

THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME AND FREEDOM IN NEOLIBERAL POST-MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the need for both a Nietzschean and Marxist approach to time and freedom in our contemporary post-modern moment.

KEYWORDS: Time; Freedom; Postmodernity; Nietzsche; Marx

INTRODUCTION

“Postmodernism then, is wary of History but enthusiastic on the whole about history. To historicize is a positive move and History only stands in its way. If postmodern theory really does believe that historicizing is *ipso facto* radical, then it is certainly mistaken. It assumes that historicizing belongs largely on the left, which is by no means the case. You do not need to tell the Edmund Burkes, Michael Oakeshotts and Hans-Georg Gadammers of this world that events can only be understood in their historical contexts. For a whole lineage of liberal or right wing thinkers, a sensitive attunement to historical context, to the cultural moldings of the self, to the subliminal voice of tradition and the force of the local or idiosyncratic, has been a way of discrediting what they take to be the anemic ahistorical rationality of the radicals. Burke’s appeal to prescription, venerable custom and immemorial heritage is in this sense much the same as contemporary pragmatism’s appeal to our received social practices, even if the former is thinking of the House of Lords and the latter of baseball and free enterprise. For

¹ The author would like to thank Marion Trejo, Erik Tate, Douglas Lain, Conrad Hamilton, and Borna Radnik for their early suggestions on this piece. Solidarity.

both schools of thought, history - which comes down to something like ‘the way we happen to do things and have done so for rather a long time’ - is a form of rationality in itself, immeasurably superior to such jejune notions as universal freedom and justice.”²

In 1989 the young Francis Fukuyama published a seminal essay in *The National Interest* with the provocative title “The End of History?” Three years later a book³ with a similar title and the question mark erased appeared, arguing that with the collapse of the Soviet Union liberal capitalism was the only political and economic ideology with global force.⁴ This wasn’t to say that there wouldn’t still be ideological conflict and dispute. Anachronistic ideologies such as Iranian theocracy or the North Korean hermit Stalinism would persist for a while, occasionally sabre rattling in the general direction of the United States and its neoliberal allies. But with the fall of fascism in 1945 and the end of communism in 1989 there was no attractive competitor to (neo)-liberal capitalism which would generate widespread popular support. As Margaret Thatcher opined, economically summarizing the ethos of capitalist realism, there was “no alternative.” Eventually even the anachronisms would be swept away and we would enter a firmly post-historical world, where the biggest political disputes would be Third Way style arguments about what the marginal income tax rate should be. The consequence of this was, as Wendy Brown observes, an undoing of the demos which deepened feelings of powerlessness and resentment even on the part of historically privileged groups.⁵ This would later become crucial to the

² Terry Eagleton. *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) at pg 33

³ Fukuyama was never quite the neoliberal and neoconservative stooge his fiercest critics contended. In his book Fukuyama makes clear that he is unsure that the end of history is a positive development, and even goes on the prophetically warn that the thymotic desire for recognition and glory on the part of the political right may well cause history to restart. In other words his Nietzschean concerns about resentment occasionally outweigh his Kojevian optimism. Fukuyama has recently returned to this theme, and even conceded that he may have been too hard on egalitarian proposals which might have halted the emergence of what I call post-modern conservatism. See Francis Fukuyama. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018)

⁴ Francis Fukuyama. “The End of History.” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989 and Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1992)

⁵ See Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019)

rise of post-modern conservatives like Trump.⁶

Around the same time as Fukuyama was making a name for himself, the discourse around cultural post-modernity was beginning to gain serious traction. While the major thinkers-Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze-associated with post-modern theory had been around for a long time and *The Condition of Postmodernity* was already over a decade old, the late 80s and 90s saw a real blossoming of (mostly Marxist) works analyzing the culture with unparalleled depth and insight. The two most important figures in this respect were Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, who both released classic books on postmodernity within two years of each other.⁷ With hindsight it is easy to see the appeal. With the possibility of socialist emancipation seriously curtailed (at least for now) it became essential to interrogate the new “post-historical” epoch in which faith in meta-narratives like Marxism seemed to have declined. This necessitated a rethinking of how postmodern subjects conceived of time and space; though sadly the latter tended to assume far more theoretical significance under the influence of figures like Foucault, Lefebvre, and even Harvey himself.

In concrete terms, neoliberal postmodernity was characterized by a unique relationship to time which effectively respatialized it along the lines criticized by Bergson in the early 20th century.⁸ Neoliberal subjects adopted a phenomenological and anti-historical time consciousness which eschewed even the reactionary but potentially more complex ecstatic temporalization put forward by figures like Heidegger.⁹ Put another way the hegemonic capitalist realism of neoliberal post-modernity established subjects who felt they were not free to engage in the kind of transformations characteristic of a historical approach to time. Instead respatialized phenomenological approaches to temporality were associated with a conception of freedom which was atomized

⁶ See Matthew McManus. *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics*. (Gowerbestrasse, SW: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019) and Matthew McManus. *What is Post-Modern Conservatism: Essays on Our Hugely Tremendous Times*. (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2019)

⁷ See David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990) and Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991)

⁸ Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001)

⁹ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. trans. Jogn Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1962)

and individualistic. Subjects were free to invent and reinvent themselves as they wished, without even a concern for the more authentic approach demanded by Heideggerian ecstatic time. Conformity to this pattern became so severe that by the 2010s the savviest critical theorists such as Roberto Unger had to call on neoliberal subjects to remember that time existed from the standpoint of natural philosophy.¹⁰

In this paper, I want to explore the consequences of this post-modern time spatialized and phenomenological time consciousness. My argument will be that the conditions of capitalist realism, as interrogated by the (broadly) Marxist tradition, provides a very useful theoretical analytic for understanding this development. However, I will also argue that Marxists have sometimes overestimated the importance of material developments in economic relations and political liberalism in engendering post-modern approaches to time. My contention is that we also need to follow figures like Nietzsche and Charles Taylor in recognizing the importance of secularization in this process. To put it as a slogan, we need to work harder at getting Marx and Nietzsche into bed together. This is because the approach to time characteristic of secularism is fundamentally different from that which defined an earlier epoch; something commentators like Walter Benjamin were well aware of in their occasionally Messianic approach to history.¹¹ With secularism the Platonic conception of time as the unreal “moving image of eternity” gave way to an understanding that our individualized experience of temporality was phenomenologically extended towards death. This helped explain the attraction of existential philosophies, including sophisticated iterations like Heidegger’s, which ultimately helped lay the reactionary ground for the spatialized approach to time seen in neoliberal post-modernity. A pseudo-expressivist ethic of “self-creation” through one-dimensional consumerism took the place of both our self-conception as God’s children participating in his eternal plan, and as historical actors capable of using our freedom and reflection to change the world.

¹⁰ Roberto Unger and Lee Smolin. *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time: A Proposal in Natural Philosophy*. (Cambridge, UK Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Matthew McManus. “Science, Philosophy, and the Return of Time: Reflections on Speculative Thought.” *Cosmos and History*, Vol 13 (3), December 2017

¹¹ See Walter Benjamin. “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York, NY: First Mariner Books, 2019)

THE END OF HISTORY AND ITS FALTERING RESPONSES

The conception of time operating in the early Fukuyama's capitalist realism is rather complex, drawing as it does from a Kojevian interpretation of right Hegelianism, Nietzsche, and neoliberal triumphalist progressivism. In the final chapter of *The End of History and the Last Man* it tries to reconcile a number of these theoretical tensions in a manner that is ultimately unsatisfactory; even to the author himself as it turned out. On the one hand Fukuyama links Kojev's controversial interpretation of Hegel to the claim that history ended with the triumph of neoliberalism in 1989. Fukuyama drew on a combination of empirical data on the ascendancy of liberal democracy in the period-part of the so called third wave of democratization-and combined it with more speculative claims about fascism and communism being the only plausible remaining competitors to liberalism.¹² With the decline and fall of its final competitor on the left, the way was clear for neoliberalism to be the only game in town, thus giving a right-Hegelian idealist gloss to a progressive liberal teleology with roots going back to early modernity. On this conception historical time was simply an inexorable process of economic and geopolitical competition whose end result was never in question given neoliberalism's coincidence with rationality and thus the real itself. However, as is often the case the dark underside of Fukuyama's thinking revealed the dialectical contradiction at the center of the idealist edifice. Even in the preceding essay Fukuyama recognized that the individualized experience of temporality as a horizon for personal accomplishment was being foreclosed by the end of history. The consequence would be a Jamesonian nostalgia for the return of historical time where there were genuine possibilities for recognition and struggle.¹³ Post-modern conservatives would ultimately be the ones driven by this nostalgia to firmly restart history out of a desire for identity solidification through struggle and the recognition of authoritarian parodies like Orban and Trump.

“The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be

¹² To be fair to him, Fukuyama was hardly the only conservative leaning critic to centralize this tripartite antagonism. See Patrick Deneen. *Why Liberalism Failed*. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2018) at pg 5

¹³ See Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991)

replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed. Such nostalgia, in fact, will continue to fuel competition and conflict even in the post-historical world for some time to come.”¹⁴

Despite this serious wrinkle, as Žižek often pointed out, we all became vulgar Fukuyamaists for a time. Even political radicals put away their swords and conceded that the time had come to develop new “third ways” to get past a fundamental antagonism with hegemonic neoliberalism. In lieu of transformative structuralist change, various forms of what Harvey called “militant particularism” became the vanguard of radical politics.¹⁵ Militant particularism was very much enmeshed within the post-historical consensus, conceiving of radicalism as form of ironic dissociation from a status quo which was largely impenetrable. The goal of radical politics became to engage in a kind of performative mockery of traditionalist gender roles¹⁶ or to humanize the neoliberal global order to the extent possible.¹⁷ Even post-Marxists determined to hold on to some of the old ambitions acknowledged the need to drop the overdetermined categories associated with historical time, whether we are talking about the working class or even society itself.¹⁸ These movements were all integral to keeping the spark alive and not ceding the longing for historical time exclusively to reactionaries. They also produced profound gains for marginalized groups and peoples, ensuring their acceptance by and eventual inclusion within neoliberal politics. This was a tremendous accomplishment and I by no means wish to belittle it, as some socialists are prone to doing. But none of these

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989 at pgs 17-18

¹⁵ David Harvey. *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) from pgs 32-45.

¹⁶ See Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1991). Socialist feminists often criticized this position for its lack of a hard edge. See Catherine MacKinnon. “Points Against Postmodernism.” *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, Vol 25, June 2000

¹⁷ I think leftists are often too harsh towards Habermas who has a great deal to teach us. None the less his work does occasionally assume this overly cautious air. See Jürgen Habermas. *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2012)

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Second Edition*. (London, UK. Verso Press, 2014)

movements resolved the fundamental problem of a yearning for historical time and the possibility of genuinely exercising freedom to remake the world along more egalitarian lines.

The conservative reaction to the end of history and historical time and the advent of neoliberal history was to provide an ideological supplement in the form of neoconservatism.¹⁹ As Corey Robin observed, neoconservatives welcomed the fall of the Soviet Union as an opportunity for the unbridled exercise of American power.²⁰ But they also feared that unadulterated neoliberal materialism and cosmopolitanism would bring about a moral decline in the martial spirits of the American and other Western peoples.²¹ This anxiety was by no means unfounded given the ambition of neoliberals like Hayek²² were to overcome struggle and demands for the politics characteristic of historical time through the subordination of the demos²³ to domestic and international law. None the less neoconservatives had little interest in dismantling or challenging liberal capitalism, as their post-modern conservative progeny were. This was partly out of residual Cold War animosity and partly out of a real commitment to the hierarchies and power relations established in competitive neoliberal societies, which were often glamorized with appeals to Straussian elitism. War outside was to a necessary excess in order to stabilize a potentially decadent liberal order within. The neoliberal rights to property and entrepreneurial subjectivity-tied to an insistence that you Enjoy! even the feeling of wanting something- had to be linked to a classical sense of martial responsibilities. The language of the 2000 *Project for a New American Century Report* on rearmament is telling. The neoconservative authors brush aside the claim that Americans should just “relax and live the good life” without confronting-or creating-new crises to face.

“In other words, until another great power challenger emerges, the United States can enjoy a respite from the demands of international leadership. Like a boxer

¹⁹ In the sense described by Žižek. See Slavoj Žižek. *The Plague of Fantasies*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 1997)

²⁰ See also my book Matthew McManus. *The Political Right and Equality: Turning Back the Tide of Egalitarian Modernity*. (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2024)

²¹ Corey Robin. *The Reactionary Mind-Second Edition: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018) at pgs 202-206

²² See F.A Hayek. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

²³ Wendy Brown’s commentary on this point is far and away the best. See Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019) and Wendy Brown. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015)

between championship bouts, America can afford to relax and live the good life, certain that there would be enough time to shape up for the next big challenge. Thus the United States could afford to reduce its military forces, close bases overseas, halt major weapons programs and reap the financial benefits of the “peace dividend.” But as we have seen over the past decade, there has been no shortage of powers around the world who have taken the collapse of the Soviet empire as an opportunity to expand their own influence and challenge the American-led security order.”²⁴

In other words peace and prosperity were the harbingers of decline and fall. To preserve the existing order it was necessary to project the antagonistic and chaos inducing other who would present the appearance of history restarting while paradoxically stabilizing capitalist realism at home. In this respect neoconservatism is consonant with the paradigm of liberal imperialist adventurism, which includes a long genealogy of Conradian harlequins from Disraeli through Kipling and Bush. At its peak neoconservatism prefaced the emergence of post-modern conservatism, with its insistence on conserving neoliberalism as home through transforming reality abroad. The post-modern simulacrum of history was to be maintained as a kind of hyperreal sport conducted by militarists in the developing world.²⁵ Karl Rove’s infamous dismissal of the “reality-based community” and his insistence that “we’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality” is telling.²⁶

Of course, in the end this neoconservative supplementation of neoliberalism was doomed to failure, as it turned out that reality has a way of biting back. It turned out that the post-modern simulacrum of history was not as pleasant when it started to resemble the real deal too much, with the deaths of hundreds of

²⁴ The Project for the New American Century. “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century.” September 2000 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130817122719/http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>

²⁵ This is naturally a reference to the work of Jean Baudrillard, a thinker of genius who contributed more than any other to our understanding of post-modernity. However, I differ with him on whether the war on terror constituted a genuine historical moment in a sense that broke from the closure of capitalist realism. See Jean Baudrillard. *The Spirit of Terrorism*. (London, UK: Verso Press, 2012)

²⁶ Ron Suskind. “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush.” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2004

thousands and calls for the prosecution of the Bush regime and its cronies.²⁷ Neoconservatism's efforts to upend the anomie of the end of history through imperial adventurism failed, contributing to a genuine historical shift within neoliberal societies with the emergence of post-modern conservatism. In a strange way the end of neoconservatism and the ongoing nostalgic desire for recognition and power contributed to declining conservative support for liberalism itself. Without the possibility of bombing more Arab countries reactionaries were forced to return chastened to the realm of domestic xenophobia. This was highly appealing in an era of capitalist realism where neoliberal subjects had to be content with the pleasures of mere phenomenological time.

CAPITALIST REALISM AND THE DESCENT INTO PHENOMENOLOGICAL TIME

The ideological insistence that there was no alternative to the neoliberal end of historical time was vindicated by ineffectiveness on the part of the political left and violent but impotent²⁸ reaction and simulacrum on the political right. This contributed a great deal to the emergence of what Mark Fisher called capitalist realism in his classic book of the same name. *Capitalist Realism* opens with the unforgettable claim that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Hollywood films endlessly present various forms of catastrophe which end the human race, whether due to environmental disasters, disease, or infertility. But as Jameson might observe, these new forms of science fiction catastrophizing all lack the utopian and transformative quality of their more radical predecessors for whom the future of historical time was open to revision and egalitarian justice.²⁹ The dour quality of films like *Children of Men* signified our resignation to unfreedom in the ahistorical 21st century. In this context the closest we could get to historical time was the nostalgic transformation of once living cultures into deadened museum commodities. As Fisher put it:

“We do not need to wait for *Children of Men*'s near-future to arrive to see this

²⁷ See Amy Bartholomew. *Empire's Law: The American Imperial Project and the 'War to Remake the World.'* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2006)

²⁸ In the Arendtian sense of aspiring to impotent bigness.

²⁹ See Fredric Jameson. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions.* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2005)

transformation of culture into museum pieces. The power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence' which can assign all cultural object, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary values...In the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are objectively ironized, transformed into artifacts. Capitalist realism is therefore not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself."³⁰

Fisher's eerie portrait is indicative of the frozen nature of the end of history. The more humanist young Marx stressed the freedom capacity of labor to transform both external and human nature, a position that becomes less individuated as Marx emphasized how historically instantiated material conditions shared by all were determinative of our conscious thoughts and praxis.³¹ On this analysis our creative capacity was gradually becoming flattened under capitalist conditions, despite the tremendous increase in our productive potential through technology, necessitating a historical transition to a higher and more emancipated form of society. But with historical time foreclosed such a possibility will never emerge. The consequence would be the final triumph of one-dimensional man, whose creative freedom was going to become gradually compressed by the determinancy of neoliberal conditions.³² As Jameson points out an increasing volume of labor remains appropriated by capital under such conditions. Unfortunately our only creative forms of resistance assume a calcified quality, since we have to draw on the cultural objects of dated historical periods rather than developing our own. We gradually lose the ability to generate aesthetic and political novelty with the end of historical time, and have to make-due with nostalgia.³³ The post-modern cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism is content to recycle the past because there is no longer any future. As Fisher would

³⁰ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009) at pg 4

³¹ The reference to a young humanist Marx is of course drawn from Althusser. Louis Althusser. *For Marx*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 2006) from pgs 49-86. This was later contrasted with the apparently scientific Marx of *Capital*. See Louis Althusser. *Reading Capital*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 1997)

³² See Herbert Marcuse. *One Dimensional Man*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964)

³³ See Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) and Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*, Vol 146, 1984

point out, it has been cancelled and we remain haunted by its undead ghosts.³⁴

There are several dimensions to this which contribute to the problem. One is the spread of new technologies, particularly communicative technologies such as digital media and the internet, increasingly emphasized what Virilio would call speed and Postman entertainment or amusement.³⁵ In earlier generations the technical need for literacy as a competitive edge spurred the extension of universal public education for all, generating a literate working and middle class which helped constitute the bourgeois public sphere. These literate groups primarily absorbed print information which at least had the virtue of highlighting a degree of complexity; albeit often in a highly ideological fashion.³⁶ In the 21st century as we move ever close to a hyper-real media diet characterized by manic partisanship and a retreat from complexity is deepens the challenge of generating creative and emancipatory material.³⁷ Also important are the ways law and biopolitical institutions establish certain forms of neoliberal subjectivity. This was of course the complex critique³⁸ discussed by Foucault and generations of Foucauldians, who emphasized the need to understand neoliberalism not merely by analyzing foundationalist relations and forces of production but also how the multifaceted forms of power establish subjects who order the world in a disciplined manner.³⁹ These subjects would be limited in their capacity to develop new aesthetics of selfhood.

But I think as important as these developments was the advent of a new form of time consciousness at the post-modern end of history. With the purported end

³⁴ See Mark Fisher. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*. (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014)

³⁵ Paul Virilio. *The Information Bomb*, trans. (London, UK: Verso Books, 2006) and Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (New York, NY: Penguin University Press, 2005)

³⁶The classic work on this subject is Habermas'. See Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1991)

³⁷ See Baudrillard, Jean. *Screened Out*. (London: Verso Press, 2014) and Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Fraser Glaser. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994)

³⁸ Many Marxist critics have pointed out that Foucault's approach to neoliberalism could be surprisingly positive, which have led some to criticize not just his analysis but also to triumphantly declare that this proves the reactionary bent to Foucauldian theory generally. I do not share this view, but do agree that Foucault's theorizing on power needs to be supplemented by Marxist points. This is an argument made by Hunt. See Alan Hunt. "Getting Marx and Foucault Into Bed Together." *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol 31, Dec 2004

³⁹ See Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell. (New York: Picador, 2008)

of historical time neoliberal subjects found themselves in an unusual situation. Neoliberal subjects were governed by an ideology which increasingly stressed an atomized form of self-expression-almost inevitably tied to consumption-and even authenticity which was seen as consonant with capitalist individualism. Hayek, Friedman and the other neoliberals were very explicit about the connection they saw between capitalism and freedom; even conflating the two in various works.⁴⁰ But this was to be freedom understood in a very specific manner; it was to be ahistorical and exercised within the purview of a personalized temporality. This meant that individuals were given considerable formal freedom, though not the material resources, needed to make something of the time of their lives. But with the end of historical time that meant what Axel Honneth would call the civic freedom we require to change the conditions in which they lived would be entirely precluded.⁴¹ This would solidify the conditions of capitalist realism. If ideological hegemony didn't function to destroy any conception of historical time and civic freedom law and governance would finish the job.

Under these conditions the appropriate form of time consciousness to develop was a phenomenological one. I do not mean by this that neoliberal subjects suddenly gravitated to the complex philosophy of Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger, though there is of course a relation between the two.⁴² Rather they

⁴⁰ See Milton Friedman. *Capitalism and Freedom: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman. *Free To Choose: A Personal Statement*. (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1980)

⁴¹ Honneth discusses the Berlinian distinction between negative and positive liberty and observes that it is missing a key third form. Both negative and positive liberty ultimately relate to the individual's personal capacities to do what they wish in their own life. Civic freedom relates to our capacity, alongside others, to establish the kind of society we wish to share. See Axel Honneth. *Freedom's Right: the Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016) at pgs 29-30. Honneth later responds to criticism that this book was insufficiently radical by associating civic freedom with calls for a renewal of the socialist project. See Axel Honneth. *The Idea of Socialism*. (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2017)

⁴² Some might wonder at the status of Kant in this discussion, given the role he played in formulating liberal conceptions of time in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and other works. Certainly Bergson holds Kant at least partly responsible for the spatialized time consciousness characteristic of 20th century modernity, in which case we might say the same about its more generalized instantiation in neoliberal post-modernity. However I think we should be very cautious in rushing to such a conclusion. Goldmann in particular warns that Kantianism was foundational to the emergence of dialectical approaches to history, and hence an early proponent of historical time. This would seem in keeping with Kant's own work on Enlightenment and the need to bring about conditions amenable to the emancipated use of reason in recreating the world. See Lucien Goldmann. *Immanuel Kant*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 2011)

came to understand time as the horizon for personalized and collective experience in which meaning was generated in and by our ideological understanding of past and projected into a future which would differ little from the present. It was phenomenological in the sense of eschewing historical dialectics and materialism in lieu of a reactionary emphasis on personal and communal experience.⁴³ Consequently, and despite the calls of Heidegger and others for a more holistic or “ecstatic”⁴⁴ time consciousness, neoliberal temporality typically remained highly spatialized in the sense described by Bergson⁴⁵ in his classic *Time and Free Will*.⁴⁶ Bergson describes this process, and its consequences for our sense of freedom and reflection very well.

“We have been present at the deliberation of the self in all its phases until the act was performed: then recapitulating the terms of the series, we perceived succession under the form of simultaneity, we project time into space, and we base our reasoning, consciously or unconsciously, on this geometrical figure. But this figure represents a thing and not a progress; it corresponds, in its inertness, to a kind of stereotyped memory of the whole process of deliberation and the final decision arrived at: how could it give us the least idea of the concrete movement, the

⁴³ This is perhaps why even reactionary critics of neoliberalism and its permissiveness eschew discussion of dialectics and emancipation for references to “historical empiricism” and hence traditionalism and the retrenchment of associated hierarchies. Perhaps the most notable figure in this respect is Yoram Hazony, who coined the term historical empiricism in his calls for a “conservative democracy.” See Yoram Hazony, “Conservative Democracy,” *First Things*, January 2019. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/01/conservative-democracy>

⁴⁴ See Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. trans. Jogn Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1962). Heidegger’s conception of ecstatic time is distinct from Bergson’s emphasis on duration: a point which he himself was keen to make. He was also highly critical of capitalist and communist modernity, seeing both as enamored in a metaphysics of technical thinking. Ecstatic time was meant to emphasize the holism of a human life and redirect our attention onto authenticity. The problem with this position was of course how readily it can be turned to reactionary purposes. One can readily see modernity as radically fallen from a prior period of more embedded existence, and consequently come to reject both the future and the present for the past. And of course Heidegger did make exactly this choice circa his involvement with the Nazi party. This was at the root of Adorno and Horkheimer’s pioneering critique of Heideggerian thinking and the “jargon of authenticity?”. Whether elements of Heidegger’s theory of ecstatic time can be retrieved from this negative association is a question I will leave aside for now.

⁴⁵ My endorsing the critical dimensions of Bergson’s argument should not be seen as accepting his theory of duration and freedom. This is in part because I feel it remains insufficiently dialectical, and hence lacking the theoretical power needed to restore a firm conception of historical time. That said it is quite likely that any such restorative effort would need to engage whole heartedly with his work.

⁴⁶ See Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) at pg 101

dynamic progress by which the deliberation issued in the act.”⁴⁷

This describes the phenomenological spatialization of time consciousness in neoliberalism very well, particularly in its discussion of a kind of pseudo-progress which is ultimately inert and the final decision or state predetermined before we even live within duration. For most neoliberal subjects, time presented itself as a set of moments where living a free life meant bringing the past into the present to create the future in a manner which was personally satisfying. It assumed a delineated quality where the goal was to continuously move from one experience to another, always competing with others to reach an end status at the summit of personal wealth and power. Our experiences in the past became discrete forms of social capital to be operationalized in the present for our future advantage as neoliberal subjects. This also had an impact on our productive life the kinds of commodities being produced and made available to consumers came to reflect the new time consciousness.⁴⁸ As was well articulated by David Harvey in his classic *The Condition of Postmodernity*:

“In the realm of commodity production, the primary effect has been to emphasize the values and virtues of instantaneity (instant and fast foods, meals, and other satisfactions) and of disposability (cups, plates, cutlery, packaging, napkins, clothing, etc) The dynamics of a ‘throwaway’ society...began to become evident during the 1960s. It meant more than just throwing away produced goods (creating a monumental waste-disposal problem), but also being able to throw away values, life-styles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being. These were the immediate and tangible ways in which the “accelerative thrust in the larger society” crashed up against the

⁴⁷ Ibid at pgs 180-181

⁴⁸ An attempted radicalization of Bergson has of course been carried out before by Deleuze, who drew heavily on the former’s theory of duration when discussing the potential for freedom within societies of control. His positions are very interesting, but a contrast between the perspective sketched out here and Deleuze’s thinking goes beyond the scope of this paper. But my general argument is that Deleuze goes too far in trying to ignore the Kantian and thence Hegelian subject in developing what is essentially a pre-dialectical metaphysics. This has its virtues but ignores the epistemological and political problems association with such classicism. See Gilles Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990) and Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). My reading of Deleuze owes much to Todd May’s exceptionally lucid exegesis. See Todd May. *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

“ordinary daily experience of the individual!”⁴⁹

To the extent we shared a non-spatialized communal consciousness of time which provided a sense of meaning beyond the one-dimensional expressivism of consumerism and competition, it was an inherently reactionary one. Since we lacked a consciousness of historical time oriented around future emancipation, we were committed to the museum like ransacking of the past to establish a shared sense of identity and meaning in the here and now. There was little sense that we could develop new and more emancipated subject identities by changing conditions and bringing about a brighter shared tomorrow. The consequence is that post-modern conservatism ala Trump, Orban and Bolsonaro came to be conceived as the most radical gesture available as a reaction against neoliberalism. But like most forms of reaction, it is ultimately an impotent gesture which is fundamentally beholden to what it seeks to reject. Post-modern conservatism does not break from the phenomenological time consciousness of the neoliberal period, since it rejects any emancipatory movement towards a new historical future. The resurrection of a sincere consciousness of historical time would suggest genuine transformation, which is antithetical to its pathology and political ambitions. Instead post-modern conservatism merely provided an ideological supplement to the spatialized time consciousness characteristic experienced phenomenologically by the atomized individual subject. It does this by enabling a nostalgia driven fusion of meaningful communal horizons centered on an imaginary past where it could cause no fundamental harm to the functioning of capital.⁵⁰ The result is the creation of pastiche like reactionary identities in the present, which vampire-like draw meaning from the museum of cultural artifacts past.⁵¹

⁴⁹ David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990) at 286

⁵⁰ The term fusion of horizons is of drawn from Gadamer. See Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Method, 2013) at pg 317. Habermas most notably criticized Gadamer for being a closet conservative; a charge which the latter rejected. For Gadamer, sharing a past is the only way to begin conceiving of a different future together. While I largely agree, how this could be carried out was never particularly well explained by Gadamer in his major works. For an overview of this debate see Thomas McArthy. *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978) pgs 187-193.

⁵¹ For a more extensive but earlier discussion of these issues see Matthew McManus. *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture, and Reactionary Politics*. (Gewerbstrasse, SW: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019) and Matthew McManus. *What is Post-Modern Conservatism: Essays on Our Hugely Tremendous Times*. (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2020)

These forms of time consciousness characteristic of post-modernity fundamentally preclude any return to historical time, and hence the freedom to change the world Marx called for in the “Theses on Feuerbach.”⁵² The spatialized phenomenology of time characteristic of pure neoliberal subjects is so resolutely broken into personalized moments complemented by a one dimensional expressivist ethic that any chance of thinking historically is thin. Post-modern conservatism does deviate from this atomistic phenomenology to a degree, but only for reactionary purposes. Unable to conceive of any genuine transformation of the current moment, it compensates by ransacking the past. Any meaning carried forward is inevitably bastardized by the nostalgic parody embodied in the pastiche of reactionary identity. However the proper dialectical approach is not to simply be critical of this development but to recognize its emancipatory potential. The fact that neoliberal subjects increasingly and overtly long for the kind of meaning⁵³ that only comes with moving away from spatialized and individualistic time showcases that it is increasingly possible to break the fetters of capitalist realism at the end of history.

How to accomplish this lofty goal in practice goes well beyond the purview of a theoretical essay, and relates to a number of questions which academics are almost always especially unqualified to answer. For the remainder of this essay I will suggest how we can begin to retheorize historical time through a friendly critique of the Marxist tradition. While Marx and his followers accomplished a tremendous deal in highlighting the need to develop a historical time consciousness under the conditions of modernity, they put too much emphasis on

⁵²Karl Marx. *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1992) at pgs 421-424

⁵³ This longing for meaning may help explain the popularity of figures like Jordan Peterson. He offers the possibility of a Messianic vindication of the present through the restoration of past glories. Such will restore a sense of meaning to life in a period which seems increasingly devoid of it. This of course cannot occur by trying to change the world, since we must always focus inward at trying to become better iterations of ourselves under conservative socio-economic conditions. That those same socio-economic conditions may have contributed to loss of meaning isn't interrogated very extensively by Peterson. Like most traditionalists he is all too willing to insulate his favored sacred cows from truly comprehensive or total criticisms. See Jordan Peterson. *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999) and Jordan Peterson. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. (Toronto, ON. Random House Canada, 2018) for summations of his work. For a critical look see our forthcoming book *Myth and Mayhem: A Leftist Critique of Jordan Peterson* with the outlet Zero Books.

how changing material conditions would ultimately produce the desired result. With the disappointments of the 20th century still fresh, we must try to do better. One way to start is by taking more seriously the thinking of Nietzsche, who was the other greater historical analyst of the 19th century. Getting Marx and Nietzsche into bed together means taking more seriously the impact secularization has played in generating post-modern culture and its distinctly reactionary forms of time consciousness. This will ultimately entail demonstrating a little Weberian infidelity to strict materialism by highlighting the impact of ideas on time consciousness. The gain may well be a richer understanding of both post-modernity's time consciousness and how to overcome its limitations in and for the future.

GETTING MARX AND NIETZSCHE INTO BED TOGETHER ON TIME

“The members of the political state are religious owing to the dualism between individual life and species-life, between the life of civil society and political life. They are religious because men treat the political life of the state, an area beyond their real individuality, as if it were their true life. They are religious insofar as religion here is the spirit of civil society, expressing the separation and remoteness of man from man. Political democracy is Christian since in it man, not merely one man but everyman, ranks as *sovereign*, as the highest being, but it is man in his uncivilized, unsocial form, man in his fortuitous existence, man just as he is, man as he has been corrupted by the whole organization of our society, who has lost himself, been alienated, and handed over to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements – in short, man who is not yet a *real* species-being. That which is a creation of fantasy, a dream, a postulate of Christianity, *i.e.*, the sovereignty of man – but man as an alien being different from the real man – becomes, in democracy, tangible reality, present existence, and secular principle. In the perfect democracy, the religious and theological consciousness itself is in its own eyes the more religious and the more theological because it is apparently without political significance, without worldly aims, the concern of a disposition that shuns the world, the expression of intellectual narrow-mindedness, the product of arbitrariness and fantasy, and because it is a life that is really of the other world. Christianity attains, here, the *practical* expression of its universal-religious significance in that the most diverse world outlooks are grouped alongside one another in the form of Christianity and still more because it does not require other people to profess Christianity, but only religion in general, any kind of religion. The religious consciousness revels in the wealth of religious contradictions and religious diversity.”

KARL MARX, “ON THE JEWISH QUESTION:”

Marxism proper began with a deep analysis of religion and ended by all too frequently ignoring it. While Marx himself was interested in secularization⁵⁴ and its consequences, his characterization of religion as the “opiate of the masses” under capitalism has long generated a sense of it as a largely secondary concern. This carried down to the work of many theorists of neoliberal postmodernity, including greats like Harvey and Jameson in their respective big books on the topic. In their dense and staggeringly complex treatments of the subject one rarely sees any engagement with the dialectic of secularization. The same is true today when even as brilliant a critical theorist as Wendy Brown can largely dismiss interest in religion even while invoking Nietzsche to describe contemporary forms of nihilism and resentment.⁵⁵ Fortunately things have begun to change and major thinkers like Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou have begun to take the impact of religion more seriously than previous materialists. This concluding section is my own (brief) contribution to a positive trend in critical theorizing.

The dialectic of secularization arguably begins in the Enlightenment and finds its earliest expressions in the work of Kant, Hegel, and then the various left Hegelian critiques of Christianity. Since then it has assumed variably triumphalist and apocalyptic forms, or in the case of Nietzsche both triumphalist and

⁵⁴ Marx’s own conception of the pre-secular era’s time consciousness is rather vague, though something might be gleaned from his early writings especially and filled out with a sensitive look at Hegel. His analysis of Epicurus and Democritus as early as Marx’s thesis showcases not just a latent materialism, but a deep commitment to the philosophy of contingency and change embodied in their anti-Parmenidean sentiments. The same is true of his invocation of Aristotle over Plato, with the former being friendlier to the material world of change than the latter. Under the influence of Feuerbach Marx seems to have concluded that religion services a vital social need in the postulation of a transcendent and eternal resolution to the alienation characteristic of temporal modernity. The problem was that this solution took place only within the realm of ideas while leaving the material conditions ultimately determinative of alienation in place. One might therefore follow Žižek’s radical Christian reading of Hegel in saying that Marx wanted to accomplish in historical time what religion claimed to do in eternity, but really only accomplished ideologically—establish a community of equals oriented by fraternity and love. The irony then, as Žižek observes, is that atheistic Marxism becomes the full realization of the Christian promise of realizing eternity within time. See Slavoj Žižek. *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 2014) at pgs 147-148.

⁵⁵ See Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019) at pgs 163-164.

apocalyptic. The Hegelian critique strikes me as the most important and salient when it comes to understanding the time consciousness of both the religious and secular ages; particularly as articulated in the work of contemporary figures like Charles Taylor and Robert Brandom. Brandom's recent book, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of the Phenomenology of Spirit*, distinguishes between the pre-modern, modern, and now post-modern ages of spirit. While Brandom rarely discusses time consciousness or secularization directly, much can be gleaned from his pioneering analytic reading of Hegel. This is especially true if synthesized with Taylorian insights.

From a Hegelian perspective pre-modernity's time consciousness was fundamentally static. Time was effectively the moving image of eternity, and all entities ultimately participated within a closed loop. This was of course Plato's position, which continues to inform various totalizing and reactionary metaphysics to this day.⁵⁶ The consequence of this, as Brandom observes, is that our sense of meaning came to be externalized in an alienated fashion.⁵⁷ The world of time was ultimately meaningless and even unreal matter in motion. It was only given significance through its relationship to the transcendent and eternal world of the forms, of the divine prime mover. The immanence of historical time could never grant the same significance. The antiquarian view of time and its relationship to meaning took the form of belief in miraculous developments where eternity exposed itself in time, as though the divine intervention of the Greek pantheon in human affairs. The consequence was that human freedom could signify nothing since the only meaningful actions could not occur within time, but only by the intervention of what was eternal within time. Hence most Greek histories were stories of the rise and fall of empires and heroic individuals; the Oedipal myth so beloved by Freud being representative as the son kills the father to assume his crown and is in turn consumed by decay and age. In their own age these narratives resonated significantly, though in the 20th

⁵⁶ Unger and Smolin criticize contemporary philosophies of nature for this residual Platonism in their book on the "reality" of time. They argue that we need to take the existence of time more seriously to fully understand nature, as well as to better recognize our own capacity for freed. See Roberto Unger and Lee Smolin. *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time: A Proposal in Natural Philosophy*. (Cambridge, UK Cambridge University Press, 2014)

⁵⁷ See Robert Brandom. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019) at pgs 500-538

century we recognized that such a form of time consciousness had dangerous reactionary qualities ala Spengler.

The Christian epoch occupied an unusual middle position between this classical time consciousness and the modern and now post-modern time consciousness. Drawing on Greek thinking as it did, scholastics often agreed that time was the moving image of an eternity apprehended by God. But they made the radical claim that God did not simply intervene miraculously at points. Instead his agapeic love for creation compelled God to engage in a form of self-alienation by becoming human and existing for a finite period of time and thence dying.⁵⁸ The holy spirit then descended from heaven to establish the community of believers. Hegel's point is that this mythology demonstrates a key fact about the relationship of human time and freedom. The idea of a transcendent eternal world still persists, but the meaning it provides through freedom is now permanently embedded in the human world of time. What characterizes the turn to modernity, especially in Kant, is the final dissolution of the transcendent eternal world as an ideological fantasy. Freedom and meaning become historical; it is now up to us to realize concretely what was previously only existent outside the temporal world. With this development the dialectical process comes not to an end, but to a self-conscious awareness as the philosophy of history. Human beings make the world, and our civic freedom enables us to remake seemingly naturalized institutions in a manner open to our needs and interests. As Brandom puts it:

“Where for the Greeks the norms had been part of the natural world, for Faith they are part of the supernatural world. But that is a specific difference within general agreement that norms are grounded in ontology and matters of fact, in something about how the world just is antecedently to its having human being and their practical attitudes in it. Those norms and their bindingness are not understood as products of human attitudes and activity, though they in fact are instituted by people acting according to the pure consciousness of faith. Believers institute these norms by their attitudes, but they do not understand themselves as doing that. Faith has not embraced the fundamental, defining insight of modernity: the attitude-

⁵⁸ Schelling has a similar though darker interpretation of this process which has become increasingly popular. I discuss this in my paper on the topic. See F.W.J Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt. (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2006) and Matthew McManus. “Science, Philosophy, and the Return of Time: Reflections on Speculative Thought.” *Cosmos and History*, Vol 13 (3), December 2017

dependence of normative statuses.”⁵⁹

What Hegel intended us to take away from this conception of historical time consciousness is a matter for serious debate. According to liberals like Brandom, right Hegelians like Roger Scruton, and even post-modern conservatives like Peter Lawler, we are moving towards an age of trust where the alienation and conflict of modernity will eventually be mollified through sound institutions and the generation of affective attachments and tradition.⁶⁰ For Marxists, we must recognize that a historical time consciousness needs to be married to a materialist recognition of the ongoing contradictions of contemporary society. Neoliberal and conservative reactions hope to end history through transcendental institutionalism and idealist traditionalism, when the real problems of alienation persist. What I would argue is we need to recognize the more disturbing dimensions of this historical time consciousness recognized by figures like Nietzsche to understand the dark elements of secularization. This can in turn help explain why neoliberal and post-modern conservative time consciousness becomes appealing as an ideological escape from the burdens of historical time.

Nietzsche famously posited that secularism’s conception of history was disgustingly sunny in its expectation that there were historical fixes to the nihilism brought about by desacralization. Once the transcendent eternal world was erased, we were left with just this world to create and recreate as we will through the application of human freedom. What we failed to recognize was that the fall of the eternal not only lost us transcendence, but also the relation to something beyond ourselves in this life which was characteristic of Christianity. The consequence was an enormous sense of loss for many of us which expressed itself in the impotent efforts to retain Christian morality in a godless world.⁶¹ From a Nietzschean perspective, Marx was wrong to think that with the end of religion we would be forced for the first time to firmly confront the real material conditions determining our alienation. In fact with the death of God we were

⁵⁹ See Robert Brandom. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019) at pg 533

⁶⁰ Peter Augustine Lawler. *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought*. (Lanham, MA: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1999)

⁶¹ The famous passages on the epistemic and ontological uncertainty accompanying the death of God are telling. See Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science: With A Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix in Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York, NY: Random House, 1974) at pg 108

thrown so irrevocably into a world oversaturated with time that nothing was permanent, everything changed before it even had the chance to be one thing or another, and all essence was withdrawn. In other words without both the eternal world and the relation to it which provided meaning we were left with the absolute freedom of radical temporal contingency. For the superman, this created a sense of exhilaration unmatched before. As Taylor puts it:

“The dawning sense in modern times that we are in a meaningless universe, that our most cherished meaning find no endorsement in the cosmos, or in the will of God, has often been described as a traumatic loss, a second and definitive expulsion from paradise. But in Nietzsche’s portrayal, virtually a hymn of praise, we sense another reaction: exhilaration. It is partly the very spectacle of immensity and power, but there is also the almost giddy sense that in this massive turbulence, all meaning is up to us. This can appear as the ultimate emancipation, freeing us from all exogenous significance.”⁶²

Taylor’s summation is well put, but misses the dimensions of Nietzsche’s thinking which are more pessimistic about the nihilistic future before us. Emancipation from eternity means absolute freedom in time. But freedom to do what? To be what? For Nietzsche there could be no more answers provided which did not inevitably assume an ideological form, often masking deep rooted feelings of resentment at our own powerlessness which would be projected on the powerful. In other words our problems had to be dealt with existentially and individually, necessitating a genealogical rather than a dialectical approach to history.⁶³ This would not provide a sense of what was meaningful but instead an account of how our very conceptions of meaning, including the socialist theories of history, were actually pathological demonstrations of our unwillingness to face the truth of nihilistic time.

CONCLUSION: POST-MODERN CONSERVATISM AS THE PRODUCT OF NEOLIBERAL TIME CONSCIOUSNESS

This brings us to Fukuyama’s early warning at the end of his book about how the

⁶² See Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008) at pg 587

⁶³ See “On the Genealogy of Morals” in Friedrich Nietzsche. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: The Modern Library, 2000)

thymotic need for recognition would bring about the end of the end of history.⁶⁴ Marxist commentators, like neoliberal triumphalists, occasionally assume that material factors are all that matter in determining our time conscious. The spatialized phenomenological time consciousness of neoliberal subjects seems natural when you consider the intense pressures to accept capitalist realism and become a competitive player in a tough world. Marxist critics countered by arguing that the contradictions inherent in neoliberal governance and ideology would eventually lead to its collapse and the restoration of a historical and emancipatory time consciousness. However, it turned out that Nietzsche was more on the ball in foregrounding nihilism as a key motivator. It was this sense of nihilism which contributed to the emergence of post-modern conservatism as the reactionary force which would bring about the end of neoliberal hegemony. This is because the spatialized phenomenological time consciousness of neoliberal subjects was exceptionally amenable to the kind of manic individualism and longing for recognition and power so characteristic of Nietzschean existentialism and the will to power as rejoinders to the nihilism of hyper-capitalist post-modernity. The parallels with the Nazis own appropriation of Nietzsche in the 1930s hardly needs to be explained. Under the right conditions, as Wendy Brown points out, neoliberal subjects could nostalgically long for meaning by turning to the past for sources of identity. This in turn fuelled their anger towards the progressive forces which allegedly brought about conditions of historical powerlessness and the dissolution of an identity worthy of recognition and veneration. The consequence was a politics of resentment directed by the powerful against the powerless; a parodic inversion of Nietzsche's expectation that still broadly accords with his diagnosis.⁶⁵

The alternative to this reactionary development has to be the restoration of a genuinely progressive politics which embraces a time consciousness oriented towards the future rather than the nostalgic past. Žižek has already pioneered this outlook with his critiques of New Age idolatry and the effort to re-essentialize identity to promote conformity and inclusion within neoliberal politics.⁶⁶ So has Roberto Unger circa his discussion of a pragmatics of self-creation which takes

⁶⁴ Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1992)

⁶⁵ See Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019)

⁶⁶ See Slavoj Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 1999)

the reality of time seriously.⁶⁷ I think taking this position seriously means adopting a truly dialectical expressivist ethic of self-creation which eschews the temptations of Heideggerian authenticity and more noxious neoliberal bastardizations. It would suggest that genuine communal emancipation from material scarcity should be used in projects of invention and creation which embraces the artificial quality of both norms and nature. It would also reject the insistence that the only way to obtain freedom is within the clustered confines of neoliberal law. Such a materialist ethic of genuine self-creation in unalienated solidarity with others becomes possible in our technological age, and offers potentially limitless scope for creativity and expression. It would be more inspiring than the possibilities offered by neoliberal subjectivity and reactionary post-modern conservatism.

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⁶⁷ See Roberto Unger. *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009)

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