global intrication prone to new risks and competitiveness feed production lines themselves responding to market data received in real time. In direct opposition to the massed corporeality of communism, materials never pile up in warehouses. All of this, to the letter, is absorbed into the atmospherics of a radical center which sees its bi-partisan coalitions as a precarious, “just-in time” waltz; its efficacy as direct and productive without the weight and friction of unnecessary ideological baggage; its political interventions as temporary, task-oriented, and solution-based; and its action as always informed by a real-time empiricism rather than the industrial prometheanism of political utopia. It is out of this supple structure that the radical center fashions the rudiments of its now nearly universalized persuasiveness.

Given the ease with which the concept of modernity trades places with an impression of descending spiral or wasteland, it is perhaps unsurprising to find alive at a wild mess of sites and nodes an entire rhetoric of the center as old, it would appear, as orbits. Still detectable there in the notion of the center as integrated process--a base of operations or regulating cortex—is an ancient metaphysics of the axis or column. This is an architecture, however, which is also somehow a form of extreme sensitivity to the

input”. We have to begin “thinking about a product’s death from the moment of its conception”...”the world will need products that, during their lifetimes, do minimal damage to the planet and that, at the end of their lives, can either be safely thrown away or put to new uses.. to develop processes and invent products that use nature more frugally at both ends of their lives will call forth whole new generations of technology”...”What a fortune awaits the company that devises—say—a way of transporting individuals rapidly, safely, and quietly, without emitting nasty fumes, in a container that melts back undetectably into the earth as soon as it reaches the end of its long life!” (08.08.90, 3).

new, a fixed receptivity still porous to difference, mutation and rupture. Of course, it is clear that the work necessary to think this flexible stability as been done by the quiet motors of the concept of the network: continuously opening onto new flows of information or anticipating dim shifts in a precarious global conjuncture the center is the articulate matrix through which a profusion of processes and matters pass on the way to intellection, utility, and order. Like those commercials in which a hybrid car decomposes into water or dust, the center leaves no marks by which to trace its victories, no monuments by which to chart its passage through a fractious outside.

Transnational liberalism practices on the inside of an increasingly homogenous culture of the political, a measured apportioning of hope, gestures and speech that is nevertheless frenetically variegated, a veritable kingdom of diversities. Drifting between the specialist knowledge of the central bank and the non-institutionalized moral energy of the NGO, the center structuralizes activist liberal passion by providing it with a topological habitat that is also a kind of political spirit. To speak from the center is to speak at first sight from the nucleus of the logic of the world, from a realist, technocratic space where things happen in the round. The risk of an appearance of elitism, of an expert knowledge piped downwards in the form of a command or pre-constituted decision finds its resolution in the incorporative geometry of the network, a structure which retains a sense for expertise, but without the hierarchical resonances of a dogma closed to learning.

The genius of the center lies in an emptiness of content that renders it supremely labile: it has a remarkable range of application and can be “set up” or activated as it were without the preparatory friction associated on the left with “consciousness-raising” or grass

roots organization . The unique plasticity of its formalism allows it to unfold universally in the shape of an exception that is particular, an empirical rupture on a surface long dusted by false oppositions and problems. By staging the field of the political as an exasperated binary, the center operates an infinitely iterable skit of freedom. Coded erotically by a language of rupture, the natural ecstasy of release from impasse or tension , the magic of the third term always arrives just in time to break the paralytic spell of opposition. A newness freed from the incrimination of sediment, the center here limns a politics that is nothing but the negative space lost to the rancorous Two of history. In the shadows thrown by the frenetic combat of enemies blinded by self-certainty, the middle truth arrives as a pacification which is also a restoration to sight of vistas lost to passion, to an excess coextensive with politics itself.

If there is a detectably global center its political content agglutinates like the viscous fluid of a carpenter's level. A million decentralized reckonings of the reasonable sliding along the spectrum with a slowness as averse to emergency as it is amenable to the requirements of accumulation: this is the articulate inertia of the center, the caution it supplements with extremity so as to protect its practice from the scandal of fence-sitting or worse.

Conclusion: Being-in-the-Middle

Part 1: Being Somewhere Together

"..rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo"
Deleuze and Guatarri, 25.

The ease with which middleness can slide into a name for Being itself should amaze us. What matters, however, is not when it became possible to speak of human life as *in the middle*: Aristotle's vertical ontology, with Man at an equidistance between God and Mineral, is not what I have in mind here. Nor do I mean the cartographical hubris of cultures for which spatial centrality was a sign of cosmological election. Rather, I am interested in the perhaps uniquely modern feeling of *groundless betweenness*, a feeling that perhaps finds paradigmatic expression in the phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger. *Dasein's* fallenness, which locates it spatially as "being-alongside" as well as its temporal thrownness, alive as it is between projects past and still to come, nicely capture the experience of a singularly modern "being-in-the-middle". certainly, there are antecedents here: the Judeo-Christian tradition encodes the self as a fleshly interregnum between birth and after-life, as well as locating space/time itself within a linear eschatological structure which is "open" in so far as it is messianic. But sprawling, messy, existential betweenness; this perhaps, lives best in a city without Gods, or in one in which God, finance, television and science co-inhabit nervously.

The middle, then, is not only a pilgrimage or ascesis oriented towards a destroyed or forgotten balance; it is a word we use to say our vagueness. *There is perhaps no better name for the trivial confusion of contemporary being than middleness*. If, as Jean Baudrillard has suggested, we are "only episodic conductors of meaning" (42); if definitude is the exception to a rule of protracted distraction; if our moment's concepts are irremediably muddled, there nevertheless remains a persistent feeling for *the reality of the amidst itself*. We might think of this as a secularization of Heideggerian Being, as that

which persists when a capitalized Angst is subtracted from modern dislocation and left in the direction of a global whatever. Even if we cannot distinguish the true from the false, the simulation from its referent, even if our categories are miserable and our maps are splotchy at best, there is a profound way in which the shared imbroglio of confusion can be thought as *extended duration*. We are all, as it were, in *medias res*. Where else could one possibly be, but in the middle of it all?

Middleness, in other words, is the *topos* of a culturally pleasurable or vexing experience of unplaceability: it is where unknowingness happens. One falls asleep while reading *somewhere* in the middle, not at the beginning or riveted at the end. The forest claims its victims not at the edges but somewhere deep in-between. The phrase "in the middle of nowhere" is just a way of adding nothing to nothing. What singularly characterizes today's dogma of the middle is the way it transforms everything merely dimly understood into a totality without structure or history. To substitute the phenomenology of the body encircled--the immediacy of its amidst--for Being itself, for all that is and perhaps ever has been, eliminates the determinacy and complexity of social existence in a sometimes melancholy, sometimes exhilarating here-ness utterly available to capture by capital.

What contemporary indie film or pop song *doesn't* end on this note of resounding inbetweenness? Nothing we know is certain. Love is difficult. Enjoy the small things, leave the unthinkable – or unthinkably – big things alone. The self is enjoined to cling to what it already (meagrely) has: neediness and a taste for the irony of it all. Bill Murray's *Lost in Translation*, Don McKellar's *Highway 61*, Noah Bambaugh's *The Squid and the*

Whale, *Punch Drunk Love* and Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic* are all equally admissible as touchstones here. Often the family stands in for the meaningless externality of society with its endless litany of expected social scripts and roles. The self struggles to fit into a world that is other, but not alien. Consciousness is awkward; it stumbles on the threshold of saying the thing it wants to say, or kisses to displace the inherent leadenness of words. This lifeworld's dominant pattern is that of clutter: objects trip up the subject or change its course. A piano is left mysteriously in the driveway of one's home. Frequently a character will idiosyncratically exhibit an inordinate attachment to an item of clothing, branded product or trivial object—think the Twinkie in Ruben Fleischer's *Zombieland*. Bittersweet, capricious, and mundane, the topsy-turviness of things discovers unity in a subjective appreciation of its fragility and meaninglessness.

Is it too much to insist on the dogmatic empiricism of these films? Or better, is it not the case that they express precisely the destiny of an empiricism that remains in business despite the vanishing of the conditions for its possibility? These films register the death certificate of empiricist cognition even as they remain utterly within the ambit of its project. What exists, in the last instance, is the veil of middleness, the site of the revealed/concealed appearance of jumbled objects and personalities. Causally indeterminate matter in motion, but also half-formed, ungrounded subjectivities exhaust the landscape of this continuously disjointed middle being. If the Idea exists, here, it is in the form of the untranslatable dream, a pure singularity which appears out of the confusion of the amidst with an eye to an improbable, often risibly eccentric (or personal) objective that also manages to strike us as whimsically meaningful. The vastness of the

world, the contiguity of its contents, the self as plethoric margin: these are the coordinates of our cynicism of whim.

One can imagine a scene in which Michael Cera is asked to voice an opinion about labour conditions in China, or where he is grilled on the industrial origins of climate change. His answer, returned only after an open-mouthed pause, would undoubtedly be some variation on, “Actually, I’m not too sure about any of that.” The interlocutor would be portrayed invariably as either pretentious or strident, that is, as either *excessively* false or *excessively* true. Both are not stupid enough; or, in what amounts to the same thing, both have stupidly drifted from stupidity itself. The political moral of this middleness is simple: the notion of changing the world is ludicrous to a subject for whom the primary psychical hope of which is mere adequation to the fargile norms of social intercourse. What matter, here, is that for this subject to pass into the regime of communication, sovereignly organizing space and time, fighting injustices, exploitation, etc, it would have to lose what is most precious about it--*its idiosyncratic social failure*. Worse, there is even a way in which the labouring Chinese body has been misrepresented by the socially successful--because articulate--do-gooder: they are no doubt just like us, fucked up in the middle of something larger than themselves.

What is perhaps most disquieting (or should it simply be interesting?) is the way this existential middleness begins to traffic as a genuine social solution to dissatisfactions sparked by the (radical) center itself. Where the latter denotes authority, expertise or technocratic grip, the former congeals around strategies of wonderment, wandering and play. Where it flickers salience, exigency and directness the middle imbroglio can be

invoked as that which ultimately envelopes the center, drowning its pretensions to adequacy and knowingness in a disorientation we terminally share.

Contemporary subjectivity is in many ways hyper-fortified. One's taste for oneself, propped up by instantaneity and inter-continental travel, by customized forms of expression and experience, has arguably never been better protected against the predations of friction. We are egos the centers of which are now unabashedly marginal, substances grounded on the very basis of a unique deviation from the tyranny of substance. Center and periphery have traded places without the former losing for an instant its grip on the wheel. In other words, *today's mandatory eccentricity looks more like armour than flight*. Between the extreme snowboarder's punk deviance and the perforated scrotum of the performance artist there is one long boring chain of equivalency.

At the same time, one suspects subjectivity has never been less sure of where it is. Disciplinary specialization and search engines embed into the very fabric of the subject a disturbing sense of everything it will never know for sure. Structural stupidity and mass intellectuality coincide. The very possibility of knowing everything instantly engenders a diffuse sense of insufficiency and confusion. Urban space and neighbourhoods change at speeds wholly at odds with any of the old comforts of spatial and temporal stability. If Virilio is right, then we all live under the dim prospect of a total error, a certain kind of catastrophic togetherness forever threatening to badly unwind.

The radical center allows this simultaneously full and weak subject to satisfyingly embed and defer itself within a political field it senses as only partially understood. Not

sure where they stand ideologically, divorced from any substantive understanding of political history, these figures discover in the center a space which mediates between their doctrinal uncertainty and the social injunction to position. Knowing full well that ideologues are bores, the temptation to slough off political identification in some sense weakens personal weakness. Their own affective labour being so often dependent on a cunning negotiation of interpersonal and political difference, yet equally staked on distinguishing themselves from the tepid grey of “organization man”, the knowledge worker requires a form of political intelligence which allows it to appear decisive, singular, but never dogmatic or brutish (23.04.64, 824). We can imagine the squirming body of the junior executive tasked with answering a superior’s pointed, gin-scented question about who they’re voting for in an upcoming elections. Forty years ago a wishy-washy deflection to the tastelessness of mixing politics and business would suffice; today, in the aftermath of the personalization of labour (as well as the spectacularization of politics) such gestures appear stiff and formal at best.

Insofar as the center is framed as a site for the productive exchange of viewpoints, a space of synthesis and learning, it de-pressurizes the communication of transnational agents expected to perform feelingly in a bewildering array of contexts and settings. What other option remains for a British executive who has to toggle between Saudi entrepreneurs and Chinese state officials, Texan fundamentalists and East Coast liberals? Globalization has at least minimally complicated the coalition signals once reserved for the half-light of the all-white, all-male Masonic temple. This is by no means a case of cynical manipulation or psychological self-transparency; the very space in which such an

agent travels itself enunciates the truth of centrist reason, airports, hotel lobbies, and shopping complexes ontological proof of the fecundity of the boldly scumbled border. Whether one defers sheepishly to an unknowing linked to existential middleness--“I’m somewhere in the middle”—or executes one’s between as a supremely discriminate defection—“neither the one nor the other”—it remains the case that the our political options appear frustratingly trapped between two variations on the same theme.

Note for an Escape

[Today’s militant critics of globalization] present no worked-out alternative to the present economic order. Instead, they invoke a Utopia free of environmental stress, social injustice and branded sportswear, harking back to a pre-industrial golden age that did not actually exist. Never is this alternative future given clear shape or offered up for examination. And anti-globalists have inherited more from Marx besides this. Note the self-righteous anger, the violent rhetoric, the willing resort to actual violence (in response to the "violence" of the other side), the demonisation of big business, the division of the world into exploiters and victims, the contempt for piecemeal reform, the zeal for activism, the impatience with democracy, the disdain for liberal "rights" and "freedoms", the suspicion of compromise, the presumption of hypocrisy (or childish naivety) in arguments that defend the market order. Anti-globalism has been aptly described as a secular religion. So is Marxism: a creed complete with prophet, sacred texts and the promise of a heaven shrouded in mystery. Marx was not a scientist, as he claimed. He founded a faith. The economic and political systems he inspired are dead or dying. But his religion is a broad church, and lives on (21.12.02).

The radical center is not subject to disorientation by an aggression of the margin. By this I mean all of the attempts made by anarcho-communists, G20 activists, theorists, artists, etc, to unravel the center with a cultural outside imagined as inadmissible to its habits, ideal spaces, and conclusions. Neither the deviant sexual practice nor the lobbed homemade bomb remotely disconcert the extreme center. In a first moment, it wholly anticipates and sequesters the oppositional logic transforming it into a paradigmatic instance of conformist tedium. In the second, it has internalized utterly the logic of the

radical expanding to accommodate the aberrant practice or co-opting its affect through a rhetoric of creative capital. This formula cannot be undone by any of the extreme lifestyles or languages posited by an art, politics, or writing of the margin.

It is my suspicion that the kind of ensemble we are dealing with is susceptible to break-down under only two conditions: either it collapses in the wake of social catastrophe--its middle radicalism wholly discredited by chaos or misery--or it is *unabashedly* occupied, that is hegemonized from within. In the first instance, the crisis must be nearly instantaneous and its effects unorganized; the scenario here would be some kind of unexpected total accident which utterly impedes the infrastructural smoothness of capitalist life and gives rise to hooliganism and terror on a mass scale. In such a context the ironic displacements and affects of the center would simply cease to signal (they rely, as I have argued, in some way on an ontology of smooth growth). Perhaps, it would revert to a traditional disciplinary power—fascism maybe or some variation on Chinese authoritarianism—or simply vanish into an unhegemonized imbroglio of sects, factions, and competing truth-claims.

If the crisis, however, is slow, causally diffuse, and intermittent in its intensity (as I suspect the future of the next 50 years will be), the center can still maintain a hold over political discourse even in conditions that would radicalize an earlier moment. I am thinking here of places like Brazil and India where the continuing and even intensified poverty of millions ends up stabilized by the *ambience* of a growing middle class, but also a media ecology uniquely configured to neutralize such tensions. If the radical center's Nietzscheanism is conceded, it stands to reason that even exasperated crisis—

unemployment, for example, at 20% in Spain—will be folded effortlessly into its matrix, the horror of joblessness, transformed into the transgressive freedom and whimsy of hipster funemployment.

There are a few contemporary thinkers who have precisely identified the complexion of today's radical center. Agamben, Baudrillard, Zizek, Jameson, Badiou, Mouffe, and Rancière have all clearly articulated the “post-political” nature of our conjuncture. They rightly acknowledge the absorption of life into the field of exchange as well as the debilitating monotony of a governance built around the inviolable sovereignty of consensus. They note the technocratism of our moment as well as the decrepitude of its spontaneous relativism. The problem lies primarily on the side of tactical responses to this order. Time and time again these thinkers counterpose to the desiccated logic of contemporary governance a tumultuous, unincorporable outside thought to displace or disorient its smooth functioning. Even those who concede the dissensual nature of contemporary power continue to treat it like a parlour game in need of rude interruption.

Agamben's “politics of the gesture,” Baudrillardian “symbolic exchange,” Zizek's flirtation with revolutionary intransigence and violence, Badiou's philosophy of the rupture, Mouffe's unbound pluralism and Rancière's anarchic *demos* all generate an opposition between the domain of institutions (the Police) and a force, power, practice, or thinking capable of suspending its normativity. To various extents all focus on the unbounded riskiness of this suspension, on the revolutionary disjuncture, rather than the concrete protocols necessary to consolidate a new order. They similarly all tend to imagine the notion of order itself as inherently depotentiating. It is the implicit Maoism of

these thinkers—their focus on permanent revolution, on a speech or thinking incapable of domestication by power, on the identification of democracy with dissensus—which always ends up completely quarantined by the flexible realism of the center.

The center cannot be shaken by a difference it fails to recognize; it must be destroyed from within by something that resembles it: *it must be lied to convincingly*. This *unpleasant* truth requires a tremendous shift in the tenor of Left philosophy and practice. Not least among its casualties, is the long dalliance of the Left with the erotics of immanence, the satisfying insistence on the possibility of engendering a politics in which means are no longer subordinated to the sovereignty of ends. The extent to which we refuse to perform the difference between politics and culture, public and private, reality and its outside is the extent to which our efforts disperse into the futility of traceless exchange. Reason, efficiency, common sense, etc, are no longer concepts we can smugly presume to have deconstructed or left behind, just as abjection, matter, or difference are no guarantees of political decency; rather they are the rudiments of a centrist axiology we have to pretend matters, one that must be infected, manipulated, and extended into the possibility of a communism wholly withdrawn from the fantasy of their naturalness.

Doing this requires an abandonment of the pleasure of cultural self-sameness; it means learning how to operate the distinction between an intention and its appearance as well as inhabiting times and places the tone, style, and language of which we instinctively hate. We have to remember that the difference between *what is* and *what could be* is sublimely boring; it requires a tenacity that is quiet, persistent, determinate and sweet.

Which is only to say, that in the age of the manager-heretic there may be nothing more revolutionary than a bureaucrat.

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⁹⁰ Due to the way I’ve chosen to annotate *The Economist* within the body of the text I’ve not followed MLA protocol here: instead the articles are listed chronologically (which I think makes more sense). I’ve also sequestered the articles away from other references for easy access.

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