

Magic Versus Neoliberalism: Riots Against Everywhere

Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers's *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, translated and edited by Andrew Goffey, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011

Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *After the Future*, edited by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn, translated by Arianna Bove, Melinda Cooper, Erik Empson, Enrico, Giuseppina Mecchia, and Tiziana Terranova, Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011

Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos's *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the Twenty-First Century*, Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2008

Craig Willse

Each of these three books wrestles with how to produce political vision in a historical moment that has often felt heavy with defeat. Written in the aftermath of the antiglobalization actions of the 1990s and early 2000s, but before the transnational emergence of uprisings at the close of 2010, each text offers ways to reflect critically, and with hope, on the current sociopolitical moment and its immediate histories. Working through some of the limits of the texts, especially in terms of missed opportunities to theorize the racial projects of capitalism, may also point to limits in our writing, thinking, and organizing with which we can and must grapple.

In *Capitalist Sorcery*, Pignarre and Stengers draw inspiration for thinking about politics through magic from the work of pagan activist and writer Starhawk, which they address toward the close of their book. While Pignarre and Stengers's engagement with magic hovers at the level of analogy, the metaphor nonetheless helpfully reorients the question of what Marxist analysis might offer. For Pignarre and Stengers, to address capitalism as spellbinding provides an alternative to ideology critique. They do not claim that capitalism has no ideology; far from it, Pignarre and Stengers argue that neoliberal capital derives great force from a mythmaking insistence on its own inevitability and unstoppable. In the wake of Reagan's and Thatcher's post-social interventions, to suggest that neoliberalism could be undone, or even simply pushed back, has been to open yourself to critiques of foolish, childish romanticism. "Get with the program" has been the response of ideologues (whom Pignarre and Stengers term "min-

ions”). In its analysis of political opposition or alternatives, *Capitalist Sorcery* thinks in terms of inheritance (i.e., what do we inherit from Marx or from antiglobalization movements?) and the concept can be applied to neoliberalism as well. Neoliberal thought and practice inherit centuries of scientism; whether called an invisible hand or a law of nature, a positivist fantasy that the world is both given and transparent has lent weighty credibility to a neoliberal claim that no other way could be possible. To describe capitalism as spellbinding is to note its alchemical capacity to hold together, to attach: we are bound in and to capital. And so from here we can sense the limits of ideology critique: “It is not enough to denounce a capture in the way one might denounce an ideology. Whilst ideology screens out, capture gets a hold over something that matters, that makes whoever is captured live and think” (43).

While this may not differ much from a sense of ideology as constitutive (as in Althusserian interpellation or Foucauldian discipline), the language of capture draws our attention to “a double movement: a suspension and an exposing to risk” (43). For Pignarre and Stengers, such a model challenges the arrogance of the denouncing social critic who positions himself outside ideology. Pignarre and Stengers are right to point to the remainders of vanguardism (something that might inhere in a division of labor upheld by a professionalization and institutionalization of academic production), but leave open the question of how to engage in mutual and thoughtful exchange. Recent theorizations of affect might be helpful for considering the bounded-upness of thought, feeling, body, being, and activity (as in Clough 2007).

Nonetheless, Pignarre and Stengers’s model suggests that the effectiveness of neoliberalism depends on its capacity to capture—making its inevitability real in effect. They make a parallel argument about Marx, positing that his categories can be lifted from their own indebtedness to scientism and recognized as useful and forceful (i.e., real) because they have mobilized and made possible another set of countercaptures: “From our point of view, according to which the truth of a science results from the hold that it succeeds in getting, what matters first and foremost is that the strength of Marx’s categories, centred around exploitation of labour and the extraction of surplus value, well and truly got a hold. But this hold does not depend on the ‘truth’ of these categories beyond appearances” (53). This reminds us that capitalism is a set of conventions that can be defamiliarized. Pignarre and Stengers suggest, then, a pause before giving

answers, in order to ask new questions. This is a valid if not wholly original call; in the face of political urgency, a more compelling goal might be to do both: generate immediate answers that, in turn, render the old questions suddenly illegible. Such answers might evade capture to find new life in yet unknown forms.

While a very different book, Berardi's *After the Future* shares two important points of reference with *Capitalist Sorcery*. The first is the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. Pignarre and Stengers are cautious about overstating the significance of Seattle, recognizing that its status reflects and cements a Global North narrative that has erased ongoing resistances in the Global South; they localize Seattle as something that for them enacted a rupture, ending "a veritable sorcerer's spell" (72). For Pignarre and Stengers, Seattle interrupts despair, offering a hope that opens up different questions. Regarding Seattle, as in general, Berardi is less optimistic. Of the decade since that mobilization, Berardi writes that it "has been exciting, surprising and exhilarating—but it has finally turned sad" (12). This critique of Seattle contains a kernel of the overarching concern of *After the Future*. Seattle falls short insofar as it did not effect a fundamental shift in the experience of everyday life. Berardi laments that Seattle "has changed nothing in the daily life of the masses; it hasn't changed the relationship between wage labor and capitalist enterprise; it hasn't changed daily relationships among precarious workers; it hasn't changed the lived conditions of migrants. It hasn't created solidarity between people in the factories, in the schools, in the cities. Neoliberal politics have failed, but social autonomy hasn't emerged" (13). In the wake of Seattle, Berardi looks for but does not find evidence of social recomposition—new relations between and across categories of labor.

So if Pignarre and Stengers are ready to break the spell of capitalism, Berardi wants to spend a bit more time diagnosing the current sorcery-induced malaise. He attributes this melancholic state to two related shifts: a turn to immaterial labor, which he terms "semicapitalism," and the spreading ubiquity of digital communication technologies. If Berardi might reject the efficacy of Luddites who mistook factory machinery for the engine of capital, his work nonetheless falls in line with a long anti-capitalist tradition of technophobic critique. For Berardi, the decomposition of work and its reorganization as semicapitalist bits and flows has stripped labor of its capacity for self-recognition, for seeing its commonalities in its stratified variety. And perhaps even more insidiously, rather

than resist the digital, we have been drawn in and seduced, abandoning human contact for cybersex, for example. Here Berardi of course neglects a more complicated queer analysis of the digital and the sexual, but there remains something compelling in his diagnosis nonetheless. The recalibration of bodily and digital temporalities (following on centuries of setting labor power to assembly line rhythms) is hard to deny; we feel it as the simultaneous intensification, multiplication, and fragmentation of attention (for example, multitasking and Internet browsing). From this, according to Berardi, we take one of two options: an anxious striving to catch up to the speed of these flows or a depressive state of withdrawal, a sinking into flows that overwhelm us. And so he writes, "Semio-capital is a crisis of overproduction, but the form of this crisis is not only economic, but also psychopathic. Semio-capital, in fact, is not about the production of material goods, but about the production of psychic stimulation. The mental environment is saturated by signs that create a sort of continuous excitation, a permanent electrocution, which leads the individual, as well as the collective mind, to a state of collapse" (94).

This relates to a second connection between the two texts. Both Berardi and Pignarre and Stengers describe a present unmoored from an imagination of progress, a loss induced by the unsustainability of that illusion against the persistent evisceration of social life by capital. Berardi suggests that the failure of a progress mythology to sustain itself might actually be indicative of a crisis of capital deep enough to destabilize one of its most potent inventions: the future itself. As Berardi observes, that the future will be better has been both explicitly and implicitly posited by theories of Communist succession, the democratic welfare state, and capitalist technophilia (19). But to even imagine a thing called "the future" is for Berardi a specific effect of our mode of production: "The rise of the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model" (18). Thus, the postfuture proposed by Berardi is not the end of history promised by neoliberal cheerleaders, but a giving up on a fantasy produced in the material conditions of surplus and accumulation. While Berardi suggests that this loss of illusion can inspire apathy and depression, there is also an opportunity here: to abandon a future that has abandoned us. How might we imagine politics differently if we stopped investing in Enlightenment formations of progress?

If Berardi diagnoses a contemporary disenchantment, and Pignarre and Stengers call for an otherworldly-is-possible response, with *Escape Routes*, Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos ask that we see a kind of practical magic in moments that evade systems of capital control. As do the other authors, they diagnose the current political moment as a bit stuck. Insightfully linking together the incorporation of various oppositional publicities into governance regimes, they argue, “The crisis of multiculturalism, the difficulties of aligning queer politics with other social movements, the occupation of postfeminist positions by neo-essentialist understandings of what women are, the obsession of radical democratic approaches with the question of formal rights, all these mark a phase of stagnation of subversive politics and its absorption into the vortex of neoliberal thinking” (30). The antidote to this quiescence, however, is not a renewed position of labor, as Berardi might have it, nor does it only depend on another set of questions. Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos demand that we reverse the usual view of relations between the state and subjectivity. Subject positions, they argue, do not follow state formations. Rather, the state must mutate and stretch to capture forms of escape that are primary; state-building is a race against subversion. The authors build this analytic model through a compelling reconsideration of that key moment in Marxist analysis, the enclosure of the commons and the “freeing” of the serf from the land. In *Escape Routes*, the mobile vagabond pressures feudal systems of control dependent on bounded immobility, thereby forcing the innovations of discipline to produce the docile bodies of wage labor. This model of escape is then traced through a shift from national sovereignty to transnational governance to what Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos term “postliberal aggregates” (i.e., the war on terror), and across the fields of biomedicine, migration, and precarious labor. By inverting our sense of control, they suggest that capture may be formative because it re-forms. A notion of a primacy of biopower might be found in Foucault already, but in their emphasis, Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos challenge us to overcome the optimistic/pessimistic divide and see escape where it is already happening. This is not a political program for next steps, but a politicization of already existing practices.

How, then, might we bring these three texts into our contemporary moment, to refract current politics against their various arguments? It would be hard, I think, to read these texts today and not consider how Occupy Wall Street (OWS), or Occupy/Decolonize movements, fit or

challenge the analyses offered.¹ I find one of the most compelling aspects of the Occupy/Decolonize movements to be the great amount of critical interventions they have provoked, especially from communities of color, including migrant, trans/queer, and Native activist communities, demanding, and building, an analysis of how economic “crisis” unfolds through enduring vulnerabilities organized by gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. In the consideration that follows, I take the OWS movements to be coextensive with the critiques that have reshaped them. In other words, while some forms of OWS recapitulate familiar exclusions and hierarchies, I see no reason to privilege those, while according their violence and force due weight. They need not be granted more credibility than the interventions; Occupy/Decolonize is in this way a Deleuzean assemblage, which is to say, incomplete and open to other systems.

But the inchoate nature of OWS has led to predictable accusations by media, politicians, and unconvinced members of the public that the protests are incoherent, as supposedly evidenced by an apparent lack of demands. Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos provide tools for a critical response in their analysis of what they term the “double-R axiom.” This describes a coarticulation of rights and representation through the sphere of the state that secures the nation, binding a people to a territory through exclusions of those who cannot be represented and cannot obtain rights (variably queers, women, people of color). “Hence, the double-R axiom constantly refers to its exact opposite: to the absence of rights and representation” (7). The refusal of at least some parts of the Occupy/Decolonize movements to capitulate to calls for a platform of demands can be read, then, as refusal to offer these emergent energies up to that double-R form of capture; there is a recognition of the limits of a liberal reform that would fix systems of banking, or employment, to make them work for those who could obtain such privilege. Further, the occupation of public parks as a strategy is not irrelevant, as it confronts the relationship of territory and citizenship and the regulation of mobility that *Escape Routes* shows has been central to the consolidation of national governance. The incipient promise of this rejection of the double-R axiom is a refusal to reconsolidate the nation-state. “To say that national sovereignty is incomplete is not to say that it can improve and become potentially all-inclusive, rather it means that national sovereignty is unequal and incomplete by design. It is exactly this ultimate incompleteness of national sovereignty that creates the possibility for social change and for its potential overcom-

ing” (7–8). Such an overcoming is radicalized by indigenous activisms that insist on engaging and resisting colonial occupation as the condition of possibility in which political occupation takes place (see, for example, Desjarlait 2011).

The creative nature of antiracist, anticolonial activist intersections with Occupy/Decolonize calls to mind Elizabeth Betita Martinez’s “Where Was the Color in Seattle?” an essay widely circulated post-Seattle that reflected critically on the structural barriers to participation for communities of color as well as the reproduction of white supremacy in antiglobalization organizing (Martinez 2000). Martinez’s analysis points to a missed opportunity in each of these texts to theorize their respective neoliberal systems as components of a specifically *racial* capitalism. We must consider how accounting for that might change, modify, and expand their various contributions; thinking alongside black studies, critical ethnic studies, and Native studies, we must ask how life and land are racialized in their absorption into capital exchange and in their being remade for and in capital. While Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos come the furthest, especially regarding migrant labor populations, none of these three books takes on a critical analysis of racial formations. Rubrics such as “Western imperialism” (Berardi [73]) are and are not enough. They are in imparting a sense of persistence, mass, and heft, but such broadness may make us too comfortable in neglecting the nuanced and particular organizations of racial capital in their material and symbolic specificities, what Andrea Smith has formulated as the three pillars of white supremacy: enslavement and antiblackness, indigenous genocide, and Orientalism and militarism (Smith 2006). This is not simply a matter of overlooking a variable called “race.” As organizer Kazembe Balagun reminds us in a discussion with the Activist Interview Project (2011), Wall Street’s name derives from an actual fortification built to keep out native Lenape and other indigenous populations, and African slaves were among the first commodities to be traded from within those walls. To take seriously an understanding of capitalism as racial capitalism requires attention to the continued force of this history as a set of processes and flows central to the current crisis and that must be central to methods of escape as well.

To illustrate my concerns, we can consider the narrative being constructed about current Occupy/Decolonize movements. In connecting these Western rebellions to the Arab Spring, most commentators have skipped past an uprising sandwiched between those events—the London

protests of summer 2011, set off by the police killing of Mark Duggan. The racist depiction of those protesting youth as wild, senseless animals draws from a long tradition of containing black resistance by labeling it crazy or criminal (Gilroy 2011; Harvey 2011). How to meaningfully theorize continuities between that resistance and other more celebrated uprisings is an important task; how to formulate a politics that does not abandon those London protestors is even more urgent. The British state's response has mobilized the twinned mechanisms of post-Keynesian policing: incarceration and withdrawal of social welfare provision. This is why, in her speech at Liberty Park, New York, in October 2011, Ruth Wilson Gilmore argued that imprisoned populations not physically present at occupations must be made the center of OWS's political strategies. This is also why we cannot treat slavery as an analogy for the condition of labor in capital, as Pignarre and Stengers and Berardi both do (and as many OWS protestors do as well). Instead, following Cedric Robinson (1983) and Saidiya Hartman's (1997) work, among others, we must understand black enslavement, and its afterlife as antiblack racism, as capital's condition of possibility. Following Frank Wilderson's (2003) critique of the Gramscian model underwriting white leftist theory and practice, we must also recognize that the life of the Marxist revolutionary subject depends on its exclusion and abandonment of the slave.

The various unities called for by the writers (the social recomposition of Berardi, for example) are not possible without a deep and committed consideration of the disjunctions, the cuts made by capital, the state, and nonstate technologies of governance that produce and sort racialized populations in terms of uneven life possibilities and probabilities. Accounts of neoliberalism that deal with the differentials of those violences are absolutely urgent, and they require a committed engagement with where those differences are being documented and theorized. This is the task that remains.

Acknowledgments

In memory of Dara Greenwald, who brought powerful magic into this world.

Craig Willse is an assistant professor in cultural studies at George Mason University. He is coeditor, with Patricia Clough, of *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*.

Note

1. I refer to this collection of diverse movements with both terms (OWS and Occupy/Decolonize) to keep these movements, terms, and politics in tension. For an illustrative commentary on the effort to rename the occupation in Seattle, see Black Orchid Collective 2011.

Works Cited

- Activist Interview Project. 2011. "Kazembe @ Occupy Wall Street!" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqGabPQ31sQ>
- Black Orchid Collective. 2011. "Decolonize Seattle!" Black Orchid Collective, October 22. <https://blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/decolonize-occupy/>.
- Clough, Patricia Ticineto, and Jean Halley, eds. 2007. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Desjarlait, Robert. 2011. "Decolonization and 'Occupy Wall Street.'" Indian Country Today Media Network, October 23. http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/ict_sbc/decolonization-and-occupy-wall-street
- Gilroy, Paul. 2011. "Paul Gilroy Speaks on the Riots, August 2011, Tottenham, North London." *The Dream of Safety* (blog), August 16. <http://dreamofsafety.blogspot.com/2011/08/paul-gilroy-speaks-on-riots-august-2011.html>.
- Hartman, Sadiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, David. 2011. "Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets." *Counterpunch*, August 12–14. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/08/12/feral-capitalism-hits-the-streets/>.
- Martinez, Elizabeth Betita. 2000. "Where Was the Color in Seattle? Looking for Reasons Why the Great Battle Was So White." *Colorlines*, March 10. http://colorlines.com/archives/2000/03/where_was_the_color_in_seattlelooking_for_reasons_why_the_great_battle_was_so_white.html.
- Robinson, Cedric. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Zed Books.
- Smith, Andrea. 2006. "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Woman of Color Organizing." In *Color of Violence*, ed. INCITE!, 66–73. Boston: South End Press.
- Wilderson, Frank. 2003. "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9(2): 225–40.