Diabolical Frivolity of Neoliberal Fundamentalism

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Horkheimer and Adorno rightfully claimed that the victory of culture industry is “twofold, what it destroys as truth outside its sphere can be reproduced indefinitely within it as lies.” Meaning that the more forcefully state repression mechanisms are allowed to work (read: repress) on the so-called outside (that is, in the social reality), the more humane the police are on the inside (in the so-called media representation of reality); the more the Government allows the market to colonize the public sphere, the more socially sensible its representation is in movies, and so on.

Today, we cannot talk just about plain control, but we must talk about the nature of the interaction of the one who is being controlled and the one who controls, an interaction where the one that is “controlled” is asking for more control over himself/herself while expecting to be compensated by a surplus of freedom to satisfy trivial needs and wishes. Such a liberty for the fulfillment of trivial needs is being declared as freedom. But this implies as well the freedom to choose not to be engaged in any kind of socially sensible or politically articulated struggle. This presents the double structure of the biopolitical.

Today, in the “late stages” of post-Fordist capitalist production, subjectivity is no longer external to the system; neither is cultural industry a mere propagator of capitalist ideology. In that sense, as well as in the case of the double structure of the biopolitical (lack of social responsibility on the one side, surplus of imbecile forms of freedom on the other), the cultural industry functions as the inhibitor of possibilities of thinking about some other social orders, but it also functions as an incubator of rationalization of precisely this social order that sustains the neo-liberal market and, consequently, its regime.

Therefore, the subjectivity, through a mere act of watching, paying attention to (media-generated) images, produces a value of the product/image and produces its own value as emancipated subjectivity. Also, in the sense in which cultural industry does not produce a mere aseptic image, but also produces a purpose for a banal individual need, it makes its collective fantasies a form of social reality. Meaning that media-represented reality now spills back into social reality.

According to Virno, “In the culture industry, it was therefore necessary to maintain a certain space that was informal, not programmed, one which was open to the unforeseen spark, to communicative and creative improvisation: not in order to favor human creativity, naturally, but in order to achieve satisfactory levels of corporate

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productivity.” As he says further, “...in general, everything which it would have been dysfunctional to rigidify and regulate beyond a certain threshold...”

If we understand Virno’s “unforeseen spark” as some kind of common knowledge, some kind of thinking “outside the box,” some expertise that could be subversive to capital in the sense of a refusal to oblige some work ethics, we can understand that this kind of knowledge has been incorporated into the work process by way of transcendence of its Fordist, “serialized,” uniform nature. But, that “unforeseen spark” has also become formalized/made rigid as the incubator of rationalization of the effects of capital. Hence, the “unforeseen spark” does not appear in the form of some radical demand or politics, but is being represented in communication as the construction of an “importance” around completely ephemeral social events.

Love the Regime as You Love Yourself

Therefore, it is not only the mainstream media industry that has been mobilized in order to “familiarize” the famous “crisis” or “recession” to its subjects – the whole culture, communication matrixes, verbal patterns are also those which have been mobilized in a laisser-faire manner in order to rationalize the hierarchy of exploitation that created the “crisis” in the first place.

At first, we have the mere verbalization of the “crisis” as a problem, as something bad, and this first step has been properly made by neo-liberal subjects. Part of this process of rationalization, of familiarization with the regime, are worried faces of the news anchors, dramatic speeches of governmental representatives, TV shows that host recommendations of how to cope with the recession. In the early days of the crisis, neo-liberal media cults, such as Oprah and her show, hosted “economic experts” like Suze Orman who presented her “Recession Action Plan 2009,” where she was explaining how to deal with finances, etc. But recently, the way of coping with the crisis took another shift. In an episode called “Recession-Proof Your Marriage with Gary Neuman,” psychotherapist Neuman advised a young couple on the verge of divorce because of their money problems that their primary problem lies in the communication between the two of them, and not in the lack of money. Therefore, they were advised to work together while being grateful for having each other and that the financial loss could not have damaged the family as much as their splitting up would. One interpretation of this message is in the trace of a return to “family values” which, in Europe, has already resulted in a sharp rise of right and far-right political options, as the elections for the European parliament have shown. However, the other interpretation is the one which sees the very concept of communication in such a utilitarian manner as a means for the rationalization of the effects of capital. Meaning that as a stable family they will produce/consume more than an individual. The very concept of love is here a subject of neo-liberal ideology. The Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, one of the European proto-fascists, some time ago got caught by paparazzi

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2 Paolo Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life, (Semiotext[e], New York, 2004.) p. 59

3 Ibid.
hosting a decadent house party. The far-right prime minister who built his political agenda on the “return to family values” and/or on generally neo-conservative rhetoric was now caught in a very non-family-like activity. However, he is not perceived by the majority of his voters as a hypocrite, but as a potent politician who gets rewarded with votes not because he is a genuinely conservative politician, but because he is not – because he is a proper neo-liberal.

Sarkozy, the other European proto-fascist, was elected not because of his xenophobic, “work, order and discipline” politics, but because it was known he would fail to do it completely. Of course, we are not saying that Sarkozy’s “order and discipline” would be a good thing, to the contrary. Therefore we have a situation in which proto-fascist politics is being made on one side a symptom of a non-existent socially sensible politics, and on the other this same proto-fascist politics is realised as a bunch of imbecile actions that only fit yellow press appetites.

The result of these two examples are that a proper democratic man learns how to be at once be a proto-fascist on one side, and an obedient, freedom-living citizen on the other. Class antagonism is being changed for imbecile antagonisms.

What we are witnessing is an operation of cognitive cleansing (or maybe more precisely cognitive pollution). It is not brainwashing, but it is an operation that makes the proper subjectivity familiarized with the regime. It is a culture that suggests love for the system as love for one’s self as an apolitical idiot and market fundamentalist. As we have said, what is being inhibited on the one side (the political demand to overthrow the whole capitalist system), is on the other side an incubation of a system of rationalizations for the ways in which the fascistic system works.

Another example is the movie Independence Day. This Huntingtonian epic of cognitive cleansing produced in the mid 1990s built its story around evil aliens invading Earth (i.e., the USA). Independence Day is a fascist epic not only because of its radical representation of otherness, but because, in a veiled manner, it attacks the minimums of social sensibility and sanity within common knowledge by attacking some of the epitomes of such sentiments in the form of urban legends. Independence Day features a scene in which protagonists (who represent common people) have been taken to a hidden army base in the so-called Area 51, where they have been allowed to see a captured alien which the army has been experimenting on. Area 51, by the way, has a cult status in conspiracy theories as a place where allegedly secret experiments have been conducted not upon aliens, but upon citizens, and therefore it epitomizes the hidden government agenda that works only for capitalist interests and not for the people.

Independence Day, in the scene mentioned, turned the story upside down, presenting the government as indeed conducting illegal experiments, but only to protect its citizens. It was a kind of pop-cultural preventive means of rationalization that helped to rationalize later concentration camps in Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo Bay.

What is the U.S. government’s excuse for torture? They have been torturing people, but
only to protect its own citizens. What is the excuse for building minorities’ ghettos or transforming minorities into ghettos around Europe, especially Roma people? They are being imprisoned into camps, but only for their own protection. What is the rationalization of the transfer of state money into private hands as a solution to the crisis? It is all for the sake of the people, and so on.

What is happening with the subjectivity between the media representation of reality and social reality? What has been inside now dictates what is outside. As Levinas said, it is “Being before the existent, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it theoretical freedom) before justice. It is a movement within the same before obligation to the other.” But, it does not only mean intrinsic before extrinsic, it means we witness intrinsic without extrinsic, the inner without the outer. As a result, the historical and political context of social struggles, the anticipation and predicament of it, as well as the sense for some universal potential of social change have now successfully been exiled from the cognitive structure of the subject. The only proper frame of reference subjectivity can have is the internal one, the intrinsic one – the one that under the influence of the market gets to be only the frivolous one.

Internal ideation of the external travestied the outer into the inner. What is reproduced as a lie (this lie should be understood as a lie about capital having any purpose but the garbled, distorted one) now becomes the outside truth. Social reality realized itself in neo-liberal capitalism as a true sick man’s dream. To say it in the spirit of the text: Entertainment as the maximum reach of the social potential of the democratic man has transcended and become ontological entertainment, onotainment. Intimate ethical and moral inclinations of subjectivity are not being organized according to some acknowledgment of social antagonisms in the social reality, let’s say about the hierarchies of exploitation, but they are being organized around the egocentric core whose maximum range of reflection is itself. The happiness of such subjectivity does not come from some other, outside acknowledgment, but it comes from the happiness of the system, which pronounces such subjectivity a free and realized person. The epistemological frame of references of the subjectivity acquires the same frame as that of the regime, or maybe an even more garbled, distorted one.

The Ominous Face of a Slave’s Happiness

The regime produces the spectacle, the spectacle produces the regime, and the “social” reality does not produce antagonism, but a surplus of spectacle as the surplus of rationalization of the regime. This contributes only to a particular struggle for certain consumer needs or certain “human rights,” without questioning the totality of production relations inside which the injustices were created in the first place.

Paraphrasing Jacques Rancière, ressentiment turns the logic of cause and effect upside down. Subjectivity for one’s misfortune, for one’s exploitation, does not blame the totality of capitalist production relations, but transforms the lack of that totality into a

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commodity. This is reflected as a need for police security, and not as an overall existential insecurity; it presents a rejection of fundamental mechanisms of social protection in favor of mechanisms for protection of individual security and it is an apology for the defence of a freedom that is ultimately only the freedom to be an apolitical imbecile who will even be enthusiastic when forced to pay for the managerial elites to come out of the “crisis.”

Virno mentioned dysfunctional formalization (making something rigid), but we are talking here about functional deformation or formalization of the dysfunction. Hence, subjectivity forms itself not under the exclusive influence of media-represented reality or under the “influence” of social reality, but forms itself in a short-circuit between these two – in a space where it is not known where one begins and the other ends. In the manner similar as today, where the borders of private and public interests oscillate, the borders in between the public sphere and the market are blurred in neo-liberal capitalism.

Let’s go one step further. If cultural industry has played an important role in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism (and it did), then it is legitimate to claim that a bulk of language-cognitive abilities are non-separable from labor, i.e., that the means of production consist of communication techniques and procedures. These techniques and procedures are those that produce life, everyday communication, the most ordinary gibberish, the trash that can be seen in various tele-votings, in social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and also in public communication. As it is known, it looks like the liberal West is more concerned when some country forbids access to Facebook than when the same country has a couple of million of hungry people.

Value criteria that are being affirmed in frivolous communication are nothing more than tropism that later, in the democratic process of voting, result not in the legitimization of some political option of higher social interest – what gets legitimated is exactly these frivolous tropism as politics, the right to gibber gets to be declared as an ideal of freedom. The culture of communication is, in this case, resentment dislocated into a sphere of gibberish where, instead of gaining the form of social rebellion, revolution, or at least a form of communication where the nature of production would be questioned, it deals with symptoms of that production, i.e., only with the life style.

What is something higher, what is that unheimlich that motivates a need for such a communication, is a mere need for the exposition of someone’s life style as a token of being a political animal. As an example, the mere speed with which someone answers a phone call is directly proportional to someone’s integration into the exploitation matrix, that is, someone’s “emancipation.”

That is freedom, i.e., the freedom to join the spectacle as production process; it is life, which is nothing more than the sharing of experiences that are generated in the spectacle, as a spectacle. Hence, it is not a sharing of experiences acquired through acknowledgment of some social antagonism, of acknowledgment about the organization of exploitation, but presents the sharing of the experience of exploitation as “happiness” because exploitation functions.