

Left Alone: The unacknowledged implications of inequality
for the Left

by

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Abstract

This thesis sets out a new form of political analysis which could be referred to as materialist holism. Materialist holism uses the multidisciplinary study of inequality and of the social determinants of health to draw an empirical link between Marx's theory of alienation and a critique of totality. Using this analysis I make the case for a renewed and transformed social democracy, which could be called diagonalist social democracy.

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Introduction

Our attempts to lessen material inequality are far more than just a struggle for what is fair and just. Although we may not realize it, fighting for more or less material equality is really a fight over who we are, or rather who we could be. It is a struggle over our collective fate—more so than anything else, save perhaps the fight against anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD), though even the fight against ACD is shaped by material inequality more than we realize. My investigation into what the reality of more or less material inequality means for those of us looking to build a more equal and fair society has led me to conclude that a less unequal society brings about much more than just greater equality and fairness. Material inequality, it turns out, shapes social *totality*¹ in ways that we on the Left have so-far failed to sufficiently factor into our analyses.

Gross inequality can snuff out trust, solidarity and community. It can strain and undermine social relations; it can enhance perceived social evaluative threats and status competition, thus fueling stress, anxiety and depression. It can make our social interactions increasingly dysfunctional and superficial. Gross inequality not only makes us stressed—it makes us mentally and physically sick. It robs us of political information and spiritual development, creating a void inside us and imbuing us with the views and beliefs of the powerful, as well as a deference to their authority, all before prematurely ending many of our circumscribed lives. The unrestrained growth of inequality and

¹ The simplest way to define totality is to say that it refers to everything, but this does not sufficiently capture what the word connotes in Marxian theories. Instead, it should be understood as a reference to the whole of our social reality. All of human interaction—with each other and with the material world—understood as a coherent structure or system, within which exists various ineluctably connected scales of reality. In other words, a structure of structures.

increasingly catastrophic ACD represent the zenith of *slow violence*.² Every scale of totality—of our reality—is shaped by the degree of material inequality present: our everyday lives, our lifetimes, and all the fleeting moments therein are in large part *overdetermined*³ by this *macro-scale*, or *totalistic*, factor. Inequality has such large scale implications that the relative presence of it shapes the physical and social spaces we operate within, and thus our behaviour, ideas, personalities and beliefs within them. Its impact is so great that it helps to forge and make static our identities, cultures, and ultimately our ‘natures.’

When inequality began to rise across the rich capitalist democracies, it was the result of a political project now known as neoliberalism. This political project was “carried out by the corporate capitalist class as they felt intensely threatened both politically and economically towards the end of the 1960s into the 1970s” (Harvey, 2016b). Corporate class solidarity was strong under the aegis of US hegemony, but since then corporate class interests have become more divergent, and the world of states has become relatively more multipolar, despite ongoing US hegemony. Yet, capital, at least for the moment, does not need to unite to resist struggle from below, for the Left remains largely divided and weak in the wake of a decades long, and largely successful, neoliberal political offensive. However, this may be starting to change.

Geographer, professor of anthropology and noted Marxist David Harvey (2016b), observing the relationship between how capitalism and the Left have changed alongside each other since the 1970s makes an interesting proposition:

² See Chapter 3 (3.4).

³ See Chapter 4 (4.3).

What if every dominant mode of production, with its particular political configuration, creates a mode of opposition as a mirror image to itself? During the era of Fordist organization of the production process, the mirror image was a large centralized trade union movement and democratically centralist political parties. The reorganization of the production process and turn to flexible accumulation during neoliberal times has produced a Left that is also, in many ways, its mirror: networking, decentralized, non-hierarchical.

The mirror metaphor speaks to the overdetermination of the Left by neoliberalism, which in many ways will be the subject of discussion in this paper. Harvey (2016b) continues, arguing that “much of the Left right now, being very autonomous and anarchical, is actually reinforcing the endgame of neoliberalism,” and asks: is “there a way to organize which is not a mirror image? Can we smash that mirror and find something else, which is not playing into the hands of neoliberalism?” (Harvey, 2016b).

I believe that Harvey is right that some of the more dogmatically horizontalist types unwittingly reinforce neoliberalism,⁴ as does the fact that the Left is increasingly siloed around single issues and identities. In the following pages I will not only answer Harvey’s question in the mirror-smashing affirmative, but *I will also explore at length the nature of this mirror*. I will accomplish both of these tasks by employing what could be seen as a novel materialist analysis of social totality, one that is founded upon a melding of Marx’s theory of alienation with a critique of totality using the multidisciplinary study of the social determinants of health and of inequality. By doing this, however, I do not wish to participate in an internecine battle of Leftists on the side of the Marxists. In the

⁴ I would argue that many proponents of post-colonial theory unwittingly do this as well.

words of Karl Marx: “I am not a Marxist.”⁵ Although my understanding of social totality is essentially Marxian, my horizon could be characterized as anarchist, and I believe the means to this end must involve a renewed and reimagined social democracy. My understanding of social totality, as well as my horizon and the means I believe we should employ to strive towards it, are all, in some way or another, informed by this novel materialist analysis. What this materialist analysis reveals first and foremost is the importance of material inequality as a factor that significantly shapes our social totality.

One of the key bodies of research I will draw from is very much a collaboration between social and natural sciences, namely psychology, psychiatry, sociology, epidemiology, genetics, neurology and various other social and natural sciences. The fruits of this collaboration are potentially the best argument there is for a more holistic approach to understanding our society, and gives us perhaps the clearest picture to date of what meaningful and realistic transformation might look like. Unfortunately, the crucial insights that this growing body of knowledge offers, and the important strategic implications of these insights, are generally ignored by the world of Left theory. This is perhaps due to the Left theorist’s understandable mistrust⁶ of the more positivistic

⁵ In a short biography of Marx, Robert Heilbroner (2011) notes that at the end of his life he “grew weary of the bickering of the working-class movement and delivered himself of a statement that has never ceased to bedevil the faithful (“I am not a Marxist,” he said one day); and then on a March afternoon, quietly slipped away” (Chapter 6).

⁶ Indeed, the shift towards more positivistic social sciences is part of a dubious trend in academia, namely the continued compartmentalization of knowledge into increasingly parochial and specialized fields, which is, at least in part, the result of the university’s increasing sensitivity to the exigencies of the state-capital nexus and its sponsoring of ongoing *primitive accumulation* and further divisions of labour. This speaks to the overdetermination of academia, for here we see that academia is not only shaped by exogenous forces at the level of macro-totally, but that it also mirrors contradictions observed at that level.

approach of the natural sciences, which has often yielded narrow-minded and conservative prescriptions when applied in the social sciences.⁷

As we shall see, however, it is the *multidisciplinary approach* that informs much of the research on the social determinants of health that represents the strongest and most fruitful attempt at breaking down the barriers between compartmentalized and specialized fields of science, both ‘natural’ and ‘social.’ It is this evolving literature that is most forcefully countering the parochial positivism that has increasingly characterized fields of academic study, and it does so from a scientific perspective. In this sense, this literature represents a form of *imminent critique*,⁸ but need not be limited by it. The brilliance of this multidisciplinary approach is that it has essentially produced a qualitatively and quantitatively enhanced understanding of social totality. It is a new and empirically-grounded form of holism yet to be fully appreciated by the Left, and yet to be deployed in a way that sheds new light on long-standing Left concepts like overdetermination and alienation.

This holism can help us to shift focus away from some of our differences, which are often overstated on—and sometimes even contrived by—both the Left and Right, and instead highlight some of our too often understated similarities and hence shared goals. A

⁷ Canadian Critical Theorist Robert Cox’s (1981) distinction between critical theory and problem solving theory, in many ways, captures the tensions between Left theory and increasingly positivistic political science analysis (pp. 128-130). Although this is a useful distinction, it can also act as a false dichotomy that obscures some of the emerging multidisciplinary approaches which help us to understand social totality (and which can create a bridge between problem solving and critical theory).

⁸ Professor of anthropology and geography, and noted Marxist, David Harvey (1990) describes imminent critique thusly:

Provisionally accepting the methodological presuppositions, substantive premises, and truth-claims of orthodoxy as its own, immanent critique tests the postulates of orthodoxy by the latter’s own standards of proof and accuracy. Upon ‘entering’ the theory, orthodoxy’s premises and assertions are registered and certain strategic contradictions located. These contradictions are then developed according to their own logic, and at some point in this process of internal expansion, the one-sided proclamations of orthodoxy collapse as material instances and their contradictions are allowed to develop ‘naturally’ (p. 5).

multidisciplinary approach to understanding the social determinants of health *reveals a certain universality that I believe the Left should take seriously and embrace*. Yet this highlights another potential reason that the implications of this literature have yet to be acknowledged by the Left, namely that universalism is far from in vogue on the Left at the present moment. It is this new holism that largely informs what I have so-far referred to as a new materialist analysis. What this holism tells us about material inequality can be complimented and enhanced by investigations into material inequality from other fields, such as political science, political theory, political economy and anthropology—fields which often evaluate the health of societies in a different, though equally valuable, way. This broader approach is what one could call *materialist holism*.

Another reason why the Left has yet to pay sufficient attention to some of these literatures is perhaps the fact that much of the more politically oriented literature on inequality offers prescriptions that begin and end with redistributive policies, and often points to the social democracies of northern Europe as an example to be followed (see McQuaig, 2010; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). This pretty much amounts to an endorsement of an evolutionary social democratic political strategy; yet, as those seeking the eventual defeat of capitalism know too well, social democratic movements and parties have their fair share of pitfalls: they often capitulate to the demands of capital, or are simply co-opted by capital; they often pursue only mild to moderate reforms that are too easily reversed; they are often accused of perpetuating capitalism, or saving it from crises, through redistribution-driven consumer demand stimulation, and by producing a more materially comfortable and thus complacent citizenry.⁹ Perhaps

⁹ This latter phenomenon could be referred to as an *equality trap*.

unsurprisingly then, those on the ‘radical’ or anti-capitalist Left are skeptical of Left strategies that emphasize reducing inequality and that do not explicitly emphasize replacing capitalism.

A final reason that the Left has yet to adequately grapple with these literatures has to do with the fact that many on the Left often seem more interested in ‘the struggle’ than in the reforms that result therefrom, namely the details of what the latter look like and their effects long-term. This may be the result of the fact that the Left underestimates how interdependent reformism and Left activism are, with causal arrows flowing in both directions. The Left in North America, for example, occasionally expresses envy at the relatively greater political radicalism in, for example, France (i.e. more frequent strikes, boss-napping, and more adversarial protests) but they do not connect that greater radicalism to, for example, the fact that kids in the schools of France are getting four-course lunches (Moore, 2016). Yet, these disparate phenomena, I will argue, are connected. Here the mirror metaphor is again insightful: more functional societies are reflected in a more functional Left (and vice versa). *This is the key argument of this text. The major question animating this text, then, is what are the connections between material inequality and the Left? Specifically, how do they shape one another?*

I will be using terms like Left and Right, as well as the term socialism, a lot in this paper, so I best clear up what I mean by those terms now. Left versus Right is a useful shorthand for opposing political forces, but it is also a false dichotomy, and it can often be quite a deceptive one depending on the political context. In America, for example, Left and Right is often considered to be another way of saying liberal and conservative,

or worse yet, Democrat and Republican.¹⁰ Most of the Western world outside of America, however, has a Left-Right political spectrum that is significantly broader. This is especially true in countries with some form of Proportional Representation electoral system (PR). Thus, outside of America, ‘liberal’ is generally considered either to be centre or Right, conservative is considered to be to the Right of liberal, and on the Left are socialist parties of various types, as well as green and pirate parties (which generally have many policies in common with the socialists). Yet, Left-Right is still misleading in these contexts, especially given the occasional presence of Right nationalist parties, neo-fascists, Christian Democrats, and Red Tories (all of whom appear to blend policies associated with the Left and Right). Though the major reason why the Left-Right spectrum is deceiving in these contexts is because—as I have been implying here—it is too often defined and bounded by the major political parties in each country: the parties within a given electoral system never actually reflect the world of political philosophy or the population’s varying political views sufficiently or with fidelity; rather, electoral systems are where political power intersects with political ideology, and this often results in a situation where virtually all political parties, including the nominally Left or socialist ones are what I would call Right (which usually means neoliberal in the present context).

I am somewhat sympathetic to those who transform the Left-Right spectrum by adding an Up-Down axis¹¹ (‘Up’ being authoritarian or hierarchical and ‘Down’ being democratic or horizontalist) which intersects vertically with a horizontal Left-Right axis; though this too is problematic, for it implies that one can be both Left and Authoritarian

¹⁰ Due to America’s cultural domination of my country (Canada), many conceptualize Left and Right in the same way here.

¹¹ These portrayals are often shared on social media in meme form.

(or Right and horizontalist), to which I fundamentally disagree. If anything, it might be better for the Up-Down axis to just replace the Left-Right axis altogether. Indeed, for I would say what defines, or what ought to define, Left and Right more than anything else is a struggle over hierarchy and oppression. The Left opposes oppression and exploitation in all of its so-far recognizable forms (or at least it tries to and ought to), with an emphasis on *systemic* oppression and exploitation; this translates into an opposition to (illegitimate) hierarchy, namely as it currently exists in the form of capital(ism) and the state. The Right also opposes some forms of oppression and exploitation, but their opposition to these is narrower, often due to an inability (or an unwillingness) to acknowledge systemic oppression and exploitation; crucially, they do not oppose capital(ism) or the state, generally because they either do not view the state and capital(ism) as inherently oppressive and exploitative, or they view the extent of exploitation and oppression as justifiable (perhaps because it benefits them). I could go on, but suffice to say here that when I use the term Left and Right I mean to use them as shorthand for these opposing views.

One crucial element was left out, however. That is that the Left does not simply oppose the state and capitalism, it wants to see them replaced with a socialist organization of society. What is socialism? The Marxist might say that socialism is worker control over the means of production, and even today this is not necessarily inaccurate. Behind this definition is the idea that once workers (as the majority) control the means of production (via the state) it will presage a classless egalitarian society

(communism¹²). I propose we identify a more general principle that I believe underpins the desire for (or strategy of) worker control over the means of production: the principle that we should organize our societies in a way that allows all people to be self-directed and in control of their life activities, at least to the extent possible given the exigencies of any collective. To some this may sound anarchistic, but it is surely also the horizon operating in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, as well as in the minds of many other socialists of various stripes throughout history.¹³

The socialist reader may have noticed that I used the word 'people' above instead of 'worker.' I do this because certainly it is not the goal of socialism to create a society where one identity or class is placed above all others in a new hierarchy (even an inverted one). Rather, it is to transcend these (vertical) divisions altogether. This is true even though it will necessarily be the workers, the alienated, the oppressed and exploited, the indebted, and anyone else that ought to be represented by a broader formulation of class (i.e. the majority), who will ultimately be the prime movers in this effort. This basic point is implied by the Marxian feminist Kathi Weeks' question: "Can we want, and are we willing to create, a new world that would no longer be 'our' world, a social form that would not produce subjects like us?" (as cited in Frase, 2012). To which the answer must be yes.

In the broadest of terms, then, I argue that a multidisciplinary investigation of material inequality in human societies—a materialist holist investigation—demonstrates

¹² In his early writings Marx used the word communism to describe the state that would presage a socialist society. In his later writings, however, he reversed the terminology (see Marx, 2000). I only use the term socialism, for Marx's differentiation between the two terms is largely the product of a problematic view of history that I do not subscribe to.

¹³ It is also sometimes argued that this understanding of socialism is to take classical liberalism to its logical conclusions in the present moment.

that Left political strategy within rich capitalist democracies ought to be less sectarian, and based on a more holistic understanding of our societies and ourselves that goes beyond a narrow understanding of political reality. In practical terms, or in terms of praxis, this means pursuing transformational change through multiple avenues, including but not limited to: community and workplace organizing, social movements *and electoral politics at every level*. Furthermore, I wish to make the case that, despite electoral politics not being in vogue on the Left, that an electoral strategy is absolutely requisite to achieving any approximation of socialist society. A less sectarian political strategy, then, means *not conceptualizing of these avenues as mutually exclusive, or indicative of mutually exclusive Left identities*. This conclusion stems from *the reality of the impact of gross inequality on human societies*, and the fact that mitigating inequality requires the use of all of these ostensibly distinct avenues.

To be clear, I offer these reflections as a wannabe parliamentary socialist confronted with an existential crisis: it appears that we are headed for civilizational collapse due to a combination of increasingly catastrophic ACD and growing material inequality worldwide, but a socialist of my bent sees transformational change—the kind we need to prevent apocalyptic disaster, if it is even still possible¹⁴—as an incremental process that requires quite some time (longer than what may be available) to unfold. Oxfam reported this year that the combined wealth of the richest 1% of the world’s population has overtaken that of the other 99%, and that 62 individuals now own as much wealth as the bottom 50% of its population (Elliott, 2016). Meanwhile, an increasing number of climate scientists are predicting virtual human extinction as soon as the next

¹⁴ Some activists have already given up and simply await our collective destruction (Stephenson, 2012), while others argue that the task ahead is for us to “learn to die” (Scranton, 2015).

few decades solely as a result of insufficient action on climate change (Jamail, 2013). Others, like the natural and social scientists who co-authored a recent report funded by NASA's Goddard Space Flight Centre, also point to a possible civilizational collapse in the coming decades, but they emphasize how this would be due to a combination of "unsustainable resource exploitation and increasingly unequal wealth distribution;" a conclusion they came to after reviewing the historical record of civilizational collapse, and finding that these were the two most common factors (Ahmed, 2014).

1 Chapter: The ‘Origins’ of Inequality

1.1 Runaway Trains & Stubborn Beliefs

Some in the field of anthropology, I have learned, are also concerned by the existential crises we now face. Canadian archeologist Ronald Wright (2006), like the authors of the NASA-funded study mentioned in the introduction, reviews the historical record, or as he calls it “reading the flight recorders in the wreckage of crashed civilizations” (Chapter 5),¹⁵ and comes to similar conclusions, namely that we are indeed headed toward civilizational collapse because of the ‘runaway trains’ of climate change and inequality. Wright (2006) offers some interesting insights as to why this is happening; he explores how different peoples were “seduced by a kind of progress that becomes a mania, an ‘ideological pathology,’ as some anthropologists call it” (Chapter 3). In other words, Wright (2006) illustrates how these particular conceptions of progress are bound up with the cosmologies of different civilizations, and how they can be made stubbornly static by social structures in which “power and wealth rise upward and the many are ruled by the few” (Chapter 3), and remain static even in the face of collapse. This is what Wright terms a *progress trap* (which I identify as a form of *inequality trap*). Troublingly, he notes that “our present behaviour is typical of failed societies at the zenith of their greed and arrogance. This is the dinosaur factor: hostility to change from vested interests, and inertia at all social levels” (Chapter 5).

In our current ‘global civilization’ this ideological pathology or progress trap takes the form of progress defined by market fundamentalism. Specifically, Wright

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the eBook version I have of this work is without page numbers, so I cite chapters instead. Furthermore, many of the books I cite in this paper—due to my frugality—are eBooks. Thus chapters will regularly be indicated instead of page number, *even for direct quotes*.

(2006) identifies laissez-faire economics, “the conceit [of which] — that if you let the horses guzzle enough oats, something will go through for the sparrows — has been tried many times and has failed many times, leaving ruin and social wreckage” (Chapter 5). In previous civilizations, Wright identifies pathological conceptions of progress in other forms; on Easter Island, for example, the people were socially split into clans, and each of them began to honour its ancestry with increasingly large statues. This statue cult “became increasingly rivalrous and extravagant” (Chapter 3). The felling of trees necessary to get the timber to move these increasingly giant stone monuments took priority over ecological sustainability. “The people who felled the last tree could see it was the last, could know with complete certainty that there would never be another. And they felled it anyway” (Chapter 3).

Take this, then, as the first insight of our exploration of the ‘origins’ of inequality: societies characterized by persistent, or growing, inequality are ones in which pathological ideas—even those that can precipitate societal collapse—may be stubbornly clung to,¹⁶ even if society is increasingly confronted with collapse. Which is to say that ideas which encourage and justify the growth of inequality (or environmental destruction) within a society will not necessarily be dismissed or rendered void in the face of an inequality induced (or climate change induced) societal collapse. This is likely due to the fact that as power concentrates at the top of a society, the ideological justifications for

¹⁶ It should be noted that ‘civilizational collapse,’ or more specifically the collapse of empires, does not necessarily have only negative consequences. Graeber (2011), for example, notes that the collapse of empires has been a ‘mixed blessing.’ “In Europe, for instance, the institution [of slavery] largely vanished in the centuries following the collapse of the Roman empire—an historical achievement rarely recognized by those of us used to referring to these events as the beginning of ‘the Dark Ages’” (p. 211). Of course, in the present moment, the scale of the potential collapse, and the destruction that is predicted to cause it and be wrought by it, foretells immense human suffering and possible species extinction.

inequality can more effectively be reinforced in those below. This is confirmed in the contemporary context by the research discussed in Chapter 5 (5.1, 5.2) of this text.

1.2 Inequality in the Upper Paleolithic

Another interesting insight of Wright's (2006) work, and of many other anthropologists and archaeologists for that matter, is that the foundation of most contemporary social organizations stem back to before the emergence of capitalism, at least as we commonly think of it.¹⁷ What I am referring to here are the agricultural foundations of most societies today. Wright (2006) points out that the uneven growth that was requisite to (post)industrial civilizations was made possible by farming, and that our contemporary civilization still depends on this 'technology' (Chapter 2). Anthropologist Keith Hart (2001) agrees:

It is counter-intuitive, but the dominant institutions of today's world have their origins in agriculture and closely resemble, in form if not in content nor always in function, pre-industrial civilizations that still significantly underpin our own. A preliminary list would include territorial states, landed property, warfare, embattled cities, impersonal money, long-distance trade, an emphasis on work, world religion, racism and the family (pp. 310-311).

I think this suggests that a single minded focus on capitalism, especially an overly parochial conception of it (e.g. capitalism as completely separate from the state), or an overly broad conception of it (e.g. capitalism as the originator of inequality), can undermine our ability to identify meaningful avenues of transformation. As Hart (2001)

¹⁷ Many anthropologists believe capitalism to have emerged earlier than we typically think (i.e. before the end of the 18th century), as the result, at least in part, of "the historically transformative role of finance and credit instruments" (Kalb, 2014, p. 124).

puts it: “we are living with the consequences of 5000 years of agrarian civilization ... which cannot be discarded overnight. When 3 billion peasants work in the fields with their hands and archaic institutions like the territorial state rule the world, we must not attribute all wrongs to capitalism” (p. 327).

There is a common belief here that is lurking in the background, however, that needs to be examined, namely that hierarchical social structures originate, or at least become the norm, with agrarian societies, and that the hunter gatherer and forager societies that were dominant before the invention, or accident, of farming were egalitarian societies. Indeed, according to Wright (2006), “[i]n hunter-gatherer societies (barring a few special cases) the social structure was more or less egalitarian” (Chapter 2). This has been the assumption of many anthropologists (see, for example, Hann & Hart, 2011, Chapter 4), and has been picked up in other disciplines as well. The anthropological version of the argument that systemic inequality can be traced back to the emergence of agricultural society was pioneered in the early 20th century by archaeologist Gordon Childe, for whom “farming was a precondition that allowed for and supported a ruling class that could subsist solely on taxes paid by others” (Kurnick, 2015, p. 407). I highlight this assumption, not because it is wrong per se, but because a more detailed look at the complicated egalitarianism of the Upper Paleolithic yields interesting and potentially useful results.

Anthropologists David Wengrow and David Graeber (2015) argue that “broad-brush characterizations of a deep egalitarian past – before the emergence of farming and states – sit uneasily with the content of the archaeological record” (p. 599). First, the authors point out that the “existence of ranking and other hierarchical structures among

non-farming societies was common knowledge for much of the twentieth century, both for anthropologists and for archaeologists” (p. 602), but that this was not generalized to analogous societies during the Upper Paleolithic, namely because the former societies, studied through ethnography, were never completely disconnected from agro-industrial states and capitalism (p. 603).¹⁸ Wengrow and Graeber (2015) demonstrate, however, that there were, in fact, hierarchical relations in the Upper Paleolithic. Yet, they argue that it is incorrect to believe that hierarchical hunter-gatherer and foraging societies existed as such; that is, as static hierarchical social structures. The reality was likely far more complex, and offers us interesting insights into the possibilities of social organization.

They begin by critiquing archaeologists who point to the evidence of grand burials and monumental construction and who conclude from it that pre-agrarian societies were simply hierarchical ones (pp. 600-602). They challenge this by noting that the archaeological record of grand burials in the Upper Paleolithic reveals that in a “remarkable number of cases the bodies of these individuals bear evidence of striking physical anomalies that could only have marked them out dramatically from their social surroundings” (p. 604).¹⁹ It “seems unlikely that Palaeolithic Europe produced a stratified elite that just happened to comprise a high proportion of physically anomalous people” (p. 605). Further, the ethnographic literature is rife with examples of anomalous humans “who are treated simultaneously as exalted and profoundly dangerous, or who alternate between the two,” and that these individuals might be exalted in life and feared in death, or vice versa (p. 605). This could explain grand burials where corpses were left

¹⁸ A point forcefully made by anthropologist Niccolo Caldararo (2011).

¹⁹ And, Wengrow and Graeber (2015) note that this makes one wonder if the grand burials for anatomically typical skeletons may have been the result of qualities, physical or otherwise, that also singled them out as unique (pp. 604-605).

intact, which “appears to have been socially anomalous in the Upper Palaeolithic” (p. 605).

Speaking of anomalous individuals, Wengrow and Graeber’s (2015) comments about individualism are worthy of a brief digression, for they have some implications for contemporary critiques of ‘modernity’ and capitalism. A common criticism of capitalist society is that it produces a sort of hyper-individualism, or atomisation, which is novel and ‘unnatural’ and leads to morally dubious belief systems like moral relativism. Perhaps it is worth bearing in mind, then, that it “is generally acknowledged that egalitarian societies of the Americas were typically marked by an ethos of extreme individualism. Far from encouraging a stifling conformity, they emphasized individual autonomy and self-realization” (p. 604). This I find particularly interesting, for it challenges *reified*²⁰ conceptions of capitalism that sometimes form one end of a false dichotomy with an equally reified conception of pre-capitalist society. It is also worth noting, however, that in some of the egalitarian societies that Wengrow and Graeber (2015) highlight, individualism nevertheless “existed in tension with egalitarianism, and such societies were also marked by mechanisms (e.g. mockery of proficient hunters) that seem designed to prevent extraordinary individuals from undermining the fundamental principles of the group” (p. 604). These are often termed leveling mechanisms.

Concerning the individualistic grand burials, Wengrow and Graeber (2015) conclude that “seeing them as evidence for hereditary systems of social ranking – as has

²⁰ *Reification* is another Marxian term. It refers to the “act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man-produced things which have become independent (and which are imagined as originally independent) of man and govern his life” (Petrović, 2005). I employ the term here in a way that is largely in line with the definition above: I use it here as an adjective and I mean for it to connote the obfuscation of social relations that underpin something.

generally been done—seems to us the most improbable interpretation of all.... Such burials were exceptional in every sense, and can hardly be interpreted as simple proxies for social structure among the living” (p. 605). Wengrow and Graeber (2015) are similarly unconvinced by the arguments based on the archaeological record of monumental construction; instead, they contend that “simply observing the existence of inequality in certain aspects of social life and material culture, in certain times and contexts, says little about social evolution in general” (p. 602). This is where the argument gets really interesting, for what Wengrow and Graeber (2015) propose is that the hunter-foragers of the Upper Paleolithic likely transitioned from egalitarian social organizations to relatively hierarchical ones depending on the season; essentially the exigencies of different climates would require alterations in the size and density of groups, but “uniquely for humans, with their particular type of social cognition, such alternations involve corresponding changes in moral, legal, and ritual organization,” which amounted to “entire systems of roles and institutions [being] periodically disassembled and reconstructed to allow for more or less concentrated ways of living at different times of year” (p. 600).

The authors point to archaeological evidence of such alterations, and also note that there is a rich ethnographic record of such alterations among contemporary hunter-gatherer societies. The ethnographic record is particularly interesting for its political implications, namely that “everyone was quite self-conscious about these differences. Among the Kwakiutl, for instance, individuals adopted different names in summer and winter seasons, literally becoming different people, depending on the time of year” (p. 606). This suggests that “social structures not only became more visible as subjects of

reflection; they were regularly assembled and disassembled, created and destroyed” (p. 606).

Thus it is likely that hunter-forager societies in the Upper Paleolithic consciously and deliberately alternated between hierarchical and egalitarian modes of social and political organization. Therefore, the idea of ‘hierarchical’ versus ‘egalitarian’ societies may be a bit of a false dichotomy that actually obscures the more relevant fact about our ancestors: they were likely “self-conscious political actors” who were “continually aware that no social order was immutable” (p. 613). What this suggests, of course, is that significant inequality is not a natural fact of human society, nor is perfect equality. This research makes clear not only how immense an influence social and material organization (and environmental exigencies) can have on human culture, identity, and thus, in a sense, ‘human nature,’ but also points to the radical possibility of all of these becoming more fluid.

The authors conclude that if “there is a riddle here it is why, after millennia of constructing and disassembling forms of hierarchy, Homo sapiens – supposedly the wisest of apes – allowed permanent and intractable systems of inequality to first take root” (p. 613). For Wright (2006), the answer is straightforward: it was the first progress trap of civilization—hunters became too efficient:²¹

among the things we need to know about ourselves is that the Upper Palaeolithic period ... ended with an all-you-can-kill wildlife barbecue. The perfection of hunting spelled the end of hunting as a way of life. Easy meat meant more babies.

²¹ Wright’s (2006) overall analysis of progress traps emphasizes the role of unequal social structures. Yet this latter factor cannot apply to his account of the Upper Paleolithic, which he suggests was characterized by egalitarian and nonurban societies.

More babies meant more hunters. More hunters, sooner or later, meant less game. Most of the great human migrations across the world at this time must have been driven by want, as we bankrupted the land with our moveable feasts (Chapter 2).

But if social organization was more fluid, or *overall* more egalitarian, for our Upper Paleolithic peers, why did they not change habits in the face of collapse? Wright (2006) seems to assume some sort of maximizing behaviour as a natural human trait. Yet the ethnographic record shows us that such an assumption is hugely problematic;²² even in agricultural societies ethnography has revealed that people will simply choose not to maximize production of food resources, even when it is clearly doable,²³ so why is it that our Upper Paleolithic peers did not do the same?

Archeologist Sarah Kurnick (2015) surveys some very fascinating answers. One argument starts from the assumption, somewhat at odds with Wengrow and Graeber (2015), that static pre-agricultural unequal social structures did, in fact, form in the Upper Paleolithic, and that this was not necessarily the result of environmental exigencies, but the result of leveling mechanisms²⁴ being relaxed; for this to happen in hunter-forager societies required the development of storage technology with which ‘surplus’ food could be saved. The argument is as follows:

when resources became abundant and storable, and all members of a community had enough to eat, leveling mechanisms would have been relaxed, proscriptions on self-interested behavior would have been lifted, and the notion of private property would have become acceptable. At that point, aggrandizers would have

²² See Dalton, 1961, for a discussion as to why.

²³ See, for example, Chapter 2 of Marshall Sahlins' (1974) classic work: *Stone Age Economics*.

²⁴ The importance of which Wengrow and Graeber (2015, p. 604) also emphasize.

begun to advance their own interests by, for example, hosting feasts to create debts owed by their invitees, and by fashioning and hoarding prestige objects such as jewelry made from exotic raw materials (p. 409).

This view assumes the presence of at least one ‘self-interested’ or ‘aggrandizing’ individual in such scenarios, which is, to be fair, not the most unbelievable assumption. In fact, this argument avoids the problematic assumption that humans are naturally utility-maximizing creatures, and instead assumes that at least some individuals can at least sometimes pursue self-aggrandizing activities, and that in certain contexts this can lead to asymmetrical relationships where advantages accumulate to one side over time, which could then result in some degree of institutionalized inequality.

Another argument centres on “economic changes that permit a few to control the labor of the many.... Severe wealth imbalances thus arise when individuals no longer control their own labor” (Kurnick, 2015, pp. 409-410). Kurnick (2015) suggests that these two arguments can be combined, with the former scenario preceding the latter, to make a more complete picture: extreme inequality “first emerged in places with abundant resources and groups able to procure, process, and store those resources, and when the many—for fear of retribution, belief in certain values, or an inability to conceive of other options—allowed the few to control their labor” (p. 412). So the reason, then, that many of our Upper Paleolithic peers did not simply choose to limit food production is possibly because of “economic changes that permit[ted] a few to control the labor of the many” (Kurnick, 2015, pp. 409-410). Which is to say that entrenched inequality, and the ideological pathologies that can be sustained by it, may have already been a factor before

the Neolithic revolution, and this could help us explain how the first ‘progress trap’ was unwittingly laid.

A key implication of Kurnick’s (2015) take on the emergence of extreme economic imbalances, is that we should “focus not on the emergence of agriculture, but on the *ability to produce, process, and store a surplus by whatever means*—including, but not limited to, agricultural production. *The critical variable is not the method of food production, but the quantity of food produced, and especially the quantity stored* (p. 408, emphasis mine). The archaeological work of M.E. Moseley (1975), namely his exploration of the *maritime foundations* of Andean civilization provides us with an approximate validation of Kurnick’s theory. Moseley’s (1975) archaeological investigation of the Prehispanic and pre-agricultural Andean civilization in coastal Peru reveals a socially stratified and sedentary society where “a relatively small group of people comprised an aristocracy that held a disproportionately large amount of power. This power was based on a labor tax which required the masses to execute certain amounts and types of work” (p. 3). This pre-agricultural, yet stratified and complex, civilization slowly developed out of a maritime economy that had been preceded by a hunting and gathering way of life.

What Moseley (1975) discovered in Peru suggests that it is not the perfection of a particular kind of subsistence economy that ‘spells its end’ as Wright suggests. Instead, the evidence he encountered suggests that it is the exploitation of novel resources which, in turn, allows for population growth which, in turn, creates a new constituency that relies on these novel resources which, in turn, presages a transformation of subsistence economy over time. However, Moseley (1975) also suggests that the later Andean

transition to agriculture from marine subsistence may have been a product of political choices rather than simply the result of this economic-demographic feedback loop. Indeed, Moseley (1975) highlights evidence that marine technology could have been further refined and marine resources further exploited, but neither transpired, suggesting that a key reason the marine economy was gradually replaced by agriculture was the fact that the institutions of the latter allowed the few to *further* organize and control the labour of the many (p. 119). This lines up with Kurnick's (2015) argument "that the extent to which workers control their own labor is a key variable in the emergence and persistence of dramatic economic inequality" (p. 412). But how do these relationships of control develop? This is something that has been explored by David Graeber, who exemplifies a valuable relational framework to understanding inequality.

1.3 A Relational Account of Inequality

If we look to his 2011 book *Debt: The first 5000 years*, we get a far more relational account of inequality than what was offered in the paper with Wengrow discussed above; Graeber's (2011) idiosyncratic take broadly falls in line with Charles Tilly's (2001) 'relational approach' to understanding the origins of inequality. Relational explanations of inequality are ones in which "inequality emerges from asymmetrical social interactions in which advantages accumulate on one side or the other, fortified by construction of social categories that justify and sustain unequal advantage" (Tilly, 2001, p. 360).²⁵ Graeber's relational account of inequality, like anthropologist Craig Muldrew's,²⁶ "commonly make[s] concessions to cultural, functional, coercive, or

²⁵ This fits Kurnick's (2015) discussion of the origins of inequality as well.

²⁶ Muldrew is one of Graeber's (2011) key sources, and one of Tilly's (2001) exemplars of the relational approach.

competitive mechanisms, but [centres its] explanations on cumulative and long-term effects of asymmetrical social interaction” (Tilly, 2001, p. 363). This is particularly true for Graeber when it comes to cultural and coercive mechanisms, which perhaps brings him more in line with anthropologist Don Kalb.²⁷

In *Debt*, Graeber (2011) couches these mechanisms in a relational setting between debtors and creditors where inequality clearly emerges from asymmetrical social interactions ‘in which advantages accumulate on one side or the other’ over time. We can see this in his discussion of the mindset of the conquistadors, for example, in which he points out that it was not simply “a psychology of cold, calculating greed” that fueled ongoing colonization of the New World, but “a much more complicated mix of shame and righteous indignation, and of the frantic urgency of debts (these were, almost certainly, *interest-bearing loans*)” (p. 318, emphasis mine). Here Graeber is locating a coercive mechanism²⁸ within the larger framework of a relational account. The relational approach is also dominant in Graeber's (2015) exploration of the origins of bureaucracy in *The Utopia of Rules*:²⁹ he speaks of how relatively equal relationships require a great deal of interpretive labour by all parties, but that asymmetrical relationships—in which violence, “the trump card of the stupid” (p. 68), can be employed by one side—“makes possible relations of a far more simple and schematic kind” (p. 68). When the asymmetry becomes vast enough, violence is no longer necessary, inequality becomes systematic,

²⁷ Kalb is another exemplar of Tilly's (2001) relational approach and a critic of Graeber.

²⁸ In *Debt*, coercive mechanisms are salient; Graeber (2011) traces the origins of the modern economy to the institution of slavery, which he argues arose with the presence of, and persistent threat from, organized, or “sustained and systematic,” violence that was sufficient to fundamentally pervert ‘human economies’ (p. 159)—the latter being “economic systems primarily concerned not with the accumulation of wealth, but with the creation, destruction, and rearranging of human beings” (p. 130).

²⁹ Again with significant concessions to coercive mechanisms.

violence becomes structural, and “lopsided structures of imaginative identification,” i.e. bureaucratic structures, are established (p. 69).

1.4 Preliminary Lessons for the Left

Graeber’s (2011, 2015) explorations of debt and bureaucracy serve as an example of why a relational account of inequality can be helpful to the Left. It shows us, for example, that there are other material relationships that are not strictly class-based, which are worthy of our focus when formulating Left strategy and analysis. Class, to be sure, is an essential category when analyzing the inequalities inherent to capitalism, but it is too often a calcified conception of class that is deployed. Class and the creditor/debtor relationship, for example, are surely not mutually exclusive categories. In other words, there are relational inequality mechanisms outside of the classic Marxist surplus value formulation that characterize and perpetuate contemporary capitalism.³⁰ This is to essentially agree with what Don Kalb has argued elsewhere, namely that class “is a generic name for [a] bundle of unstable, uneven, contradictory and antagonistic relational interdependences” (Kalb, 2015, p. 14). One benefit of focusing on other relational inequality mechanisms like debt is that it highlights the potential of corresponding leveling mechanisms like debt forgiveness.

A relational approach to inequality could also help to qualify and add depth to our understanding of totality, namely by helping us to avoid understanding overdetermination in too deterministic a way: totality is built from the ground up even though it shapes the

³⁰ Indeed, the importance of the creditor/debtor relationship as a mechanism of inequality and form of control that helps maintain the global capitalist system is especially salient at the international level, where debt is clearly used by wealthier states as a mechanism to subordinate, rob and control the less wealthy ones, and where control of the global credit system is one of the requisite pillars of structural power that defines American hegemony (see Strange, 1987).

ground itself. This chapter offers some other important lessons for those who pursue Left transformational strategy. First, it suggests that there is no default formulation of ‘human nature,’ or more precisely, there is no default formulation of human nature that is *external to society*, a fact that will be corroborated by much of the research explored in the next three chapters. For the transformational Leftist, this means that there is no human nature that will simply reassert itself following the dismantling of state and capitalism. Rather, this literature suggests that equality is something that has always been achieved, maintained and enforced through societal or communal mechanisms. Second, this chapter suggests that the degree to which there is material inequality in a society, or at least how hierarchically or horizontally a society is organized, shapes the identities, culture—or what one might call the nature—of the people within said society. Finally, this chapter also suggests that the Left ought to be more open to the consideration of a wider variety of leveling mechanisms, even if these mechanisms do not appear to be explicitly transformational, Marxist, or anti-capitalist.

2 Chapter: The Individual Level

2.1 On Human Nature

As is evidenced by the last chapter, any exploration of inequality is necessarily an indirect interrogation of ‘human nature,’ for the degree of the former plays a significant role in shaping our identities and cultures, and thus in shaping the latter. Also, it should go without saying that assumptions about human nature are foundational to political theories and inform their respective political prescriptions, and so the former’s relevance to political strategy should be obvious.³¹ That said, I do not wish to identify a static or single human nature here, nor am I certain of how the term ought to be defined or how useful the term is. What I am certain of is that our ‘natures’ vary greatly. Which is to say that it seems to me that humans are all of the things that different political philosophers say they are, but that there is no *default* formulation of these ostensibly foundational traits—though I believe that there are formulations that are indicative of a society which promotes human flourishing. Which is to say again what was said in the last chapter: there is no human nature that is external to society. So how selfish or generous people are, for example, depends greatly on the material, social and cultural context, or in other words the societal context. Given the dominance of cultural and moral relativism in some fields, however, it is worth pointing out here that our biological structures do place firm boundaries on the degree of variability possible.

³¹ The way these philosophies evaluate and understand inequality is generally determined in large part by these views as well.

This is a simple point, but one worth articulating. American linguist and public intellectual Noam Chomsky (2013b)³² makes this point about human morality; he starts from the assumption that the human *capacity* for moral thinking is a product of our biological structures. Which is to say that our ethical systems are produced by innate biological structures within ourselves. Whether it is language, culture or morality, these things are essentially formed through observations of behaviours and actions, and somehow we turn this ‘scattered data’ into complex beliefs and culture. This leap, Chomsky argues, from scattered data to a complex outcome is only possible if it is guided by specific genetic instructions. The data varies, of course, from people to people and from person to person; thus “there’s a range of options that’s possible, there’s variation within that range, but there are also limits to the range.”³³ Hence Chomsky argues that there are two kinds of moral (or cultural) relativism: one is uncontroversial, and the other is incoherent. The uncontroversial one acknowledges that human moral and cultural systems vary. The incoherent one suggests that human morality and culture can vary *infinitely*.

Thus the veracity of our claim that there is no human nature external to society depends on what we mean. If we mean that there is simply no such thing as a human nature understood as a particular formulation of certain character traits, predispositions, and behaviours, without the context of a society (or community), or if we mean that certain character traits, predispositions, and behaviours happen to be more dominant or

³² Some direct quotes in this text will not be accompanied by a reference to page number nor chapter, and this is because they are either from lectures, interviews and discussions found on Youtube, or from websites and journalistic sources.

³³ Interestingly, this actually parallels Althusser’s understanding of overdetermination discussed in footnote 3. ‘While the economic sets limits within which the political and ideological are obliged to operate, all of these levels enjoy a relative autonomy’ could be changed to ‘while biological structures set limits within which culture and morality are obliged to operate, all of these levels enjoy a relative autonomy.’

salient within specific cultures and societies than they are in others, then our claim is certainly veracious. *This does not negate the fact, however, that all human beings share biological structures and genetic predispositions which allow us to understand in broad strokes the kind of environments that promote human flourishing.* This latter understanding of human nature—or the possibilities *and limits* of human nature—actually allows for obtainable visions of a future socialist society, unlike the incoherent relativism above.³⁴ I do not wish to endorse, then, this incoherent relativism; however, I also do not wish to endorse the equally incoherent biological determinist view of human nature. This latter view essentially ignores the ‘scattered data’ humans observe altogether—to use Chomsky’s phrase—and suggests instead that our genes can actually *predetermine* our nature and behaviours. Neurological Sciences professor Robert Sapolsky of Stanford University identifies these opposing views—what he calls the social science view and the biology or genetics view—as the two ends of the nature versus nurture false dichotomy (Sapolsky, Maté, Wilkinson, & Gilligan, 2011).

2.2 The Nature vs. Nurture False Dichotomy

As Canadian physician and addictions specialist Gabor Maté (2010) puts it: “In the real world there is no nature vs. nurture argument, only an infinitely complex and moment-by-moment interaction between genetic and environmental effects” (Chapter 19). This new understanding is being fleshed out in a rapidly growing scientific field known as epigenetics. Maté (2010) describes the insights of the field thusly:

³⁴ “If in fact man is an indefinitely malleable, completely plastic being, with no innate structures of mind and no intrinsic needs of a cultural or social character, then he is a fit subject for the ‘shaping of behavior’ by the state authority, the corporate manager, the technocrat, or the central committee. Those with some confidence in the human species will hope this is not so and will try to determine the intrinsic human characteristics that provide the framework for intellectual development, the growth of moral consciousness, cultural achievement, and participation in a free community” (Chomsky, 2005, p. 114).

As a result of life events, chemicals attach themselves to DNA and direct gene activities. The licking of a rat pup by the mother in the early hours of life turns on a gene in the brain that helps protect the animal from being overwhelmed by stress even as an adult. In rats deprived of such grooming, the same gene remains dormant. Epigenetic effects are most powerful during early development and have now been shown to be transmittable from one generation to the next, without any change in the genes themselves. Environmentally induced epigenetic influences powerfully modulate genetic ones. How a gene acts is called gene expression. (Chapter 19).

Numerous studies have disproven the genetics view of human nature by revealing that our genes generally only *predispose* us to certain natures and behaviours (and illnesses for that matter), and that which genetic pathways are turned on or off within us is actually determined by our social and material environment.

Robert Sapolsky points to an example of one such landmark study which attempted to locate a gene within mice that could be shown to be responsible for a mouse's ability to remember things and to learn things. Researchers ostensibly located and removed such a gene from mice, and found that the progeny of said mice did indeed have learning difficulties. However, these genetically impaired mice were then taken and raised in a much more enriched and stimulating environment than what is experienced by the typical lab mouse in a cage, and they were found to be able to completely overcome their genetic deficit. What is interesting about *this* example—there are analogous findings

from studies with humans as subjects³⁵—is that the major media only reported the initial findings of the study, and never reported the second finding that a healthy environment can lead mice to overcome their genetic deficits (Sapolsky et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the belief that some behaviours are ‘simply genetic’³⁶ continues to be prevalent in our society and in our mainstream media.³⁷ Maté (2010) believes that several factors can explain this prevalence, such as a general neglect for developmental science and our tendency to try to identify one-to-one causations for most things, but he highlights one explanation in particular: “The genetic argument is easily used to justify all kinds of inequalities and injustices that are otherwise hard to defend” (Chapter 19).³⁸

The fact remains, however, that our environment, especially the pre-natal and post-natal one, can inform which genes are expressive and which remain dormant. This “early sensitivity isn’t just an evolutionary mistake,” epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson points out, “it exists again in many different species, even seedlings have an early adaptive process to the kind of environment they’re growing up in.”³⁹ For humans, says

³⁵ American psychiatrist James Gilligan offers an example of one such study; a study in New Zealand in which a few thousand individuals were studied from birth up to their 20s. The researchers found that they “could identify a genetic mutation—an abnormal gene—which did have some relation to the predisposition to commit violence, but only if the individual had also been subjected to severe child abuse. In other words, a child with this abnormal gene would be no more likely to be violent than anyone else, and in fact they actually had a lower rate of violence than people with normal genes as long as they weren’t abused as children” (Sapolsky, Maté, Wilkinson, & Gilligan, 2011).

³⁶ Robert Sapolsky points out that this view “is not that far from the history of eugenics,” and can therefore be dangerous (Sapolsky et al., 2011). Moreover, Gilligan points out that this genetic view is sometimes used to explain violent behaviour in society and can thus promote dangerous results, namely a strictly redistributive model of justice (Sapolsky et al., 2011).

³⁷ The liberal British-American comedian and host of the show ‘Last Week Tonight’ John Oliver (2016) dedicated an entire episode of his show to demonstrating how the American media routinely misrepresents scientific studies, and surveys some plausible reasons as to why this is.

³⁸ Elsewhere, Maté puts it more bluntly: “The genetic argument is simply a cop out which allows us to ignore the social and economic and political factors that in fact underlie many troublesome behaviours” (Sapolsky et al., 2011).

³⁹ Eco-feminist Vandana Shiva has made similar arguments in the context of flawed assumptions about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture: “The idea that you can have everything in one gene is too crude to handle a complex living system.... You can’t run away from systems thinking. GMOs

Wilkinson, “the adaptation is to the quality of social relations,” so how nurturing our early life environment is actually gives our body a sense of the kind of world we might grow up in and this results in some biological adaptations (Sapolsky et al., 2011). For Sapolsky (2011b) the inevitable conclusion is that “it is impossible to ever say what a gene does, you can only say what a gene does in the environments which to date it has been studied in.” This is not to say that genes do not at all influence behaviour both directly and, perhaps more importantly, indirectly.⁴⁰ What this says is that other factors influence our behaviour or nature, and that even our genetic influences can almost never be clearly separated from these other influences (Sapolsky, 2011a). It should be noted that influential environmental factors can be things other than social stressors, they can also be things like environmental toxins, for example (Sapolsky, 2011a). Thus, the social, material, *and* environmental—meant in a narrower sense here—contexts impact and interact with the biological systems that provide the boundaries for who we are or could be.

2.3 Nature Nurtures

Speaking of environment, in the narrower sense, it is worth briefly exploring here how our increasing separation from ‘nature’ impacts our physical and mental health, as well as who we are. Here we must acknowledge two separations: first, the false conceptual separation of human from nature, which is false insofar as we are ineluctably a part of the natural world. To think of ourselves as separate is merely a social construction: we are animals who ultimately depend on our ecosystems. However, there

represent an attempt to find an escape route, to think of one gene and then to move it” (as cited in Tran, 2013).

⁴⁰ See Sapolsky (2011a) for an exploration of indirect genetic influences on human behaviour, such as our genetically derived physical appearances.

is a second separation that is quite real insofar as urbanization, urban sprawl, geographical mobility and technological developments have all increased the distance between many of us and green spaces, or what is commonly referred to as the ‘natural world.’

That spending time in nature has health benefits is nothing new; Chinese Taoists knew it 2000 years ago, English gardeners were talking about it as early as 1699, and American Quakers were incorporating nature in mental health treatment as early as the 1870s (Louv, 2013, Chapter 4). Contemporary research corroborates this traditional wisdom. Modern studies in fields such as psychology and public health suggest that exposure to plants, animals, or even a view of a natural landscape can speed up recovery time from injury, lower the chances of becoming ill, and lower stress; in fact, studies that confirm that “one of the main benefits of spending time in nature is stress reduction” are not lacking (Louv, 2013, Chapter 4). As David Suzuki, a notable Canadian environmentalist and scientist puts it, “[b]eing in nature is good for all of us. People who get outside regularly are less stressed, have more resilient immune systems and are generally happier. And it's good for our kids. Studies show spending time in nature or green spaces helps reduce the symptoms of ADHD” (Suzuki & Clare, 2013).

Here we see again how environmental influences are particularly, though not exclusively, impactful at a young age. Some of the observed effects that an increased exposure to nature has on children are less known and established, but they are particularly interesting, and should perk the ears of any Leftist. For example, “in Sweden, Australia, Canada, and the United States, studies of children in schoolyards with both green areas and manufactured play areas found that children engaged in more creative

forms of play in the green areas,” while one study in particular found that “a more natural schoolyard encouraged more fantasy and make-believe play in particular, which provided ways for boys and girls to play together in *egalitarian* ways” (Louv, 2013, Chapter 7, emphasis mine). Other research has found that “when children played in an environment dominated by play structures rather than natural elements, they established their social hierarchy through physical competence;” whereas in more natural landscapes “the more creative children emerged as leaders” (Louv, 2013, Chapter 7). Perhaps the most fascinating insight, however, comes from research being done by environmental psychologist Louise Chawla. She has found that people, especially during their formative years, are more likely to experience transcendental moments when they are in natural settings and their five senses are simultaneously being stimulated; Chawla identifies these as ecstatic memories and argues that they give us “meaningful images; an internalized core of calm; a sense of integration with nature; and for some, a creative disposition” (as cited in Louv, 2013, Chapter 7).⁴¹

2.4 The Mind vs. Body False Dichotomy

That our biological nature cannot be understood separately from our environment is true not just in the context of our genes or our proximity to nature, but also in the context of a broader level of the functioning of our biological systems. There is a sibling separation to the nature versus nurture false dichotomy that must be addressed, namely the separation of mind from body. The ‘medical model’ too often assumes these separations, but they “are socially imposed, they’re culturally defined, and scientifically

⁴¹ That these kinds of, what one might call spiritual, experiences are actually possible and do occur is something that has been confirmed by the work of other psychologists as well, but it still remains outside the mainstream (see Louv, 2013, Chapter 21).

they're completely invalid" (Maté, 2014). The scientifically understood connection between our mental and our physical selves is stronger than is commonly realized. Even the immediate physiological experience of our emotional state in our brain, for example, can be quite similar, if not exactly the same, to what results from physical stimuli.

The very same brain centres that interpret and "feel" physical pain also become activated during the experience of emotional rejection: on brain scans they "light up" in response to social ostracism just as they would when triggered by physically harmful stimuli. When people speak of feeling "hurt" or of having emotional "pain," they are not being abstract or poetic but scientifically quite precise (Maté, 2010, Chapter 3).

Thus emotion is not simply what we feel in an abstract and subjective sense; it is also a biological process that we do not always express outwardly, or for that matter, consciously experience inwardly (Maté, 2003, Chapter 3). This biological expression of emotion, it turns out, impacts far more than just the brain, let alone just the emotional centres therein.

In fact, emotion impacts all of the various internal biological interconnections that form the 'super-system' within us that ensures "the development, survival and reproduction of each organism" (Maté, 2003, Chapter 7). As Maté (2003) puts it:

The body's hormonal system is inextricably linked with the brain centres where emotions are experienced and interpreted. In turn, the hormonal apparatus and the emotional centres are interconnected with the immune system and the nervous system. These are not four separate systems, but one super-system that functions

as a unit to protect the body from external invasion and from disturbances to the internal physiological condition (Chapter 5).

This super-system is known as the *psychoneuroimmunoendocrine* (PNI) system, which is the subject of a novel field of study known as *psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology*. The latter is a relatively new “discipline that studies the interrelated functions of the organs and glands that regulate our behaviour and physiological balance,” and is based on the view that the “brain, nervous system, immune organs and immune cells and the endocrine glands are joined together through several pathways” so as to form a coherent unit or super-system (Maté, 2003, Chapter 7). This discipline is “no less than the science of the interactions of mind and body, the indissoluble unity of emotions and physiology in human development and throughout life in health and illness” (Maté, 2003, Chapter 1).

This new discipline is an example of the deliberate transcendence of the arbitrary compartmentalization and parochialization of scientific knowledge that I referred to in the introduction.⁴² That said, a holistic understanding of the ‘mindbody,’⁴³ or what I would rather refer to as our *being* or simply the *human being*, is not particularly novel. Maté (2003) argues that “[m]any doctors over the centuries came to understand that emotions are deeply implicated in the causation of illness or in the restoration of health ... but repeatedly their ideas, explorations and insights vanished in a sort of medical Bermuda Triangle” (Chapter 1). The most intriguing example he offers of this is from one of Plato’s dialogues wherein Socrates quotes a Thracian doctor’s criticism of his

⁴² Indeed, Maté (2003) quotes Candace Pert, a leading American researcher in the field, as saying that “the conceptual division between the sciences of immunology, endocrinology, and psychology/neuroscience is a historical artifact” (Chapter 7).

⁴³ “Even to speak about links between mind and body is to imply that two discrete entities are somehow connected to each other. Yet in life there is no such separation; there is no body that is not mind, no mind that is not body. The word mindbody has been suggested to convey the real state of things” (Maté, 2003, Chapter 1).

colleagues. “This is the reason why the cure of so many diseases is unknown to the physicians of Hellas; they are ignorant of the whole. For this is the great error of our day in the treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the mind from the body” (as cited in Maté, 2003, Chapter 1). It would appear this remains one of the great errors of our day as well. Knowledge of the mind and body as inseparable is not just a perennially reproduced Western discovery, however: these ‘discoveries’ vindicate traditional Chinese and Indian medicine which have long understood this (Maté, 2014).

Nevertheless, these new scientific fields are making it increasingly clear that our emotional states and their hormonal correlates affect virtually every tissue in the body (Maté, 2003, Chapter 3). Which is to say again that the environment, as was the case with epigenetics, has a significant impact on our being. This means once again that social relations which are conducive to negative ‘feelings’⁴⁴ like anxiety, stress and loneliness can and do cause serious physiological harm.

We see that stress is not just an abstract psychological event, it has physiological correlates. So when you’re stressed, your whole body, the homeostasis of the internal balance is perturbed, and fundamentally you have disturbances of the nervous system, increases in the heart rate, blood pressure, and in the stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, which [under normal circumstance do] their job in helping you escape or to fight back in the face of an acute threat, but if your chronically stressed they actually create disease (Maté, 2014).

⁴⁴ It should be noted here again, that one need not be conscious of stress for the biological experience of it to be present (Maté, 2003, Chapter 3).

This appears to be especially true for chronic illnesses and diseases that are, or likely are, auto-immune diseases.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Maté (2003) believes that there are many diseases that are not commonly considered auto-immune diseases for which a strong case can be made that they be considered as such; throughout his book *When The Body Says No: The cost of hidden stress*, he makes a convincing case that diseases such as scleroderma, rheumatoid arthritis, ulcerative colitis, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's, asthma, cancer, ALS, as well as many others, should be, or likely should be, considered auto-immune diseases, because of their demonstrable relationship to the PNI system and to emotional stimuli, namely stress and repressed emotions.

3 Chapter: The Societal Level

3.1 More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better

It turns out that many of the environmental factors—what are known as *biopsychosocial*⁴⁶ factors—that significantly shape us from the prenatal stage onwards ebb and flow with the rise and fall of economic inequality. This is what the monumental research of epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2011) has revealed in perhaps the most important book in at least a generation. In *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better* Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) document their research and the research of many others on the relationship between income inequality and the prevalence of various health and social problems within rich capitalist democracies. It is likely the most comprehensive look at this relationship to date. By compiling and summarizing vast bodies of relevant, yet disparate, research in a single text, the authors not only demonstrate a tight correlation between economic inequality and a plethora of health and social problems, they make an incredibly convincing case that the relationship is a causal one. Ultimately, what Wilkinson & Pickett (2011) show is that “the quality of social relations in a society is built on material foundations” (p. 4), and that “greater equality is the material foundation on which better social relations are built” (p. 272).

Before exploring how it is that inequality relates to biopsychosocial stressors in our societies, we should discuss the general statistical relationships that Wilkinson and

⁴⁶ The perspective from which we have so far been approaching understanding mental and physical health, or more generally the functioning of our being, is commonly referred to as either a psychosocial approach, or (more precisely) a biopsychosocial approach. “According to the biopsychosocial view, individual biology reflects the history of a human organism in lifelong interaction with an environment, a perpetual interchange of energy in which psychological and social factors are as vital as physical ones” (Maté, 2003, Chapter 18).

Pickett (2011) identified. The authors look at the relationship between income inequality⁴⁷ and a specific set of indicators of societal wellbeing in a comparison of 23 rich capitalist democracies,⁴⁸ which is corroborated by a comparison of US states along the same lines. The indicators tracked by the authors are those that they could find reliable and comparable figures for. They are: level of trust, mental illness (including drug and alcohol addiction), life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, children's educational performance, teenage birth rates, homicides, imprisonment rates, and social mobility.⁴⁹ Beyond this, Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) survey relevant research from various fields of study to both provide a fuller picture of what is already known about inequality as well as to make the case for a causal relationship. Whether looking at their indicators of societal wellbeing individually, or compiling them in an index, the authors find that there is a strong positive correlation between negative outcomes on these indicators and income inequality. That is to say that the more income inequality there is in a society, the more prevalent the health and social problems that these indicators measure tend to be.

⁴⁷ Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) "use the ratio of the income received by the top to the bottom 20 per cent whenever we are comparing inequality in different countries: it is easy to understand and it is one of the measures provided ready-made by the United Nations. When comparing inequality in US states, we use the Gini coefficient: it is the most common measure, it is favoured by economists and it is available from the US Census Bureau. In many academic research papers we and others have used two different inequality measures in order to show that the choice of measures rarely has a significant effect on results" (p. 18)." That said, both measures tend to understate economic inequality due to the fact that they measure income and not wealth; the inequality of the latter is generally vaster within rich capitalist democracies.

⁴⁸ Wilkinson and Pickett's (2011) rationale for their selection of the 23 countries is reasonable, and does not betray any attempt to introduce bias:

"First, we obtained a list of the 50 richest countries in the world from the World Bank.... Then we excluded countries with populations below 3 million, because we didn't want to include tax havens like the Cayman Islands and Monaco. And we excluded countries without comparable data on income inequality, such as Iceland. That left us with 23 rich countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom [and the] United States of America (p. 301)."

⁴⁹ Comparable data for this last indicator was not available for US states.

How could this be? Could not this list of ostensibly disparate phenomena be caused by factors other than inequality? Of course, inequality is not the sole causal factor here, but this research makes clear that it is an undeniable one, and quite likely the ‘prime mover.’ One reason why we should view inequality as a causal factor is that the health and social problems the authors identify as having a strong relationship with inequality are ones that we already know are related to socioeconomic status; that is, they are problems that have strong social class gradients, i.e. problems that become increasingly common the lower one is in the social hierarchy. Moreover, it turns out that “the steeper the social gradient a problem has within society, the more strongly it will be related to inequality” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 27).⁵⁰ The strongest argument for causation, however, is one that connects inequality to the biopsychosocial stressors that themselves act as causal factors for the health and social problems Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) identify.

3.2 The Age of Anxiety

Given the inseparability of mind from body, mental health from physical health, and the individual from social relations explored in Chapter 2 (2.4), the increasing prevalence of societal ills makes sense in the context of an increasingly anxious, stressed, and depressed citizenry. These things are indeed on the rise in the rich capitalist democracies, namely the most unequal ones. The United States provides a particularly startling example. “By reviewing the large number of studies of anxiety levels in the population carried out at different dates,” Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State

⁵⁰ Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) point out that this “not only applies to each problem - to teenage birth rates or to children doing badly at school, for example - it looks as if it also applies to sex differences in the same problem. The reason why women’s obesity rates turn out ... to be more closely related to inequality than men’s, seems to be that the social gradient in obesity is steeper among women than men” (p. 27)

University “has documented very clear trends. She found 269 broadly comparable studies measuring anxiety levels in the USA at various times between 1952 and 1993.... What they showed was a continuous upward trend throughout this forty-year period” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 33). She found that “the average college student at the end of the period was more anxious than 85 per cent of the population at the beginning of it and, even more staggering, *by the late 1980s the average American child was more anxious than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s*” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 34, emphasis mine).

Anxiety, it turns out, is closely related to depression. In fact, “people who suffer from one often suffer from the other, and psychiatrists sometimes treat the two conditions in similar ways. There are now large numbers of studies showing substantial increases in rates of depression in developed countries” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 35).

Wilkinson and Pickett’s (2011) review of the literature on this comes to the conclusion “that people in many developed countries have experienced substantial rises in anxiety and depression,” and that “[a]mong adolescents, these have been accompanied by increases in the frequency of behavioural problems, including crime, alcohol and drugs” (p. 35). As anxiety and depression were on the rise, however, so was self-confidence, at least insofar as people were becoming “more likely to agree with statements such as ‘I am a person of worth’; and they seemed to have put aside self-doubts and feelings that they were ‘useless’ or ‘no good at all’” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 36). This perplexed researchers at first, but over time “many research groups looking at individual differences in self-esteem at a point in time (rather than at trends in population averages over time) began to notice two categories of people who came out with high scores”

(Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 36). One category was associated with positive outcomes such as “happiness, confidence, being able to accept criticism, an ability to make friends, and so on;” the second category, however, was associated with “people who showed tendencies to violence, to racism, who were insensitive to others and were bad at personal relationships” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 36-37).

Essentially, the researchers discovered that what they were actually measuring was a rise in narcissism or ‘threatened egotism’ fueled by “increasing anxieties about how we are seen and what others think of us;” this narcissism acts as “a kind of defensive attempt to shore up our confidence in the face of those insecurities. The defence involves a kind of self-promoting, insecure egotism which is easily mistaken for high self-esteem” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 36). Twenge, the psychologist referenced above, has shown—over the relatively short amount of time since narcissism has been measured separately from genuine self-esteem—that narcissism is indeed on the rise (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 37).⁵¹ What better symbol of this trend in America than Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump? On a superficial level he exudes self-confidence; yet, upon further analysis, he appears to be an incredibly shallow and insecure person. Moreover, the characteristics associated with narcissism mentioned above, namely

⁵¹ It is quite possible that many tests for anxiety and depression could result in an underestimation of these trends as a result of the corresponding rise in narcissism. This is so because the flip side of a defensive projection of self-confidence, that is characteristic of ‘threatened egotism,’ is presumably a suppression of genuine emotions. This may make anxiety and depression less discernable to researchers, but it does not make the physiological correlates to the stress that results from suppressed emotions any less real. For example, Maté (2003) points to researchers at Johns Hopkins University who in 1946 began “a long-term prospective study to establish whether there are psychobiological characteristics in young people that could help predict susceptibility to future disease states” (Chapter 9). Over 18 years they found a strong link between the suppression of emotions and the development of cancer; what this meant, however, is that many of those who had the lowest scores for depression and anxiety were the same people who later developed cancer (Maté, 2003, Chapter 9). Of course, this is not to suggest that all people who suppress emotions are narcissists—in fact they are often people who are considered to be the type of caring person who puts the needs of others above their own. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that ‘threatened egotism’ may successfully conceal anxiety and stress from researchers.

tendencies to violence, to racism, insensitivity to others and dysfunctional personal relationships, are far from foreign to the Donald.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) argue that the related upward trends in narcissism, depression, stress and anxiety are, in part, caused by the increasing perception of *social evaluative threats*, i.e. the perception that others are judging you (pp. 37-39). They point to research done by psychologists at the University of California who “collected findings from 208 published reports of experiments in which people’s cortisol levels [the most significant stress hormone] were measured while they were exposed to an experimental stressor” (p. 38). They found that experiments that “included a social-evaluative threat (such as threats to self-esteem or social status), in which others could negatively judge performance, particularly when the outcome of the performance was *uncontrollable*, provoked larger and more reliable cortisol changes than stressors without these particular threats” (as cited in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 38, emphasis mine). This helps explain why with a rise in anxiety we have seen a corresponding rise in narcissism or ‘threatened egotism’ which, as the reader will recall, is a ‘defensive attempt to shore up our confidence.’

Social evaluative threats make us stressed, and stress is a causal factor behind a whole host of physical and mental illnesses. That social evaluative threats stress us out is not surprising given that “the most powerful sources of stress affecting health [already] seem to fall into three *intensely social categories*: low social status, lack of friends, and stress in early life. All have been shown, in many well-controlled studies, to be seriously detrimental to health and longevity” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 39, emphasis mine). Increases in inequality increase our social evaluative anxieties, because the wider

material gaps, and thus social gaps, are between us, the more significant relative status becomes, thus exacerbating status anxiety and status competition in society.

We already know that social status plays a large role in our evaluation of others. “Indeed, psychological experiments suggest that we make judgements of each other’s social status within the first few seconds of meeting” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 44). It only makes sense that status would become more important in an increasingly stratified society, and research confirms this, such as studies that “have found that when choosing prospective marriage partners, people in more unequal countries put less emphasis on romantic considerations and more on criteria such as financial prospects, status and ambition, than do people in less unequal societies” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 44). It is not status anxiety alone, however, that is the vehicle through which inequality causes health and social problems in a society; rather, it feeds stress and helps produce negative health and social outcomes in other ways as well.

3.3 On Strained Social Relations

Economic inequality can be shown to undermine community, social cohesion and solidarity, whose “importance to human wellbeing is demonstrated repeatedly in research which shows how beneficial friendship and involvement in community life is to health. ‘Equality’ comes into the picture as a precondition for getting the other two right” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 45). One of the ways ‘equality’ does this is through its effect on levels of trust in society. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) demonstrate this through their comparison of the 23 rich capitalist democracies (and their corroboratory comparison of American states), which reveals a strong correlation between income inequality and levels of trust. Although the two trends may be mutually reinforcing to

some extent, the most extensive research on this relationship suggests that it is inequality that is the ‘prime mover.’

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) look to two researchers in particular when coming to this conclusion: political scientists Eric Uslaner and Robert Putnam, two authors who regularly turned up throughout my review of the political science literature on inequality as well. Putnam makes the case that *social capital*⁵² and economic (in)equality are closely related, and has found that as inequality grows social capital is eroded. However, he comes to the conclusion that “the causal arrows are likely to run in both directions, with citizens in high social capital states likely to do more to reduce inequalities, and inequalities themselves likely to be socially divisive” (as cited in Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 55). Uslaner, on the other hand, points out that social capital focuses on the relationships people have with their friends and neighbours; whereas level of trust in a society is usually measured by gauging people’s views of ‘strangers’ or ‘others.’ “Using a wealth of data from different sources, [Uslaner] shows that people who trust others are *optimists, with a strong sense of control over their lives*” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 55, emphasis mine). In one study, Uslaner and his colleague Bo Rothstein use a statistical test for causality to show that it is inequality that causes mistrust, and not the other way around; elsewhere, Uslaner finds that inequality has “a stronger impact on trust than rates of unemployment, inflation or economic growth” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 55). This makes sense, because inequality tends to increase the social (and geographical⁵³) distance between groups: people tend to choose friends among people of the same social

⁵² Social capital simply refers to “the sum total of people’s involvement in community life” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 54).

⁵³ As inequality increases geographical distances increase between classes with the rise of gated communities and ghettos (Therborn, 2013, Chapter 2; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 58).

class, and thus it may become harder to trust, identify with, and empathize with groups the greater the distance they are from one's own.

3.4 On Slow Violence

Now that inequality's causal connection to biopsychosocial stressors has been sufficiently fleshed out, we can take stock of some of its destructive consequences. Wilkinson & Pickett (2011) find a tight correlation between income inequality and the prevalence of mental illness (including drug addiction), though they could only find comparable data on mental illness for 12 of their 23 countries. Among these 12 countries, however, the relationship is exceptionally strong and cannot be explained by chance.⁵⁴ With our increased understanding of our beings it is predictable "that societies with low levels of trust and weaker community life are also those with worse mental health" (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 70). World Health Organization survey results show that differences in the level of mental illnesses between the rich capitalist democracies are dramatic. These results and their tight relationship to income inequality suggest that reductions in inequality that have already been attained elsewhere could possibly translate in reductions in mental illness in the more unequal nations. For example, mental illness in Canada could potentially be halved; whereas the US could potentially cut levels of mental illness down by two thirds (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 66–67).

To give an idea of the gravity of mental health problems in unequal societies it is instructive to look at statistics coming out of the UK and US, two of the more unequal rich capitalist democracies.

⁵⁴ The authors found that it was "[a]nxiety disorders, impulse-control disorders and severe illness" that were most strongly correlated with inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 68).

A million British children - one in ten between the ages of 5 and 16 - are estimated to be mentally ill.... After surveying thousands of children, [an independent inquiry reported] that increasing numbers of children have mental health problems, over a quarter regularly feeling depressed, mostly as a result of family breakdown and peer pressure. In the USA ... a national survey [found that] almost 10 per cent of children aged 3-17 had moderate or severe difficulties in ‘the areas of emotions, concentration, behaviour, or being able to get along with other people’ (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 63).

The situation is equally grim for adults in these countries. “In the UK, in a national survey conducted in 2000, 23 per cent of adults had either a neurotic disorder, a psychotic disorder, or were addicted to alcohol or drugs.... In the USA, one in four adults have been mentally ill in the past year and almost a quarter of these episodes were severe; over their lifetime more than half will suffer from a mental illness” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 63-64).

This has grave implications for socialists—we must not forget that these problems have a social gradient; they are deeply social/relational problems. Thus the constituency that socialists most want to mobilize, namely the majority of people who occupy the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, are most affected by increasing rates of mental illness. In other words, these trends impact the Left more than they impact the Right, and this likely sets the stage for mainstream politics to shift further Right. The growth of mental illness and addiction undermines the Left, not just because of the toxicity, burn out, alienation and general dysfunction it can produce and exacerbate, but because it keeps people from *getting involved in the first place*.

Getting physically ill and/or dying is also a rather large barrier to participation on the Left. Income inequality is tightly correlated to physical health and life expectancy. This should be unsurprising since mental and physical health are closely linked. This is especially true during childhood, for stress in early life affects one's health in later life as well. Perhaps the most famous studies that have linked stress to physical wellbeing are the two Whitehall studies which were long term follow-up studies that monitored the health of British civil servants. The first study was launched in 1967 and found "a strong inverse association between position in the civil service hierarchy and death rates. Men in the lowest grade (messengers, doorkeepers, etc.) had a death rate three times higher than that of men in the highest grade (administrators);" this study was preceded by a later study which included women, and it found that "low job status is not only related to a higher risk of heart disease: it is also related to some cancers, chronic lung disease, gastrointestinal disease, depression, suicide, sickness absence from work, back pain and self-reported health" (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 75). The factor that these researchers found to be the most significant in determining negative health outcomes *was a lack of control over work*, and numerous other studies have since come to similar conclusions, finding that the sense of a lack of control is one of the situations that most predictably causes stress (see Maté, 2003, Chapters 3 & 7, 2010, Chapter 18, 2014; Sapolsky, 2004, Chapter 17; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 75).

What is striking about the Whitehall studies is that they have civil servants as their subjects. These are presumably unionized workers with relatively decent pay, benefits, and job security. What this emphasizes, then, is the point that *relative status* matters in itself, outside of absolute material deprivation. This is a good reminder that

these problems have a social gradient, which means that they affect everyone from the bottom rung to the top, with those lower down bearing the brunt of it. When inequality increases, then, these problems intensify not just at the bottom, but all the way to the top of the social hierarchy as well. This has been confirmed by numerous studies that show “that income inequality affects health, even after adjusting for people’s individual incomes” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 87). This represents another challenge to reified conceptions of class that over structuralize the term; class ought to be seen as representing a ‘bundle of relationships,’ not some static unidimensional status.

The relationship between inequality and health is further demonstrated by the tight relationship between the former and life expectancy found by Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) through their comparison of rich capitalist democracies and US states. Once again, the evidence suggests the causal arrow flows from inequality. “A dramatic example of how reductions in inequality can lead to rapid improvements in health is the experience of Britain during the two world wars. Increases in life expectancy for civilians during the war decades were twice those seen throughout the rest of the twentieth century” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 84). These same decades “were characterized by full employment and *considerably narrower income differences* - the result of deliberate government policies to promote co-operation with the war effort” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 85, emphasis mine). Conversely, “the decrease in life expectancy in Eastern European countries in the six years following the collapse of communism (1989-95) was shown to be greatest in the countries which saw the most rapid widening of income differences” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 190). Furthermore, “Russia has experienced dramatic decreases in life expectancy since the early 1990s, as it moved from a centrally

planned to a market economy, accompanied by a rapid rise in income inequality” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 87). In fact, the Russian transition to capitalism in the 1990s saw the crude Russian death rate increase by roughly the same per cent (approximately 49%) that it did during the brutal Stalinist collectivization from 1930-1933 (Therborn, 2013, Chapter 1).

Inequality also causes casualties due to its strong relationship with the prevalence of violence (as measured by homicide rates). Once again, Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) found this to be true of both rich capitalist democracies and US states (pp. 135-136). They also found that there is more conflict between children in more unequal societies using data from UNICEF⁵⁵ (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 139).⁵⁶ One reason why is “that increased inequality ups the stakes in the competition for status,” and this ‘competition’ is more likely to turn violent when the stakes are higher (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 134). Ultimately, individuals become more sensitive to shame and humiliation—feelings associated with social evaluative anxiety—in more unequal societies where status differences are amplified, and this helps explain how inequality increases the prevalence of violence (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp.134-144). On top of that, however, other social and health problems that are known to be more prevalent in unequal societies go a long way in explaining how greater inequality can lead to more violence, such as addiction, mental illness, dysfunctional family life and a poorer education. The absence of a father, or family breakdown in general, for example, has not

⁵⁵ UNICEF stands for the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund.

⁵⁶ Interestingly, it is not only the actual presence of violence that is connected to inequality, but the fear of violence itself. Both have negative consequences; however, the two do not always match up.

only been shown to increase the likelihood of violence, but to lead to intergenerational cycles of violence.

There also appears to be a relationship between income inequality and punitive policies of imprisonment and punishment. This relationship is also borne out statistically by Wilkinson & Pickett (2011) who find a strong relationship between these in their country and US state comparisons. Furthermore, they argue that the approach of more equal countries and US states is generally one that is “developed in consultation with experts ... and so reflect both theoretical and evidence-based considerations of what works to deter crime and rehabilitate offenders. In contrast, more unequal countries and states seem to have developed legal frameworks and penal systems in response to media and political pressure” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 155-156). It is widely known that more punitive sentencing does not mitigate the presence of crime, and may actually increase it, and that higher rates of imprisonment in unequal societies generally tends to “reflect more punitive sentencing rather than crime rates” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 153).

With the foregoing in mind we can begin to understand, more broadly, a crucial implication of growing economic inequality, namely that it is tantamount to a kind of structural violence. That inequality is structural violence, however, is not especially novel. It is what that structural violence actually looks like over time that often goes under-articulated. The totality of the effects of *growing* inequality are seldom fleshed out to a great extent, and the picture that emerges here is not just one of structural violence, but one of *slow violence*. ‘Slow violence’ is a term that English professor Rob Nixon (2011) uses to describe slow moving disasters whose destruction is often invisible,

ignored or forgotten in large part due to their delayed or slow moving effects and our temporally biased perception that favours events that are immediate and able to be captured in an image or a moment.

He uses the term to “address our inattention to calamities that are slow and long lasting, calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans—and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media” (Nixon, 2011, p. 6). Nixon (2011) uses the term to deal with issues such as pollution and ACD specifically,⁵⁷ but as is likely apparent by now, it easily applies to the insidious and imperceptible destruction wrought by economic inequality, *especially since the latter can also be seen to fuel ACD* via increased consumerism. *Growing* inequality is more than just structural violence, then, because it is akin to a slow-moving disaster that we regularly fail to perceive or understand, whose damage is cumulative and multi-generational, sending ripples that penetrate our physiological, mental, temporal, material, and cosmological realities.

3.5 On Societal Dysfunction

We have hardly exhausted the list of societal ills for which economic inequality can be seen to play a causal role. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) demonstrate, using their usual comparisons, how income inequality is strongly correlated to educational performance (as measured by literacy). The importance of one’s social environment when it comes to learning is well known, and given the already discussed detrimental effects of inequality on social relations and the social environment, it is no surprise that inequality also negatively affects this indicator. The effects of a more hierarchical and mistrustful

⁵⁷ Reminder: ACD stands for Anthropogenic Climate Disruption.

society likely permeates intimate relationships and family life. Divorce rates, for example, have been found to rise with inequality in the US (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 111). Furthermore, studies by economists, and studies by social psychologists, have both shown how the perception of one's social status directly affects one's performance generally; the evidence suggests that "[w]hen we expect to be viewed as inferior, our abilities seem to be diminished" (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010, p. 113). New developments in neurology can provide us with an explanation as to how environment impacts learning at a biological level: there are chemical reactions in the brain that correspond to the positive and negative feelings that different environments are conducive to. Positive feelings generally produce chemicals like dopamine, which are advantageous to learning because they enhance our memory, attention span and problem solving abilities; negative feelings like stress, on the other hand, produce cortisol, which has been found to inhibit our capacity for learning, namely our ability to think and remember (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 115).

This also has serious implications for Left strategy. This is so not because our liberal educational institutions would better inculcate the youth with socialist viewpoints if youth had a healthier social environment—there is a certain kind of ignorance that one can only achieve by successfully making it through post-secondary levels of education.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, fruitful 'unlearning' necessarily benefits from a healthy environment as well, because learning anything at all is more easily accomplished in a more equal, thus

⁵⁸ In Gramscian terms, we understand these civil society institutions as a quintessential feature of hegemony; where hegemony is wrought through (contrived) consent rather than through domination. Schools, therefore, are part of the ideological superstructure that naturalizes the capitalist order, or so the theory goes. I believe that the degree to which schools actually play that role is, in fact, related to inequality.

healthier, environment, as the research above shows. That said, better funded public education (especially at the tertiary level) is characteristic of the more equal rich capitalist democracies, and it is reasonable to argue that the more schools become subject to a consumer model (which is the result of insufficient public funding) with its insidious instrumental rationality, the less room there will be for critical theory and socialist thought. The precarious contract instructor may want to challenge the worldview of their students, but this can easily result in an *unhappy customer*. It is like the communist gadfly and cultural philosopher Slavoj Žižek says in his film *a Pervert's Guide to Ideology*: “to step out of ideology—it hurts. It’s a painful experience” (Fiennes, 2013).

Yet another dysfunctional outcome of an increasingly unequal rich market democracy is the rise of teenage pregnancies. A trend that, in the United States, has been commercialized through reality TV shows like *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*.⁵⁹ Once again, Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) find a strong correlation between this social problem and income inequality for rich capitalist democracies and US states, and once again the causal arrow flows from inequality to the social problem. One explanation for this lies in evolutionary psychology which suggests that teenage motherhood may be the result of young women responding to a *quantity*—rather than a *quality*—reproductive strategy that is genetically triggered; the lack of social cohesion and trust found in unequal environments may trigger this anachronistic evolutionary strategy that sees higher reproduction as a way to increase the survival odds of one’s progeny.

A biological counterpart to this is that women reach maturation faster in more stressful environments, especially when they experience early conflict or the absence of a

⁵⁹ The upward trend of addictions in America has similarly been commercialized by shows like *Intervention*.

father, and reaching puberty earlier has been shown to increase the likelihood of teenage pregnancy (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 127). Ultimately, “there may be deep-seated adaptive processes which lead from more stressful and unequal societies—perhaps particularly from low social status—to higher teenage birth rates” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 127). Once again, this is not something that the socialist should shrug at, for we know that “teenage motherhood [can be] a pathway through which women become excluded from the activities and connections of the wider society, and a way in which generations become trapped by inequality” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 125). A fight for socialism without the active leadership and equal participation of women is unlikely to be a fight for socialism at all.

The injuries of inequality are felt proportionally;⁶⁰ they are not felt equally. In other words, as inequality grows, our socialist meetings will likely become increasingly less representative of our constituencies. Yet some on the Left still maintain that a more dysfunctional society could push a majority of people into transformational movements. The foregoing makes clear how unlikely this is. If anything, it paints a picture of an increasingly mistrustful and unwell population that may have little time for (and faith in) socialist projects, especially in the presence of alternative and more amplified political programs that exploit that mistrust and dysfunction.

⁶⁰ Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) illustrate this point by highlighting what once seemed to be the paradoxical results of research on health inequalities: they are not related to income inequality. Far from being paradoxical, it is entirely consistent, for it shows that greater equality improves health for the poor more than it does the rich, but ultimately still improves the health of the rich. In other words, “everyone receives roughly proportional benefits from greater equality” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 182).

3.6 Can We Really Say Inequality is the Cause?

While reviewing the monumental work of Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) I have failed to mention many of their arguments for causality, as well as many of their well thought out control variables. Of course, my goal here is not to reproduce their entire work in these pages; rather, it is to communicate their conclusions as part of a broader picture of inequality as a totalizing factor, or a macro-totality factor, that profoundly influences social totality. Nevertheless, I will briefly review here Wilkinson and Pickett's (2011) case for causality. First it should be noted that the statistical relationship between income inequality and each of the health and social problems is so strong that it is extremely unlikely that they are all caused by some other unknown factor. The most plausible alternative factor would likely be average income—as opposed to relative income—but the authors demonstrate in their comparison of rich capitalist democracies (and US states) that their index of health and social problems is not significantly related to average income. They also rule out the possibility that government spending is the primary mover, for it too has little to no relationship with their index of health and social problems.

Of course, living standards do rise as countries become wealthier, but this is only true up to a certain point; as wealth increases there are 'diminishing returns' on social goods. None of Wilkinson and Pickett's (2011) indicators of societal wellbeing show a relationship to increases of wealth after a certain threshold of economic wellbeing is reached within a rich capitalist democracy. After this threshold is reached it is the distribution of wealth that becomes a much more important determinant of human wellbeing. Some indicators of societal wellbeing, such as life expectancy, *may*

nevertheless continue to rise in increasingly unequal societies (due to advances in public health, medicine, science, technology, etc.),⁶¹ but the position of the latter *relative* to the more equal societies will nevertheless continue to worsen. That said, even some of the *absolute* measures of wellbeing that are expected to continue to rise over time (in the absence of war and other disasters) have become relatively flat in some of the wealthiest, yet most unequal, rich capitalist democracies, such as the US and UK, while some standards (e.g. life expectancy and educational performance) are starting to show evidence of decline.⁶²

What about cultural differences? While it is true that the English-speaking countries perform particularly poorly, while Scandinavian countries perform exceptionally well, this does not explain why there is a strong correlation between inequality and health and social problems within these cultural blocks of countries, nor does it explain why Japan performs so well, while Portugal performs so poorly. Here I am reminded of Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang's (2007) observation concerning the cultural explanations for why some countries become economically developed while others do not: as more countries industrialize, new cultural explanations are thought up to replace the freshly defunct cultural explanations for why they were 'underdeveloped' in the first place (see Chapter 9). Which is to say that cultural explanations for changes in the material organization of society should be viewed with skepticism, for the reality is that although culture *may* be able to help explain a change in the material organization of

⁶¹ It should be noted here, then, that increased life expectancy should not be conflated with an overall improvement in health. This rationale holds for other indicators as well. For example, increased educational attainment should not be conflated with increased intellectual capability.

⁶² This has become a regular subject of discussion in UK and US media. (For a recent sampling, see Cassidy, 2013; Cooper, 2015; Donnelly, 2015; Garner, 2013; McKay, 2016; Warner, 2013).

society, a change in the latter is often just as, if not more, helpful in explaining a change in the former (Ha-Joon Chang, 2007, pp. 186-188).

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) also dismiss the argument that ethnic divisions are the more significant factor, for although ethnic divisions amplify inequality and its effects, they still do not explain why health and social problems “become more common the greater the relative deprivation people experience—*whatever their ethnicity*” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 185, emphasis mine). Moreover, although ethnic divisions are almost as effective a predictor of negative results on their indicators in the US, the same is not true for most of the other rich capitalist democracies. Moreover, ethnic divisions cannot explain why some of the more ethnically homogenous rich capitalist democracies like Portugal do so poorly compared to others like Japan.⁶³

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) argue that their theory of causation is correct for several other reasons as well, two of which I will briefly mention here. For one, economic inequality has proved to be an accurate tool for predicting the health of societies vindicated by around 200 other studies carried out in different settings. Secondly, the causal link implies the existence of a mechanism, and this mechanism has been identified: social relationships. Social relationships have been shown to be more functional in more equal societies.

⁶³ Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) also point to an “international study which included a measure of each country’s ethnic mix, [and] found that it did not account for the tendency for more unequal societies to be less healthy” (p. 186).

4 Chapter: The Spirit Level

4.1 On Addiction

It was shown in the last chapter that one of the dysfunctional outcomes of an increasingly unequal rich capitalist democracy is an increase in mental illness, including drug addiction, but the world of addiction goes far beyond substance abuse. Moreover, the process of addiction is far more complex than a physiological dependency on the chemical hooks found in drugs; this is presupposed already by labelling it a mental illness. However, addictions specialist Gabor Maté (2010)—whose work we have discussed already—thinks that even this view of addiction is far too narrow.⁶⁴ For Maté (2010), addiction is the result of a complex interaction between people and their environment, which has “biological, chemical, neurological, psychological, medical, emotional, social, political, economic and spiritual underpinnings—and perhaps others I haven’t thought about” (Chapter 11). Thus, Maté (2010) is hesitant to label it as strictly a mental illness because it suggests that addiction is simply a medical issue for individuals, as opposed to an issue with all of these underpinnings that betray the significance of environment.

Maté (2010) points out that the *addiction process* includes behaviours that far exceed the boundaries of the commonly conceived spectrum of addiction, which includes drugs and perhaps a few behaviours like sex and gambling. For Maté (2010), the number of possible and existing nondrug behavioural addictions is virtually limitless.⁶⁵ It is the addiction process that is significant, and that ties them all together; whether it is a drug

⁶⁴ “It does have some of the features of illness ... But not for a moment do I wish to promote the belief that the disease model by itself explains addiction or even that it’s the key to understanding what addiction is all about” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 11).

⁶⁵ “There are almost as many addictions as there are people” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 20).

habit or a nondrug habit, both can be “highly destructive to physical health, psychological balance, and personal and social relationships” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 11). What addiction is, then, “is any repeated behaviour, substance-related or not, in which a person feels compelled to persist, regardless of its negative impact on his life and the lives of others” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 11).⁶⁶ The addiction process is reflected in the brain in the same way for all addictions: they all “share the same brain circuits and brain chemicals. On the biochemical level the purpose of all addictions is to create an altered physiological state in the brain” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 11).⁶⁷

It goes without saying that not everyone who engages in certain behaviours has a behavioural addiction, just like not everyone who uses drugs has an addiction. Indeed, as journalist and author Johann Hari (2015) points out: only “10 percent of drug users have a problem with their substance. Some 90 percent of people who use a drug—the overwhelming majority—are not harmed by it” (Chapter 11).⁶⁸ The question is, then, what do the 10 percent have in common that could explain the development of substance addiction? The difference between the 10 percent and the other 90 can largely be explained by childhood stressors and trauma, especially child abuse. “The research literature is unequivocal” says Maté (2010), “most hard-core substance abusers come from abusive homes” (Chapter 3).⁶⁹ As has been indicated already, early childhood

⁶⁶ The hallmarks of any addiction are “[c]ompulsion, impaired control, persistence, irritability, relapse and craving” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 11).

⁶⁷ This means that on “the neurobiological level, all addictions engage the brain’s attachment-reward and incentive-motivation systems, which, in turn, escape from regulation by the ‘thinking’ and impulse control areas of the cortex” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 20).

⁶⁸ “This figure comes not from a pro-legalization group, but from the United Nations Office on Drug Control, the global coordinator of the drug war” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 11).

⁶⁹ This is also confirmed by his anecdotal experiences after years of working with addicts in the notorious downtown eastside Vancouver. “The majority of my Skid Row patients suffered severe neglect and

stressors in particular can have extremely detrimental effects, which are not limited to substance abuse, throughout the life cycle. American psychiatrist James Gilligan offers another example of this reality: he has been working for the past 40 years with the most violent people his society has produced and has concluded that the most violent criminals are themselves survivors of violent child abuse (Sapolsky et al., 2011).

The most fascinating demonstration of addiction as a problem of environment is the juxtaposition of two experiments that both Hari and Maté discuss in their writing.⁷⁰ The first experiment was undertaken by Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander and his colleagues. The pharmaceutical theory of addiction—the theory that it is the chemical hooks in drugs that explains addiction—had long been bolstered by experiments where rats would continuously choose to lick a drug-infused water bottle until they died as a result.⁷¹ Alexander was bothered by these experiments, however, because he had wondered if the addiction of these lab rats might not be explained by the fact that they were isolated in tiny prisons. Thus Alexander and his colleagues decided to run the experiment themselves, but this time they would not just keep rats in isolation with their drug-infused water bottles, they would also build a second space that was a paradise for rats; this paradise was dubbed Rat Park. Rat Park “contained everything a rat could want—there were wheels and colored balls and the best food, and other rats to hang out with and have sex with” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13). What Alexander found was that the rats who were isolated would consistently use drugs—in this case morphine—until it

maltreatment early in life. Almost all the addicted women inhabiting the Downtown Eastside were sexually assaulted in childhood, as were many of the men” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 3).

⁷⁰ See Hari (2015, Chapter 13); Maté (2010, Chapter 12).

⁷¹ There was even a 1980s American television commercial that portrayed such an experiment in an attempt to scare people from trying drugs (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13).

killed them, but that the rats in Rat Park hardly used any drugs at all. Instead, they chose “to spend their lives doing other things. So the old experiments were, it seemed, wrong. It isn’t the drug that causes the harmful behavior—it’s the environment. An isolated rat will almost always become a junkie. A rat with a good life almost never will, no matter how many drugs you make available to him” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13).

The Rat Park experiments get even more interesting, however, because Alexander and his colleagues started to tweak the experiment: they would take a set of rats and make “them drink the morphine solution for fifty-seven days, in their cage, alone” before moving them into Rat Park; once in Rat Park “the junkie rats seemed to have some twitches of withdrawal—but quite quickly, they stopped drinking the morphine. A happy social environment, it seemed, freed them of their addiction” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13). Just as was observed with the mice discussed in Chapter 2 (2.2), leaving the cage for a healthier environment allows for significant deficits to be overcome. Ultimately, this led Alexander to conceive of addiction as something other than an illness. “As Bruce [Alexander] put it: he was realizing that addiction isn’t a disease. *Addiction is an adaptation*. It’s not you—it’s the cage you live in” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13, emphasis mine).

This conclusion is paralleled in the second experiment that Hari and Maté both juxtapose to the Rat Park experiment. The ‘experiment’ is actually an historical event that is tantamount to “a large-scale human experiment along similar lines” called the Vietnam War (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13). Less than one percent of soldiers had an opiate addiction before going to fight in Vietnam, but it was estimated that around 20 percent had formed

a heroin addiction while there (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13; Maté, 2010, Chapter 12).⁷² What is astonishing is that a study published in the Archives of General Psychiatry in 1975 found that when these addicted soldiers returned home “use of particular drugs and combinations of drugs decreased to near or even below preservice levels” (as cited in Maté, 2010, Chapter 12). In fact, the “addicts who received drug treatment and rehab were no more likely to stop than those who received no treatment at all. A tiny number of vets did carry on shooting up. They turned out either to have had unstable childhoods, or to have been addicts before they went” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13).

This information coupled with the results of Rat Park led Bruce Alexander to come to the conclusion that *dislocation*, namely being cut off from *meaning*, was the most significant causal factor behind addiction. Alexander, Hari (2015) tells us,

began to look over the history of when addiction has suddenly soared among human beings—and he found it has, time and again, been when these bonds were taken away from people. The native peoples of North America were stripped of their land and their culture—and collapsed into mass alcoholism. The English poor were driven from the land into scary, scattered cities in the eighteenth century—and glugged their way into the Gin Craze. The American inner cities were stripped of their factory jobs and the communities surrounding them in the 1970s and 1980s—and a crack pipe was waiting at the end of the shut-down assembly line. The American rural heartlands saw their markets and subsidies wither in the 1980s and 1990s—and embarked on a meth binge (Chapter 13).

⁷² “Along with heroin, most of these soldier addicts also used barbiturates or amphetamines or both” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 12).

In order to explain today's flood of addiction, Alexander suggests that it is the result of "our hyperindividualistic, frantic, crisis-ridden society;" a society which "makes most people feel social[ly] or culturally isolated. Chronic isolation causes people to look for relief. They find temporary relief in addiction . . . because [it] allows them to escape their feelings, to deaden their senses—and to experience an addictive lifestyle as a substitute for a full life" (as cited in Hari, 2015, Chapter 13).

Having all of this in mind makes Wilkinson and Pickett's (2011) finding of a causal relationship between income inequality and drug addiction all the more unsurprising, for as we saw in the last chapter, inequality has pernicious effects on community and family life in a way that is conducive to early childhood stressors and feelings of dislocation. Moreover, it takes little imagination to understand that the mechanisms of economic inequality in our societies are often the same ones that dislocate people; this is something that David Harvey (2009) highlights well with his theory of accumulation through dispossession.

That said, the increased presence of status anxiety itself appears to be a causal factor as well. To make this point Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) highlight the work of researchers at Wake Forest School of Medicine in North Carolina who took macaque monkeys and "housed the animals in groups of four and observed the social hierarchies which developed in each group, noting which animals were dominant and which subordinate" (p. 71). Next, they introduced a lever which the monkeys learned how to operate in order to administer as much or as little cocaine to themselves as they liked; the result was that the "dominant monkeys took much less cocaine than the subordinate

monkeys. In effect, the subordinate monkeys were medicating themselves against the impact of their low social status” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 72).

This makes sense because being at the bottom of social hierarchies tends to be rather stressful. Robert Sapolsky (2004) came to this conclusion studying savanna baboons, but also points out that a “chronically activated stress-response ... appears to be a marker of being low ranking in lots of other animal species as well. This occurs in primates ranging from standard-issue monkeys like rhesus to beasts called prosimians (such as mouse lemurs). Same for rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, wolves, rabbits, pigs. Even fish. Even sugar gliders, whatever they might be” (Chapter 17). Sapolsky (2004) astutely notes, however, that not all subordinates in all species experience higher levels of stress; in some species “it's not so bad being subordinate, or possibly it's actually a drag being dominant” (Chapter 17). A critical factor behind which species have stressed subordinates and which do not turns out to be *the stability of the dominance hierarchy*. Which is to say that hierarchies where those at the top are less entrenched and may even switch positions with those below are hierarchies where “the dominant individuals no longer have the healthiest stress-responses” (Sapolsky, 2004, Chapter 17). This actually enhances, and is enhanced by, one of the findings of Wilkinson and Pickett (2011), namely that the more equal, and therefore less stressed and more functional societies, are the same ones with the greatest degree of *social mobility*,⁷³ i.e. the ability for people to move up and down the social hierarchy (see Chapter 12).

As was mentioned above, addiction should be conceptualized as a process that includes far more habits and behaviours than just drug use. Maté (2010) pointed out that

⁷³ As measured by changes in income between fathers and sons.

the most hard-core drug addicts had, for the most part, experienced child abuse (Chapter 3). Similarly, Gilligan pointed out that the most violent people in the US prison system were those who were violently abused as children (Sapolsky et al., 2011). Yet, this does not mean that those who experienced or experience less stressful events are not impacted by them, or do not experience the addiction process as a result of them. “Not all addictions are rooted in abuse or trauma, but I do believe they can all be traced to painful experience. A hurt is at the centre of all addictive behaviours. It is present in the gambler, the Internet addict, the compulsive shopper and the workaholic. The wound may not be as deep and the ache not as excruciating, and it may even be entirely hidden—but it’s there” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 3).⁷⁴

To explain the presence of *milder addictive processes* in others, Maté (2010) highlights what he calls a lack of *attunement* during infancy and childhood as a major factor (Chapter 22). Attunement “is, literally, being ‘in tune’ with someone else’s emotional states. It’s not a question of parental love but of the parent’s ability to be present emotionally in such a way that the infant or child feels understood, accepted and mirrored;” it is a subtle process that is “deeply instinctive and is easily subverted when the parent is stressed, depressed or distracted. A parent can be fully attached to the infant—fully ‘in love’—but not attuned” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 22). What Maté is getting

⁷⁴ Maté (2010), for example, notes that he himself has a couple of addictive behaviours, namely CD-buying binges and workaholism, and he traces these to his infancy as a Jewish baby who was separated from his stressed mother in order to escape Nazi occupied Hungary. Even this, however, represents an unusually stressful circumstance of the kind that is not necessary to explain the development of addictive processes in others.

at here is that parents who are stressed and depressed can in effect be emotionally disconnected from their children during a crucial stage of brain development.⁷⁵

This emotional disconnect negatively impacts brain development,⁷⁶ and can lead to addiction processes down the line, for the lack of “an emotionally attuned and consistently available parenting figure is a major source of stress for the child” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 22). This inability to be emotionally attuned can itself be the result of addictive processes, like workaholism; also, parents whose parents lacked attunement are more likely to lack it themselves (Maté, 2010, Chapter 22). In increasingly unequal rich capitalist democracies, “where parents often face the childrearing task without the support that the tribe, clan, village, extended family and community used to provide, misattuned parent–child interactions are increasingly the norm” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 22). Here Maté is highlighting a causal connection between waning social capital and less attunement between parents and children. We should understand, then, that the dysfunction that economic inequality fuels not only leads to negative stimuli during childhood development, which can result in a whole host of problems throughout the lifecycle, it also leads to an *absence of positive stimuli*, an absence of parents who are

⁷⁵ “Brain development can be affected adversely not only by ‘bad stimulation’ coming in, to quote Dr. Robert Post but also by insufficient ‘good stimulation’ occurring—by ‘nothing happening when something might profitably have happened,’ in the wonderful phrasing of the great British child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 22).

⁷⁶ “Happy, attuned emotional interactions with parents stimulate a release of natural opioids in an infant’s brain. This endorphin surge promotes the attachment relationship and the further development of the child’s opioid and dopamine circuitry. On the other hand, stress reduces the numbers of both opiate and dopamine receptors. Healthy growth of these crucial systems—responsible for such essential drives as love, connection, pain relief, pleasure, incentive and motivation—depends, therefore, on the quality of the attachment relationship. When circumstances do not allow the infant and young child to experience consistently secure interactions or, worse, expose him to many painfully stressing ones, maldevelopment often results” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 18).

emotionally attuned to their children, which has similar, though less severe, consequences.

Growing economic inequality can be seen to fuel some large scale addictive processes in the rich capitalist democracies in other, perhaps more direct, ways. Consumerism or ‘shopaholism,’ for example, is an addictive process fueled by increases in economic inequality, for the latter exacerbates status insecurity and thus increases the importance of communicating and differentiating one’s status—a task that can be executed (or a message that can be communicated) through the consumption of status-symbol goods. “A great deal of what drives consumption is status competition. For most of us it probably feels less like being competitive and more like a kind of defensiveness: if we don’t raise our standards, we get left behind” (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011, p. 226). Advertising and marketing industries exploit the increased vulnerability to social evaluative threats within unequal societies to further stimulate consumerism. This strategy appears to be successful for we see higher spending on advertising in the more unequal rich capitalist democracies; we also see that people take on more debt, work longer hours, and that bankruptcy rates are higher in these countries (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 226-230).

Another addictive process that has demonstrable links to inequality is ‘stress eating.’ In fact this link is how Wilkinson and Pickett (2011), after revealing a tight correlation, help explain how inequality is a causal force behind increases in obesity. High levels of stress can lead to ‘stress-eating’ or eating for comfort; research shows that “food stimulates the brains of chronic over-eaters in just the same ways that drugs stimulate the brains of addicts” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 96). Thus the addictive

process is present. The addiction process behind status-driven consumerism may also be at play here, for ethnographic accounts⁷⁷ of those near the bottom of the societal ladder in the US have shown that fast food can be seen as a status symbol. Therefore, its consumption is encouraged in more unequal societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 96–98).⁷⁸

Maté (2010) also discusses obesity as the result of an addiction process. He believes that except “in rare cases of physical disease, the more obese a person is, the more emotionally starved they have been at some crucial period in their life” (Chapter 22). Specifically, he points to stress and a lack of attunement as major culprits, but also notes the connection to consumer society more broadly.

The obesity epidemic demonstrates a psychological and spiritual emptiness at the core of consumer society. We feel powerless and isolated, so we become passive. We lead harried lives, so we long for escape. In Buddhist practice people are taught to chew slowly, being aware of every morsel, every taste. Eating becomes an exercise in awareness. In our culture it’s just the opposite. Food is the universal soother, and many are driven to eat themselves into psychological oblivion (Chapter 22).

The ‘psychological and spiritual emptiness at the core of consumer society’ is also demonstrated by many other, perhaps less salient, addiction processes. Maté points, for example, to the addiction to power and to oil in our society; he notes that corporate

⁷⁷ Saying ethnographic accounts here may be a bit misleading, for Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) are actually referring to a series of articles in the Wall Street Journal that interviewed low-income Americans about the rationale behind their dietary choices (pp. 97-98).

⁷⁸ Inequality’s relation to obesity is more complex than the addiction process, however. Stress during pregnancy may result in epigenetic effects which prepare babies for an environment where food is scarce. This is, of course, problematic and can increase the odds of obesity if it turns out the baby is born into an environment where food is plentiful, or where food is unhealthy (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011).

executives are addicted to profits to such a degree “that they are actually in denial about the impact of their activities, which is typical for addicts” (Sapolsky et al., 2011). Which addictions are respectable and acceptable in our society is arbitrary, argues Maté, noting however that the ones which seem to cause the most harm are often the ones that are considered the most respectable (Sapolsky et al., 2011).

Understanding addiction as adaptation, as Alexander did above, is perhaps the most fruitful way to understand how ubiquitous the addiction process is in rich capitalist democracies, for we all must adapt in some way or another, whether consciously or not, to an organization of society that is founded on the relative oppression and dislocation of most people—societies, moreover, whose relative unfreedom is made possible by a world-system based on exploitation. In the words of the Indian author and public speaker Jiddu Krishnamurti, "it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society" (as cited in O'Connor, 2013).

Indeed, for appearances of well adjustment can betray effective coping strategies for *alienation*: “what we call the personality is often a jumble of genuine traits and adopted coping styles that do not reflect our true self at all but the loss of it” (Maté, 2010, Chapter 34). Thus, Maté (2010) argues that there

are people who are not addicts in the strict sense, but only because their carefully constructed “personality” works well enough to keep them from the painful awareness of their emptiness. In such a case, they’ll be addicted “only” to a false or incomplete self-image or to their position in the world or to some role into which they sink their energy or to certain ideas that give them a sense of meaning. The human being with a “personality” that is insufficient to paper over the inner

void becomes an undisguised addict, compulsively pursuing behaviours whose negative impact is obvious to him or to those around him. The difference is only in the degree of addiction or, perhaps, in the degree of honesty around the deficient self (Chapter 34).

In this sense we can identify the growing narcissism we discussed in Chapter 3 (3.2) as another example of the increase of addiction. This makes sense if we understand that the organization of our societies hampers us from finding meaning and stimulates the creation of voids inside us. Which is to say that the organization of our societies circumscribes human flourishing and spiritual awareness. Once again we see that the environment in which we live is key. Perhaps no other political philosopher in the history of Western political thought understood this better than Karl Marx.

4.2 On Alienation

The foregoing (including the last two chapters) has essentially laid the ground for an empirically grounded theory of alienation; one that is broadly in line with the one laid out by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 2000). What is so important about an empirically grounded theory of alienation is that, although it broadly confirms many of Marx's theoretical expositions, its empirical depth presents a challenge to some of Marx's political conclusions, namely those dealing with political strategy. This is so because an empirically grounded theory of alienation acts to qualify Marx's theory in some very important ways, namely by allowing for *degrees of alienation*, as opposed to the simple assertion of absolute states of alienation under capitalism, however veracious the latter may be.

In 1844, Marx was contemplating some of the same separations that we wrote about in Chapter 2. He makes the point, as we did in Chapter 2 (2.3), that we must not conceive of humans as separate from their natural environment. “Nature is man’s inorganic body – nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx, 2000, p. 31). Far from just an esoteric philosophical point, we saw in Chapter 2 that contemporary research has identified the importance of this inextricable link, and has deepened our understanding of it. Our deeper understanding tells us that the degree to which we are alienated from nature results in the experience of more or less stress—a biopsychosocial factor which has endless harmful impacts on individual and societal wellbeing—as well as the potential absence of positive spiritual experiences. Of course, the commodification and instrumentalization of nature is foundational to capitalism, and therefore a certain degree of alienation from nature is assumed, but we also know that the degree to which we are alienated from nature can vary drastically within capitalist societies, and that this has a significant impact on our wellbeing.⁷⁹

Marx (2000) also makes the point that humans are alienated from themselves, which is a point that we have begun to make in this chapter through our discussion of addiction. There is something in particular that Marx highlights in his discussion of ‘self-estrangement’ that is worth highlighting here. There is his well-known point that workers

⁷⁹ Harvey (2016a) argues that “[h]ow to recuperate an unalienated relation to nature (as well as unalienated forms of social relations) in the face of contemporary divisions of labour and technological-social organisation [forms] part of a common project that binds Marxists and ecologists ineluctably together” (Chapter 7).

are alienated from the products of their labour, which then confront them as an increasingly immense world of hostile alien objects, but there is a less emphasized (and perhaps even more important) point that he makes in relation to this: that in capitalism we are not just alienated from the fruits of labour, but from *the act of labour itself*, insofar as it is not self-directed.

How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was *estranging himself from himself*? *The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production.* If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labor is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself (Marx, 2000, p. 30, emphasis mine).

Here we see a philosophy of overdetermination at play, which is something we will return to below, but what we also see here is Marx highlighting that a labourer in capitalism “does not develop freely his physical and mental energy,” for labour in this context is “not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it;” in other words, one’s labour belongs to someone else, and since our species-essence is to find meaning through the self-direction of our life activities, this represents *a loss of self* (Marx, 2000, p. 30).

This lack of control over one’s activity “is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker’s own physical and mental energy, his personal life – for what is life but activity? – as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have self-estrangement” (Marx,

2000, p. 31). What is so striking about this is that we have already observed that a feeling of a lack of control, especially in the context of one's work, is one of the most significant causes of stress for humans. Recall that in the last chapter (3.4) a lack of control over work was the factor that the Whitehall researchers found to be the most significant in determining negative health outcomes, and that numerous other studies have since come to similar conclusions, finding that a lack of control is one of the situations that most predictably causes a rise in cortisol in the brain.⁸⁰

Recall as well that in studying the relationship between economic inequality and trust Uslaner found that “people who trust others are optimists, with a strong sense of control over their lives” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 55). Professor of sociology Göran Therborn (2013) also points to the sense of a lack of control to explain the disastrous human cost of Russia's post-soviet transition to capitalism: “sense of lack of control over the process of systemic change and lack of approval of the new economic regime being installed experienced by most Russians seem to have been among the causes of the leap in self-assessed ill-health and in mortality there” (Chapter 1). Thus here again we see that Marx is not just making an esoteric philosophical point, he is actually intuiting the now empirically demonstrated harm that is caused to humans when they feel a lack of control over their life activities, namely work. What this empirical demonstration means, however, is that again we must see that there are *degrees* of alienation, and that these degrees significantly alter our wellbeing, our perception of the world, and ultimately our humanity.

⁸⁰ See Maté, 2003, Chapters 3 & 7, 2010, Chapter 18, 2014; Sapolsky, 2004, Chapter 17; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 75.

Marx (2000) also highlights another separation, or element of alienation, that we discussed in Chapter 2 (2.2, 2.4) and Chapter 3 (3.3, 3.5): that is the alienation of humans from each other. Recall that for Marx (2000), the fact that we do not control our work—and thus do not own the ‘fruits’ of our labour—means that we are alienated from ourselves, for what are we if not our life activities? And what are the fruits of our labour if not expressions of ourselves? However, he goes on to point out that if we are alienated from ourselves, *then we are necessarily alienated from others (and from nature), for we are the society (and the nature) which our very existence presupposes*. Hence Marx insisted that “we must avoid postulating ‘society’ again as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual is the social being. His manifestations of life – even if they may not appear in the direct form of communal manifestations of life carried out in association with others – are therefore an expression and confirmation of social life” (Marx, 2000, p. 45). We shall discuss the social nature of human beings in the next section of this chapter. For now, recall that we have encountered the alienation of humans from each other in the form of the loss of trust and social capital in society which can in fact be said to stem, at least in part, from the stress inducing sense of a lack of control that people experience. Here again we can see that there are degrees to which this form of alienation is present, and that these degrees matter, for their effects can be more or less pernicious, leading to concrete conclusions for the Left strategist.

Harvey (2014), it turns out, has also been attempting to highlight the importance of Marx’s concept of alienation in the contemporary context, though from a much more theoretical standpoint. In his 2014 book, cumbersomely titled *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, he argues that there

is a crying need for some more catalytic conception to ground and animate political action. A collective political subjectivity has to coalesce around some foundational concepts as to how to constitute an alternative economic engine if the powers of capital are to be confronted and overcome. Without that, capital can neither be dispossessed nor displaced. The concept I here find most appropriate is that of alienation (Chapter 17).

For Harvey (2014), a renewed understanding of alienation in all its forms could not only inform the vision toward which an anti-capitalist movement strives toward, but it could also help define the short-to-medium-term tasks of a contemporary anti-capitalist political project: “to identify, confront and overcome the many forms of alienation produced by the economic engine of capital and to channel the pent-up energy, the anger and the frustration they produce into a coherent anticapitalist opposition” (Chapter 17).

Harvey (2014) appears to suggest, as well, that such a political project would necessarily involve a piecemeal struggle that sought to mitigate the degree to which alienation is experienced. “Dare we hope for an unalienated (*or at least less alienated and more humanly acceptable*) relation to nature, to each other, to the work we do and to the way we live and love?” (Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17, emphasis mine). That the battle to mitigate alienation is necessarily also a battle against economic inequality is suggested by the link Harvey (2014) draws between alienation and consumerism—a phenomenon that we have argued feeds off of growing inequality. He discusses what he calls *alienating consumerism* by engaging with the work of social philosopher André Gorz (frequently citing him and using his words).

Alienating consumerism, claims Harvey (2014), has to do with the increased desire for luxury goods or what Gorz would call “‘compensatory goods’ which are ‘desired as much - if not more - for their uselessness as for their use value; for it is this element of uselessness (in superfluous gadgets and ornaments, for example) which symbolises the buyer’s escape from the collective universe in a haven of private sovereignty’” (Chapter 17). This “consumerism of excess” he argues “is deeply alien to the satisfaction of human wants, needs and desires” (Chapter 17).⁸¹ Harvey (2014) points out that kind of consumerism is completely at odds with Left activism, for (in the words of Gorz): “Individuals socialised by [alien] consumerism are no longer socially integrated individuals but individuals who are encouraged to ‘be themselves’ by distinguishing themselves from others and who only resemble these others in their refusal [socially channeled into consumption] to assume responsibility for the common condition by taking common action” (as cited in Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17).

4.3 On Overdetermination

Overdetermination is a Marxian term,⁸² most notably developed by structural Marxist Louis Althusser. It refers, broadly, to the presence of the social whole within its parts. More specifically, it is to say that the contradictions within our social totality are reflected in the smaller scales of totality which together form the whole; the structures within the structure if you will. This is essentially the sense of the term I hoped to connote with my use of it here. However, much more is meant by this term by Althusser

⁸¹ “This is a view to which even the current Pope subscribes. ‘The limitless possibilities for consumption and distraction offered by contemporary society,’ he complains in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, lead ‘to a kind of alienation at every level, for a society becomes alienated when its forms of social organisation, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people’” (Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17).

⁸² Adapted from Freud.

(and others). The *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* summarizes Althusser's understanding of overdetermination thusly:

For Althusser, historical change is not the product of developments in the economic base reflected in mechanical fashion by the superstructure, as more traditional Marxists have often maintained. Rather, Althusser argued that, like a dream, a given historical moment is the site of a multiplicity of forces, of which the economic is only determining 'in the last instance.' While the economic sets limits within which the political and ideological are obliged to operate, all of these levels enjoy a relative autonomy, so that large-scale change occurs only through the overlapping actions of a multiplicity of historical forces (Childers & Hentzi, 1995, p. 217).

My understanding of historical change is far more materialist. This is largely because I place emphasis on material inequality (as economic base), whereas Althusser seems more concerned with mode of production (which is, of course, crucial).⁸³

Since I place emphasis on material inequality (as economic base), and not just the mode of production, 'the economic' is not just 'determining in the last instance.'

Although this may be true for mode of production, I believe the degree of material inequality present actually marks the determining 'multiplicity of forces' in a given historical moment. Moreover, the economic base, in my formulation, not only sets limits 'within which the political and ideological are obliged to operate' (with relative autonomy), it also sets limits within which our mental, physical, spiritual and social health are obliged to operate (with relative autonomy).

⁸³ Material inequality is itself overdetermined by the mode of production.

Let us now return to addiction and consider it as a phenomenon overdetermined by a broader processes of alienation. First, however, we should note that the many manifestations of societal dysfunction that were reviewed in Chapter 3 are already examples of overdetermination by material inequality. The structural violence of inequality at the scale of macro-totality is reflected (and constituted) by the social violence found at the scale of mezzo and micro-totality. Arguably, this social violence within the smaller scales of totality also contributes to anti-social policies at the national level, for it is the more unequal societies that have the least generous foreign aid policies, the most bellicose foreign policy, the worst ecological footprints, and the least effective policies to deal with the existential threat of ACD (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 61, 235, 293).

With the rise of addiction, however, we see aggravated alienation reflected at the level of individual totality. To be clear: alienation is assumed within capitalism, but the level of economic inequality should be seen as a lever which enhances or diminishes the potency of this alienation, and its consequences, at every scale of totality. This conclusion flows naturally from the holistic approach to understanding social totality (and overdetermination) that we have thus far outlined. An approach that can be summarized well by a teaching of the Buddha: “everything depends on everything else ... the one contains the many and the many contains the one ... you can’t understand anything in isolation from its environment. The leaf contains the sun, the sky, and the earth” (as summarized by Maté in Sapolsky et al., 2011). Once we understand the nature of addiction, and reject its narrow definitions, we can understand how it is intimately linked to alienation. For addiction is essentially an attempt to fill a void within ourselves, a void

that represents, in part, our inability to find meaning through self-directed activity and free cooperation—what Marx calls our species-activity. For Maté (2010), we are best able to find meaning “not when we receive or acquire something but when we make an authentic contribution to the well-being of others or to the social good, or when we create something original and beautiful *or just something that represents a labour of love*” (Chapter 34, emphasis mine).

Marx (2000) would presumably agree, but he would also recognize all of these activities as inherently social activities, for social activity exists

by no means only in the form of some directly communal activity and directly communal enjoyment.... But also when I am active scientifically, etc. – an activity which I can seldom perform in direct community with others – then my activity is social, because I perform it as a man. Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being (p. 44).

Yet this is not how ‘work’ works in the rich capitalist democracies.⁸⁴ It is in this sense that addiction is, in the words of Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl, “one aspect of a more general mass phenomenon, namely the feeling of meaninglessness resulting from the frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our industrial societies” (as cited in Maté, 2010, Chapter 34). I believe Marx (2000)

⁸⁴ This is why Gorz (1999) argues that ‘work’ “must lose its centrality in the minds, thoughts and imaginations of everyone. We must learn to see it differently: no longer as something we have – or do not have – but as what we do. We must be bold enough to regain control of the work we do” (p. 1).

may have understood this, too, when he argued that the “English gin shops are ... the symbolical representations of [objectified alienation]. Their luxury reveals the true relation of industrial luxury and wealth to man” (p. 52). For whether it be to satisfy the ‘crude’ needs of the poor, or the ‘refined’ needs of the rich, ‘self-stupefaction’ is nevertheless *the illusory satisfaction of need* (Marx, 2000, p. 52).

Addiction, then, is a reflection of the denial of our social needs. This is not dissimilar to the conclusion that Sociologist Peter Cohen has come to. Hari (2015) cites him as arguing that “we should stop using the word ‘addiction’ altogether and shift to a new word: ‘bonding.’ Human beings need to bond. It is one of our most primal urges. So if we can’t bond with other people, we will find a behavior to bond with, whether it’s watching pornography or smoking crack or gambling” (Chapter 13). This reconceptualization actually helps explain a bizarre occurrence during the ‘war on drugs’ in 1970s Vancouver, when heroin was successfully, though temporarily, eliminated from the downtown eastside:⁸⁵ addicts did not change their behaviour, they simply continued on using placebos as if they were heroin. Perhaps the reason why, then, is that the addict subculture gives users something to bond with; it gives them an identity and others who recognize them. The world may be hostile to addicts, but that might actually feel better than experiencing an indifferent world all alone. “When you have been told you are a piece of shit all your life, embracing the identity of being a piece of shit, embracing the other pieces of shit, living openly as a piece of shit—it seems better than being alone” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13).

⁸⁵ “There were big chunks of time in the 1970s in which the Canadian police managed to blockade the port of Vancouver so successfully that no heroin was getting into the city at all. We know this because the police tested the ‘heroin’ being sold on the streets and found it actually contained zero percent of the drug: it was all filler and contaminants” (Hari, 2015, Chapter 13).

Nevertheless, addiction is always harmful, and can often be seen as analogous to an attack on ourselves. Drug addiction, for example, is at the same time an escape⁸⁶ from our mental selves as it is an attack on our physical selves—it is as if ourselves were literally alien to us. Similarly, auto-immune diseases⁸⁷ manifest as the body attacking itself, also as if our body was literally alien to us.⁸⁸ “Common to them all is an attack by one’s own immune system against the body, causing damage to joints, connective tissue or to almost any organ, whether it be the eyes, the nerves, the skin, the intestines, the liver or the brain” (Maté, 2003, Chapter 1). We now know that addiction and auto-immune diseases are triggered by biopsychosocial factors like stress, trauma, loneliness, depression and emotional repression; factors that we know are fueled by the degree to which economic inequality is present, and factors which I believe represent, in part, our response or adaptation to alienation. Here we see alienation reflected at the level of nanototality. This is overdetermination by alienation.⁸⁹

4.4 On Human Flourishing

It was suggested in Chapter 2 (2.1) that attempting to define a static human nature would be foolish. Nonetheless, some assumptions about what we could call ‘human nature’ have revealed themselves in the preceding pages. I will argue here that some

⁸⁶ Maté (2014) argues that drug addiction “is an escape from awareness; whereas, the spiritual use of these substances is the enhancement of awareness.”

⁸⁷ I mean to use Maté’s (2003) definition of auto-immune diseases here which includes a much larger array of ailments, such as scleroderma, rheumatoid arthritis, ulcerative colitis, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer’s, asthma, cancer, ALS, as well as many others.

⁸⁸ This can be seen as somewhat true, although in a less literal sense, for all of the physical health problems that can be triggered by biopsychosocial factors like stress and emotional repression.

⁸⁹ It is perhaps an irony here that I am using the terms alienation and overdetermination to make sense of each other, for the term overdetermination is largely an Althusserian term, and for Althusser the “humanism of the young Marx, as expressed in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ... was separated from the scientific Marx of *Capital* by an ‘epistemological rupture’ that we ignore at our peril. Marxist humanism, he wrote, is pure ideology, theoretically vacuous and politically misleading, if not dangerous” (Harvey, 2014, Conclusion).

basic assumptions are, in fact, well grounded, and that from there we can infer the kind of environments that promote human flourishing. In some ways, then, what is required is a reverse engineering of the foregoing discussion. The first thing we can say is that human beings are social by nature. Even in the most unequal rich capitalist democracies our behaviour betrays this truth. Dialogical relations may be more dysfunctional in the rich capitalist democracies: we communicate status through our possessions and are more likely to socialize in commercial and commodified spaces. Nevertheless, the very fact that we feel we must communicate anything, and that we are sensitive to social evaluative threats in the first place, tells us that we are social beings.

We have seen in the last two chapters as well that the quality of our social environments is intimately connected to our mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing, and we also know that functional social relations are simply requisite “to survival and to reproductive success, [and] that social interaction has been one of the most powerful influences on the evolution of the human brain” (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011, p. 205). We know from studies of the human brain that the experience of co-operation reliably stimulates the brain’s reward centres, which suggests that “the neural reward networks serve to encourage reciprocity and mutuality while resisting the temptation to act selfishly;” in contrast, research has revealed that the experiences related to increased inequality, such as social exclusion, stimulate the same areas of the brain that are stimulated by physical pain (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 214).⁹⁰ Behavioural

⁹⁰ Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) also point to the existence of Mirror neurons as an example of how our biology establishes us as deeply social beings. When we watch someone doing something, mirror neurons in our brains fire as if to produce the same actions.... It has been suggested that similar processes might be behind our ability to empathize with each other and even

economics experiments have also come to conclusions that suggest humans are motivated by altruism and ideas of fairness (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 202-203), though conceptions of fairness vary from place to place, to be sure. We also know that, even though the egalitarianism of the Upper Paleolithic may have been complicated, hunter-gatherer-forager societies then and now were and are exceptionally more equal (at least in a material sense) than the massive hierarchies that have been wrought in the contemporary rich capitalist democracies. This also holds true for many of the agricultural societies throughout human history. Which means that “in the time-scale of human history and prehistory, it is the current highly unequal societies which are exceptional. For over 90 per cent of our existence as human beings we lived, almost exclusively, in highly egalitarian societies” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 207-208).

This is worth noting because the “characteristics which would have been [genetically] selected as successful in more egalitarian societies would have been very different from those selected in dominance hierarchies” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 208). This is not to say that we have not adapted to dominance hierarchies as well, but it is to say that living in relatively egalitarian settings is something that humans are certainly prepared and able to do. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) point out that “human beings have had to develop different mental tool-kits which equip them to operate both in dominance hierarchies and in egalitarian societies. Dominance and affiliative strategies are part of our deep psychological make-up” (p. 206). The kinds of psychological characteristics humans picked up from living in relatively egalitarian societies are “likely

behind the way people sometimes flinch while watching a film if they see pain inflicted on someone else. We react as if it was happening to us (p. 213). Here we see what could be developed into an empirically grounded version of Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiments, namely his belief that we literally share in the joy and pain that we observe in others.

to include our strong conception and valuation of fairness, which makes it easier for people to reach agreement without conflict when sharing scarce resources” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 208). Furthermore, “the sense of indebtedness (now recognized as universal in human societies) which we experience after having received a gift, serves to prompt reciprocity and prevent freeloading, so sustaining friendship” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 209).⁹¹

Although we can say that we have different strategies to adapt in different environments, we cannot say that all adaptive strategies result in wellbeing, as we have seen. In fact, the “oft-observed relationship between stress, impaired immunity and illness has given rise to the concept of ‘diseases of adaptation’” (Maté, 2003, Chapter 3). Maté (2010) points out that infants come into this world

fully present and alive to every possibility, but they soon begin to shut down parts of themselves that their environment is unable to recognize or accept with love. As a consequence of that defensive shutdown, says the psychologist and spiritual teacher A.H. Almaas, one or more essential qualities such as love, joy, strength, courage or confidence may be suppressed. In its place, we experience a hole, a sense of empty deficiency (Chapter 34).

Adaptation can often result in deficiency, and we know that it is in vain that addiction attempts to plug these holes. Thus, although humans have adapted to dominance hierarchies and have evolutionary strategies which can be employed in this context, it is clear that highly unequal societies are extremely pernicious to our wellbeing as

⁹¹ That debt is a universal that betrays our nature as social beings is well corroborated by Graeber's (2011) *Debt: The first 5000 years*, which was discussed briefly in Chapter 2 (2.3).

individuals and as a society. Although our nature is adaptable, we flourish in some contexts more than others.

Thus we should agree with Maté that the only way we “can talk about human nature concretely is by recognizing that there are certain human needs: we have a human need for companionship and for close contact, to be loved, to be attached to, to be accepted, to be seen, to be received for who we are;” hence we “can talk about human nature, but only in the sense of basic human needs ... that lead to certain traits if they are met, and a different set of traits if they’re denied” (Sapolsky et al., 2011). Moreover, Maté notes that if “those needs are met, we develop into people who are compassionate and cooperative and who have empathy for other people” (Sapolsky et al., 2011). This is to posit a basic universalism.

Perhaps the most crucial insight here for the socialist is that the totality of dysfunction wrought or aggravated by extreme material inequality adds up to the prevalence of a worldview within society that differs markedly from those prevalent in more equal societies. We have already revealed that the mistrust of others is highest in the most unequal rich capitalist democracies, but we must realize that this has something to do with how people view the nature of other human beings. Research on Americans from the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation hints at this reality:

people feel that ‘materialism’ somehow comes between them and the satisfaction of their social needs ... they were ‘deeply ambivalent about wealth and material gain’. A large majority of people wanted society to ‘move away from greed and excess toward a way of life more centred on values, community, and family’. But *they also felt that these priorities were not shared by most of their fellow*

*Americans, who, they believed, had become 'increasingly atomized, selfish, and irresponsible'. As a result they often felt isolated” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 3-4, emphasis mine).*⁹²

Perhaps this is not surprising. People are hardly unaware of societal dysfunction; yet they are commonly fed narratives that blame individuals or groups for their own problems and that avoid structural or systemic critiques, so when dysfunction increases, it makes sense that trust would wane.

This tells us something profound, namely that “[g]rowing up and living in a more unequal society affects people’s assumptions about human nature. We have seen how inequality affects trust, community life and violence, and how - through the quality of early life - it predisposes people to be more or less affiliative, empathetic or aggressive” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 236). As Marx (2000) argued, one’s “general consciousness is only the theoretical shape of that of which the living shape is the real community, the social fabric” (p. 45). This is a wakeup call, then, to socialists who stubbornly eschew some redistributive reforms for failing to be sufficiently anti-capitalist: allowing inequality to grow pushes the lower classes, more than anyone else, into mental and physical illness, spiritual poverty, addiction, and a negative view of their would-be comrades. Unless one is seriously waiting on a vanguard, or some other terroristic revolutionary cell, then we must take all redistributive reforms seriously. For the Gramscians, this also points to the conclusion that a ‘war of position’ is necessarily a

⁹² “However, the report says, that when brought together in focus groups to discuss these issues, people were ‘surprised and excited to find that others share[d] their views’. Rather than uniting us with others in a common cause, the unease we feel about the loss of social values and the way we are drawn into the pursuit of material gain is often experienced as if it were a purely private ambivalence which cuts us off from others.” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 4).

war over redistribution as well. For, “[a]t the most fundamental level, what reducing inequality is about is shifting the balance from the divisive, self-interested consumerism driven by status competition, towards a more socially integrated and affiliative society” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 233).

Marx (2000) said that “just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him” (p. 44). We can produce our societies differently. Just by reviewing the already existing differences between the rich capitalist democracies, it is clear that substantial changes and substantial gains could be made in the near future. Changes that I believe take us towards socialism if made; if ignored, we call closer civilizational collapse and misery. I cannot help but recall here what Wengrow and Graeber (2015) argue at the end of their article—the one we reviewed in Chapter 1 (1.2)—namely that it is “in moments of effervescence, of ritual intensity, that we become most clearly aware of our social existence, and hence capable of creating new social forms, even if we are never quite conscious of how we achieve this” (p. 611). How can we hope to achieve these sorts of collective moments in a world where alienation is increasingly aggravated by economic inequality?

4.5 Inequality or Capitalism?

While much of this paper focuses on the profound impacts that result from the different degrees of inequality already observed in the Global North, I do not deny that the capitalist system itself presupposes alienation in some very profound ways. The mode of production remains the most critical totalistic factor. This means that a more egalitarian capitalism is not an ideal, nor an endpoint, nor a horizon that socialists must strive towards (although it is most definitely a waypoint). Essentially, Marx was right that

the economic system itself is founded on certain separations that preclude humanity from naturally flourishing, or in his words, preclude humanity from realizing its *species-nature*. Thus, greater economic equality alone is not a panacea for alienation.

The nature of the upward trends in depression and anxiety noted in the last chapter (3.2) provides us with an excellent illustration as to why. Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) note that, although these trends are certainly amplified by increasing inequality, they actually stem from before inequality began to rise across the West in the 1970s. Their explanation for why anxiety and depression were on the rise before inequality took off emphasizes increasing geographical mobility starting from around the mid-20th century.

At the beginning of this period it was still common for people - in rural and urban areas alike - never to have travelled much beyond the boundaries of their immediate city or village community. Married brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents, tended to remain living nearby and the community consisted of people who had often known each other for much of their lives. But now that so many people move from where they grew up, knowledge of neighbours tends to be superficial or non-existent. People's sense of identity used to be embedded in the community to which they belonged, in people's real knowledge of each other, but now it is cast adrift in the anonymity of mass society. Familiar faces have been replaced by a constant flux of strangers. As a result, who we are, identity itself, is endlessly open to question (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011, p. 42).

Here we see that the malaise of contemporary societies cannot simply be traced back to differences in relative wealth (or some abstraction of capitalism for that matter). Many of

the roots of this malaise can be traced back to different temporal points: to different evolutions of capitalist society, to the initial emergence of capitalism, and to even further back than that as we saw in Chapter 1.

In fact, Maté (2014) highlights this point well when discussing a study out of Notre Dame University which argues that the healthiest environment to raise a child in is that of the hunter-gatherer society. One of the main reasons why is that “children are brought up in the context of nurturing adults, not just the parents ... but that clan/tribe community or neighbourhood” (Maté, 2014). The shift in Western society from community childrearing to family-unit or household childrearing can be traced at least as far back to 17th century Europe during the ‘transition’ to capitalism. Italian-American political philosopher Silvia Federici (2004) documents this in her work, which shows that the industrialization of Europe was a time of extreme social conflict during which the state systematically disciplined the population in order to presage a new organization of society. “In pursuit of social discipline, an attack was launched against all forms of collective sociality and sexuality including sports, games, dances, ale-wakes, festivals, and other group-rituals that had been a source of bonding and solidarity among workers” (Federici, 2004, p. 83). Furthermore, one of the key consequences of this effort was “the desocialization or decollectivization of the reproduction of the work-force” (Federici, 2004, p. 83). Thus, “the physical enclosure operated by land privatization and the hedging of the commons was amplified by a process of social enclosure, *the reproduction of workers shifting from the openfield to the home, from the community to the family, from the public space (the common, the church) to the private*” (Federici, 2004, p. 84, emphasis mine). We can see here how the absence of social capital and community life in

contemporary society is not absolutely the result of shifts in inequality, but is something that to some degree was requisite to the initial establishment of capitalism in Europe, and was likely to some degree requisite to the establishment of earlier social forms as well.

The presence of addiction in our societies, which is perhaps the most direct manifestation of alienation, can be seriously tempered within relatively equal capitalist societies, but its elimination likely requires a fundamental transformation away from capitalism. Maté (2014) points out that “alcohol has been known in the Western world for thousands of years, and there was plenty of drunkenness, even in ancient times, but there was no alcoholism for the most part. Alcoholism came around in the 18th century with the rise of capitalism. You can make a very good case that one of the medical outcomes, or one of the health outcomes, of capitalism is addiction” (Maté, 2014). Therapist Peter Levine (2010), meanwhile, appears to connect our alienation from ourselves to the ideological, ideational and philosophical developments that evolved alongside the emergence of capitalism. Levine (2010) claims that we have abandoned “the innate intelligence of the body ... for *the exclusivity of rationality*, symbolization and language” (p. 135, emphasis mine). “As hunters and gatherers,” Levine (2010) argues, “survival meant being fully in our bodies” (p. 135). By losing this awareness human consciousness is impaired, for “consciousness actually unfolds through the development of body awareness, of learning to understand the nuances and the meaning of our internal physical sensations, and of our emotional feelings as well” (p. 135).⁹³

⁹³ This relates to what Maté (2003) says about emotional disconnect in rich capitalist democracies, namely that the “higher the level of economic development, it seems, the more anaesthetized we have become to our emotional realities. We no longer sense what is happening in our bodies and cannot therefore act in self-preserving ways” (Chapter 3). The reason, therefore, that the “physiology of stress eats away at our

Nevertheless, the degree to which there is material inequality at any given point within capitalist society, and therefore the degree to which the capitalist imperative trumps all others, significantly shapes factors that characterize the organization of society. Let us take another look at the example given to us by Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) above to illustrate this point. It seems to me that the phenomenon of increased geographical mobility, as well as the *particular kind* of urbanization and urban sprawl that accompanied it, has been and continues to be augmented and shaped in a pernicious and particular direction by the degree to which different levels of government are coopted by private centres of power, which is a factor that is clearly and strongly influenced by how unequal a society is.

Take, for example, post-World War II when the United States “made a dramatic switch to highways spurred on by the automobile, oil, and tire companies, which conspired—or at least lobbied—against the public transportation system for their own interests” (Bonfiglio, 2010). This agenda was then promoted by the US government through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 which saw the creation of a 46,876 mile Interstate system over 35 years; this dramatically changed the trajectory of urbanization and reshaped already existing communities:

Neighborhoods were torn up to make way for the highway and social stratification and racial discrimination intensified as middle class white people migrated to the suburbs and left poor people and minority groups behind. Downtowns that were designed for pedestrians became congested and the influx of cars made them

bodies [is] not because it has outlived its usefulness but because we may no longer have the competence to recognize its signals” (Chapter 3).

frustrating to navigate. Old buildings were demolished to create surface parking, which then created gaping, ugly holes in the cityscape (Bonfiglio, 2010).

This trajectory was clearly wrought, at least in part, by governments who were more sensitive to a profit imperative than to competing imperatives such as the public good.⁹⁴

The general point I am getting at here, then, is a simple one, namely that growing inequality cannot and should not be seen as unrelated to the degree to which private centres of power influence government and thus to the degree to which the capitalist imperative is able to trump the public interest. This could also help explain why justice systems are more punitive in the more unequal societies. Whether it is developers having undue influence over municipalities or multinational corporations having undue influence over national governments we know that there is a vicious circle in which the “excess wealth of the top earners can easily be used to corrupt the democratic process, thereby allowing the wealthy to control the very legislation that allows them to actually increase their wealth,” as one of the authors of a 2011 report from The International Forum on Globalization put it (p. 123).

Thus, what is being argued here is not that the various pathologies, or manifestations of alienation, under discussion will simply be eliminated through a redistribution of wealth, but that the multidisciplinary study of inequality and the social determinants of health tells us that they can be significantly curtailed by redistributive policies, or significantly worsened by an absence of them. Moreover, our evolving understanding of what those trajectories actually look like at the level of individual and societal wellbeing should force many on the Left to reevaluate their political strategies of

⁹⁴ For more information on ‘the streetcar conspiracy’ see Bonfiglio (2010) & Engler (2015).

transformation. Allowing inequality to grow by failing to pursue achievable policies of redistribution has severe and disastrous consequences for the Left. Thus we do not choose between (1) fighting inequality thus perpetuating capitalism, and (2) fighting capitalism during crises of inequality. We must fight inequality *in order to* transcend capitalism. In a sense, then, combating inequality *is* combatting capitalism. Besides, who has the time or will for revolution in societies where working hours and mental illnesses are on the rise? Judging by the social gradients of the problems under review, not the Left.

That combating inequality should essentially be seen as the same as combating capitalism is not dissimilar to something Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein suggested recently. There has been some fuss over the fact that combating neoliberalism is not the same as combating capitalism, from both ‘progressive’ defenders of capitalism and its socialist critics. Though Klein is surely right to suggest that the way you combat capitalism is to combat neoliberalism, for neoliberalism is the contemporary expression of capitalism—it is where capitalism has ended up, and not simply as a result of caprice: “the whole reason the neoliberal project was unleashed was in the name of pursuing economic growth. It was a period of stagnation in the global economy—we had to get back to growth. That’s [ostensibly] why we had to deregulate and have these free-trade agreements and privatize our states” (Klein, 2016). Of course, inequality, neoliberalism and capitalism are not all different words for the same thing, but neither are they mutually exclusive realities. This holds for ‘modernity’ as well, for there is no comprehensible modernity without capitalism—we do not know what that looks like. As the example of the ‘streetcar conspiracy’ suggests above, we cannot really say what the modern world would look like in the absence of the capitalist imperative.

5 Chapter: The Political Level

5.1 Inequality & Political Polarization

An indefensible belief—or perhaps assumption would be the better word—remains intact on the Left: that if inequality grows to a particular point, or if ‘things get that bad,’ class consciousness will grow and people will resist en masse and reverse the worsening situation (in an agreeable way). This amounts to a more ambiguous or generalized version of the revolution via proletarianization argument. This argument has proven weak historically. An obvious example is that the ‘immiseration’ of Germany’s working class during the Great Depression eventually resulted in fascism, which, evidently, was not a meaningful challenge to hierarchy, oppression, or ideological pathology, but was in many ways an enhancement of it.⁹⁵

The theory that proletarianization will eventually lead to a socialist revolution—or more generally the belief in inevitable progress inherent to the mechanics of capitalism—is further undermined by ethnographic accounts of low-wage workers, increasingly ‘casualized’ labour, or informal workers, which demonstrate quite clearly that increasingly poor material conditions alone do not lead to increased political consciousness, radical politics, or likelihood of positive change. In fact, much of it demonstrates how often people will just adapt to and accept worsening material conditions (see, for example, Bear, 2014; Sanchez, 2012). We are, it turns out, an adaptable bunch.

⁹⁵ This undoubtedly influenced Frankfurt School theorists (see, for example, Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997) who also challenged the viability of inevitable revolution via proletarianization.

Investigative journalist Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) went ‘undercover’ and lived and worked amongst some of America’s poorest workers and essentially produced an ethnographic account of America’s growing low-wage precarious workforce. In her evaluation of her experience she argues: “If you are constantly reminded of your lowly position in the social hierarchy, whether by individual managers or by a plethora of impersonal rules, you begin to accept that unfortunate status.... If you're made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you're paid is what you are actually worth” (p. 115). Without a doubt, ethnographic work provides intimate detail and context which helps us to understand—among other things—why we cannot expect, nor rely on, revolt to naturally spring from increasingly oppressive conditions. Any Leftist that actually attempts to organize low wage workers can likely attest to this. Last summer I lead an attempt to unionize over 20 Wine Rack locations in the city of Ottawa (one of which was my place of employment) and found that the majority of workers, even those who signed union cards, were at least somewhat apathetic or complacent about their poor working conditions.

Complacency can give way to mobilization for change with effective organizing as well as with amplified and powerful messaging; though the change need not be a positive one. A current example of how this is reflected at the political level, is the Philippines, where a fascistic leader has just been democratically elected.⁹⁶ Yet we need not look outside the West to see that growing inequality is not politically advantageous to

⁹⁶ As two Filipino journalists put it: “[the people who voted for Duterte] are ordinary people, good people, kind people, and they are howling for blood. They are the new normal, and they believe in the gospel of Rodrigo Duterte” (Evangelista & Curato, 2016). Investigative journalist Robert Mackey (2016) points out that Duterte has promised his presidency will be “a bloody one,” claiming that he will legalize police killings of suspected criminals. “He even joked aloud that he would circumvent the law by pardoning himself as well. ‘Pardon given to Rodrigo Duterte for the crime of multiple murder, signed Rodrigo Duterte,’ he said, to uneasy laughter.”

the Left. This conclusion may not be obvious upon a superficial look at the shifting political landscape in the rich capitalist democracies today. As inequality continues to grow in these countries we do see similar political patterns emerging across the West, namely the emergence of ‘new’ political forces on both the Right and Left.

As much as some of these new political forces may target inequality, however, they appear to have largely been spurred into existence by economic crises, not simply by the related fact of growing inequality. On the Left, there is the popularity of Senator Bernie Sanders in the US, the popularity of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Syriza in Greece, and the emergence of ‘*nuit debout*’ and the broader movement against the government’s anti-labour reforms in France. On the Right, we see the popularity of Donald Trump in the US, the popularity of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit in the UK, Golden Dawn in Greece, and the Front National in France. The rise of Corbyn, Sanders, and new Left wing parties across Europe is certainly a positive development, but it is my belief that the character of this polarization is generally misunderstood by the Left. Before reflections on, and interpretations of, the political shifts we are currently witnessing in the rich capitalist democracies can be offered, we should review some of the political science literature on the relationship between inequality and various political phenomena. This will provide the appropriate context for the emerging political patterns to be properly discerned, evaluated and understood.

Political Scientists Torben Iversen and David Soskice (2015) recently researched the link between income inequality and the self-placement of voters on the Left-Right political scale in 20 different rich capitalist democracies.⁹⁷ Their findings run contrary to

⁹⁷ They use a list that is very similar to Wilkinson and Pickett’s 23 rich capitalist democracies.

the intuition of many Leftists and political economists. “Standard political economy models imply that socioeconomic polarization leads to political polarization by increasing divisions in the electorate, and that inequality produces more support for the political left. Both predictions are inconsistent with the evidence” (p. 1807). Instead, they find that a high level of income “inequality is associated with less polarized electorates, and [that] the political right thrives under these conditions” (p. 1807).⁹⁸

The explanation as to why has to do with the distribution of political information in society, which is positively correlated with income distribution. This is so, because the more equal societies have more accessible (and better funded) education,⁹⁹ higher rates of unionization, and more social capital. The more accessible, publicly funded, educational institutions better distribute political information in society. Unions help the distribution of political information because they have “political ties to the left and seek to mobilize and inform their members about politics, sometimes by cultivating political discussion inside and outside the workplace” (p. 1784). Finally, greater social capital helps because it results in a higher presence of social networks where politics is discussed, and since these networks tend to be relatively socioeconomically homogenous, “political discussion in these networks fosters polarization along economic lines” (p. 1784).

The authors note that these three social-institutional mechanisms are not simply the product of greater equality, but promote greater equality themselves, and that because they “also make it more likely that those with low incomes acquire political information,

⁹⁸ “[W]hereas around 80% of adults declare themselves to be noncentrist in an egalitarian country like Denmark, in inegalitarian Britain or the United States, the figure is closer to 60%” (Iversen & Soskice, 2015, p. 1783).

⁹⁹ Recall that we also saw in Chapter 3 (3.5) that greater equality is also associated with better educational outcomes.

it pulls the political center of gravity to the left. Countries with more egalitarian distributions of income will therefore tend to be associated with more polarized and left-leaning constituencies” (Iversen & Soskice, 2015, p. 1783). This may help explain the relative ‘path dependence’ of the Scandinavian countries. The major reason behind why the electorate of more unequal rich capitalist democracies are less polarized along a Left-Right spectrum is due to the fact that uninformed voters are more likely to default to the ‘political centre,’ which the authors believe to be quite rational in the context of a lack of political information. Although this does point to the irresistible conclusion that centrists are idiots (in the Athenian sense of the term¹⁰⁰). The reason why the Right thrives under this scenario, however, is because the distribution of political information in rich capitalist democracies essentially has a social gradient: those at the high end of the socioeconomic ladder are relatively more politically informed than those at the low end the more inequality grows. This has the effect of pulling the political centre rightwards, since the politically informed are more likely to vote in their economic interest.¹⁰¹ This may help explain the relative ‘path dependence’ of countries like the US.

American political scientist Frederick Solt (2008) reinforces some of these findings in his research on the relationship between income inequality and political engagement in rich capitalist democracies. His analysis demonstrates “that higher levels of income inequality powerfully depress political interest, the frequency of political discussion, and participation in elections among all but the most affluent citizens, providing compelling evidence that greater economic inequality yields greater political inequality” (p. 48). Solt (2008) argues that his findings support the relative power theory

¹⁰⁰ I.e. uninformed about political affairs.

¹⁰¹ Granted the perceived economic interest of the Right may be narrowly conceived.

of political engagement “which maintains that where income and wealth are more concentrated, power will also be more concentrated and that the less affluent will therefore be more likely to find that the issues debated are not those that interest them, to give up on discussing political matters, and to conclude that, given the options presented, participating in elections is just not worth their effort” (p. 48).

Solt (2008) concludes his study with a pertinent quote from American political scientist E.E. Schattschneider that is worth borrowing.

The struggle is no longer about the right to vote but about the organization of politics.... Nonvoting is related to the contradiction, imbedded in the political system, between (1) the movement to universalize suffrage and (2) the attempt to make the vote meaningless. We get confused because we assume the fight for democracy was won a long time ago. We would find it easier to understand what is going on if we assumed that the battle for democracy is still going on but has now assumed a new form (as cited in Solt, 2008, p. 58).

Of course, Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels understood this; hence they argued “that the first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win *the battle of democracy*” (Marx & Engels, 1978).

Marx and Engels follow this claim in the *Communist Manifesto* with a list of reforms that communists should seek to implement from within governments of working people¹⁰² in the ‘advanced countries.’ The reforms, like a graduated income tax, nationalization of banks and of communications and transportations industries, and free

¹⁰² “The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement” (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 483).

public education, amounted to a political program that Marx and Engels argued would eventually “wrest, *by degrees*, all capital from the bourgeoisie, [and] centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State” (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 490, emphasis mine). It is reasonable to assume that Marx and Engels understood that not participating in the bourgeois democracy of the ‘advanced countries’ would only serve to further alienate working people. What they did not realize was that growing inequality would act to undermine the civic engagement of working people, and not to enhance it.

Another explanation as to why increasing inequality in most of the rich capitalist democracies has failed to translate into the implementation of policies that reverse the trend is that countries where political parties are polarized along *non-economic lines*, i.e. moral or identity politics, are much less likely to have voters voting in their economic self-interest. This is the conclusion that Norwegian political scientist Henning Finseraas (2010) came to in an article cleverly titled *What if Robin Hood is a social conservative?* Specifically, Finseraas (2010) suggests that it is low-income voters who are “less homogeneous with respect to political orientation in countries with strong non-economic party polarization,” and that non-economic party polarization therefore moderates “the government’s response to increases in inequality, simply because the demand for redistribution is smaller when low-income voters have a political orientation less in line with their economic interest” than high-income voters (p. 302).

An important finding in the literature on inequality and political polarization is that electoral systems matter. Specifically, the different findings of the literature strongly suggest that an electoral system based on Proportional Representation (PR) (like those in Germany, New Zealand, and Norway) are generally better for the Left than a Single

Member District (SMD) electoral system (like those in the UK, US and Canada). Iversen and Soskice (2015), for example, point out that, although they did not find direct impacts of PR on political polarization, it

is likely to have indirect effects on polarization because it is associated with more public spending on education, as well as stronger unions and coordinated wage bargaining. Because education spending and strong unions in turn lead to more left-leaning voting, there is likely to be a reinforcing feedback loop between left policies and left voting in PR systems; conversely, there will be a right loop in majoritarian systems (p. 1806).

American political scientist Sung Min Han (2015) points out that although the presence of PR alone does not appear to have a clear impact on political party polarization, her research nevertheless “suggests that parties only have diverging ideological platforms due to greater income inequality when electoral systems [such as PR] encourage their moves towards the extreme; parties do not diverge when electoral systems [such as SMD] discourage their moves towards the extreme” (p. 582).

This last point supplements the argument that there is ‘a right loop in majoritarian systems,’ but it is particularly important because it helps to expose the myth of the sovereign voter. The Canadian economist John Kenneth Galbraith (2001, see Chapter 3) illustrated in 1958 that the sovereign consumer is a myth; I believe that the same can be said of the sovereign voter.¹⁰³ Like the massive corporations that are able to contrive

¹⁰³ It is an irony that both my liberal and anarchist friends appear to believe in a version of the sovereign voter myth (the latter understandably resist thinking of the public as ‘voters’). For the liberals, the existence of the freedom to choose who to vote for is sufficient evidence of voter sovereignty; they would do well to consider Marcuse’s (2002) argument, then, that the “range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but *what can be chosen* and *what is chosen*

demand in oligopolistic markets, so too are big-tent political parties able to contrive demands in oligopolistic political systems. This suggests that rather than write-off ‘bourgeois democracy’ altogether, socialists may want to consider how different manifestations of bourgeois democracy may encourage greater equality, and thus lead towards a more socialistic society. The foregoing also reaffirms a point that has already been made, namely that socialists ought to discard any fantasies they may have that growing relative deprivation will result in the kind of massive unrest that would presage a socialist revolution; instead, growing inequality, *at least between crises, appears to suck people into a political centre that is forever shifting rightwards.*

5.2 Religiosity, Nationalism & Authoritarianism

The sovereign voter myth is further undermined by some of the research on the relationship between inequality and nationalism, religiosity, and authoritarianism undertaken by political scientist Frederick Solt and his collaborators (Solt, 2011, 2012; Solt, Habel, & Grant, 2011).¹⁰⁴ Through “[m]ultilevel analyses using survey data on nationalist sentiments in countries around the world over a quarter century and data on economic inequality from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database,” Solt (2011) provides “powerful support for the diversionary theory of nationalism” (p. 821). The diversionary theory of nationalism is the idea “that when economic inequality in a country is greater, the state will generate more nationalism in its citizens so as to divert

by the individual” (pp. 9-10, emphasis mine). For the anarchists, however, the acceptance of the sovereign voter myth (or sovereign political activist in this case) is betrayed by their absolute refusal to admit or acknowledge that political parties, and figures within political parties, can—at least in part—create and shape political movements. For them ‘change does not come from above’—to quote the final verse of the Internationale—not even a little.

¹⁰⁴ All of these studies employ a large number of control variables that I do not review here. Suffice to say I found the quality and quantity of control variables to be more than sufficient to warrant a discussion of the results.

their attention from their diverging conditions and forestall demands for redistributive policies” (Solt, 2011, p. 821). That this would be an effective strategy for a state to change the channel on redistribution is clear. Nationalist sentiment, of this variety, implies that ‘we are all this identity’ while at the same time encouraging uncritical deference to national leadership.

Solt (2011) measured nationalist sentiment by looking at survey responses to the following question in 78 countries: ‘how proud are you to be [your national identity]?’ He supplements this with survey results to six other questions in 54 countries: first, ‘how close—how emotionally attached—do you feel to [your nation]?’ Followed by rating national pride in five areas: “(1) their country’s achievements in the arts, (2) its achievements in sports, (3) its achievements in science and technology, (4) its armed forces, and (5) its history” (p. 824). Solt (2011) translates the foregoing into three indicators for nationalism: national pride, emotional attachment to country, and national-cultural pride respectively. He finds that inequality “has a statistically significant positive effect on all three of these indicators of nationalism, and its effect does not vary significantly across incomes” (p. 826).

This is not to say that people are not at all proud or emotionally connected to their nation in the more equal societies. A total lack of pride in and emotion for one’s nation is uncommon in all of the countries surveyed. Instead, Solt (2011) shows that greater inequality sees this absence of pride virtually disappear, while feelings of general pride turn into feelings of great pride. This suggests that relatively innocuous nationalist sentiments are transmuted into diversionary nationalist sentiments as inequality grows. One of the important implications of Solt’s (2011) work, then, is that socialists should not

ignore nationalist sentiments. Another implication is that “growing economic inequality may increase ethnic conflict. States may foment national pride to stem discontent with increasing inequality, but this pride can also lead to more hostility towards immigrants and minorities” (Solt, 2011, p. 829). This point is reinforced by “recent experimental research [which] has shown that members of majority groups who express high levels of national pride can be nudged into intolerant and xenophobic responses quite easily” (Solt, 2011, p. 829).

This provides us with a crucial lesson for the Left, for some believe that the social democratic project, or reformist campaigns generally, are not sufficiently critical of the nation-state to warrant support. Although a certain degree of nationalism may be supposed by reformist or social democratic movements and campaigns, we see here that the consequence of ignoring or opposing these campaigns and movements is quite likely a rise in more pernicious and exploitable nationalist sentiments. This could, in turn, lead to the xenophobia and intolerance commonly associated with nationalism, which is one of the key reasons many oppose nationalism on the Left in the first place. Solt (2011) concludes that “states should be expected to engage in more nationalist mythmaking when inequality increases” (p. 828), and I would say that this year’s Democratic and Republican national conventions in the US are a perfect example of the veracity of this prediction.

Solt et al.'s (2011) findings on the relationship between religiosity and economic inequality are of no less interest for the Left. Solt et al. (2011) contradict the popular theory that “religion should be seen primarily as a comfort to those suffering economic deprivation and social marginality. Religion provides reassurance that despite current or

future hardships, a higher power will provide, if not in this life, then in the next” (p. 448). Instead, they find that as inequality (and thus relative deprivation) increases, religiosity increases proportionally more among the wealthy than it does among the poor, though it does increase among both (p. 458). “At extremely high levels of inequality, those with the highest incomes are actually predicted to be more likely to identify themselves as religious than are otherwise similar people with the lowest incomes. The importance of God to one’s life, belief in an afterlife, and belief in hell exhibit this same pattern” (p. 458). For other similar measurements of religiosity, namely the importance of religion to one’s life, the amount of comfort one gets from religion, belief in heaven, belief in sin, belief in a soul, and the time one takes to pray, “changes in inequality are estimated to have a more powerful influence on the richest individuals than on the poorest, but the differences across quintiles are relatively small and do not reach statistical significance” (p. 458).¹⁰⁵

It would be helpful to draw on Chomsky (2013a), here, before evaluating the implications of this research for socialists. Chomsky (2013a) makes a simple point that the content or orientation of religion can vary depending on whether a religion is persecuted or adopted by the powerful. He discusses how Christianity went from being the religion of the persecuted (the poor and suffering) during its first three centuries to the religion of the persecutors (the rich and powerful) when it was adopted by the Roman emperor Constantine in the 4th century. He adds that Christianity of the persecutor remains dominant despite numerous and ongoing efforts to revive the radical gospels (Chomsky 2013a). Of course, many members of faith groups have long fought for the

¹⁰⁵ Solt et al. (2011) compiled and employed a data set which “includes well over 200,000 individual respondents in more than 175 society-year contexts in 76 different societies” (p. 451).

persecuted and continue to do so today. In fact, in Canada and in several other countries these attempts at reviving radical interpretations of the gospel played a monumental role in the establishment of socialist political movements.

We must avoid reified conceptions of religion, then, especially because they can be seen to fuel the anti-theist bigotry (disguised as atheism) that is now quite popular on the ‘liberal-Left’ in Western nations.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, it is valuable to point out here that the measurements employed by Solt et al. (2011) likely obscure less orthodox people of faith, and more spiritual people, who may not place emphasis God, prayer, and the afterlife, and may instead identify with holism, universalism, or the radical political implications of religious texts. This difference in preferences may even result in religious and spiritual people identifying less with the label ‘religious’ given the popular connotation of the term and given increasing anti-theist bigotry. In the hopeful words of Tommy Douglas (1934)—a Baptist minister who became Canada’s most noted socialist politician—“[t]he religion of tomorrow will be less concerned with the dogmas of theology and more concerned with the social welfare of humanity.”

I believe this brief digression allows us to properly interpret the results of Solt et al.’s (2011) research, for what we see is that inequality does increase religiosity, but it is the religiosity of the rich and powerful that increases proportionally more than that of everyone else. Solt et al. (2011) believe this to be a confirmation of the relative power theory of religiosity, “which maintains that greater inequality yields more religiosity by increasing the degree to which wealthy people are attracted to religion and have the power to shape the attitudes and beliefs of those with fewer means” (p. 447). Thus, using

¹⁰⁶ Anti-theism is no stranger to socialists either. Indeed, Christopher Hitchens is essentially the Bruno Bauer of the 21st century.

Chomsky's (2013) distinction, we can posit that with rising inequality we see a strengthening of the religion of the persecutors in particular, while still allowing religion to be something more than just a tool or deficiency of the powerful. I believe this finding compliments Solt's (2011) observation that *diversionary* nationalism rises alongside inequality, and Finseraas' (2010) observation that the polarization of politics along *non-economic* lines mitigates the likelihood of redistributive policies being implemented, because these are all illustrations of how the channel gets changed on the economic issue.¹⁰⁷

My suspicion is that with the rise of economic inequality we actually see a general rise in dogmatism, and not just of the nationalist and religious variety. Surely this is what Wright's (2006) observation of 'progress traps' from Chapter 1 suggests.¹⁰⁸ For example, a dogmatism stemming from an ideologically filtered deification of science is observable in the West; it precludes many in the social sciences from interrogating the normative presuppositions that characterize their work; it explains why 'anti-vaxers' are universally and smugly ridiculed while there appears to be relatively little concern over the power of Big Pharma and the exclusively pharmacological response to a wide variety of health problems; it informs anti-theist hatred to a large extent as well. I also fear that dogmatisms around political identities, including on the Left, may also be on the rise.

¹⁰⁷ Harvey (2014) argues, correctly I think, that there is "a crying need to articulate a secular revolutionary humanism that can ally with those religious-based humanisms (most clearly articulated in both Protestant and Catholic versions of the theology of liberation as well as in cognate movements within Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and indigenous religious cultures) to counter alienation in its many forms and to radically change the world from its capitalist ways" (Conclusion).

¹⁰⁸ This is also complimented by the argument in Chapter 4 (4.1) that aspects of people's personalities could be considered defensive behavioural adaptations to biopsychosocial stressors (and could therefore be considered a form of behavioural addiction).

Some of these suspicions are confirmed by Solt's (2012) research into the relationship between 'authoritarianism' and economic inequality insofar as dogmatism is often the product of a deference to authority. As with political polarization, religiosity and nationalism, Solt (2012) employs the relative power theory, which is again vindicated by the statistical relationships he uncovers. Relative power theory suggests that when economic inequality is greater, those among the relatively rich who believe that established authority must always be respected ... have more resources to spread this view in the public sphere. Poorer citizens, on the other hand, have fewer resources to resist these efforts in such circumstances, and their greater relative powerlessness leads to 'a greater susceptibility to the internalization of the values, beliefs, or rules of the game of the powerful as a further adaptive response—i.e., as a means of escaping the subjective sense of powerlessness, if not its objective condition' (p. 704).

Solt (2012) measures the relationship between economic inequality and the degree of deference to authority in 78 different countries by using "data from the five waves of the World Values Survey conducted between 1981 and 2007, the Standardized World Income Inequality Database, and several other sources" (p. 705).¹⁰⁹

Solt (2012) uses three survey questions that measure deference to authority: the first measures how many people think it is important for children to learn obedience;¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ "The resulting data set encompasses over 200,000 individuals, in over 190 different country-year contexts, from seventy-eight different countries around the world" (Solt, 2012, p. 705).

¹¹⁰ "Recent works have reached the conclusion that childrearing values are the best indicator of authoritarianism, in particular, whether one considers it especially important for children to learn obedience. The question of how best to raise children is an especially good measure because it invokes fundamental orientations toward authority while remaining both relatively unobtrusive and distinct from any of authoritarianism's hypothesized effects by avoiding reference to specific political situations" (Solt, 2012, p. 705).

the second, how many support “a change in their society in the near future toward a greater respect for authority;” the third, people who agree that “one should follow one’s superior’s instructions even when one does not fully agree with them” (p. 705). Solt (2012) finds a strong correlation between all of these indicators and income inequality. His analysis suggests that

economic inequality has strong effects on respect for authority: people who live in contexts of greater inequality are considerably more likely to express more authoritarianism however it is measured.... all individuals regardless of income appear to learn greater respect for authority from their more hierarchical social context. The best predictor of differences in authoritarianism across countries since the early 1980s is not the level of development or some aspect of cultural heritage, as earlier studies have suggested, but rather the extent of economic inequality (p. 709).¹¹¹

The implications of these findings are significant for several reasons.

For one, individuals “who are more authoritarian have been repeatedly demonstrated to be more intolerant of ethnic, religious, sexual, and political minorities.... And higher levels of authoritarianism make individuals much more likely to condone and even endorse illegal and blatantly undemocratic government behavior” (Solt, 2012, p. 703). This suggests, then, that “redistributive policies should be an effective means of reducing tensions across lines of ethnic or religious difference, curbing discrimination

¹¹¹ Using control variables Solt (2012) found that ‘modernization,’ ethnic diversity, absolute income, and a history of communism all had no consistent effects on one’s attitudes towards authority. Despite ‘modernization’ (economic development) not having an effect overall, the average person in the oldest democracies was still “more likely to support unquestioning obedience *at work* than otherwise similar people living in the newest democracies or under authoritarian rule” (Solt, 2012, p. 709, emphasis mine).

against sexual minorities, and gaining greater respect for advocates of uncommon political views. Conversely, failure to address rising levels of inequality should be expected to yield more intolerance” (Solt, 2012, p. 710). Fighting for the redistribution of wealth is a fight for greater democracy, and here we see that the more successful we are in that fight, the more democracy becomes worth fighting for.

This is another stark warning for many on the Left today: the struggle for economic inequality must not be thought of as separate from the struggle for a more tolerant society, i.e. a less bigoted one. In other words, greater economic equality is the foundation upon which greater *existential* equality can be achieved. This is an absolutely crucial point for the Left in the present moment, for it has become increasingly siloed around single issues and identities. This is not to trot out the old argument that existential inequality can only be achieved *after* the overthrow of capitalism, nor is this to argue that all identities should be subordinate to class—though if class is to be a meaningful or useful term, these identities must help define it. Nevertheless, these struggles are bound up with each other. Moving towards greater economic inequality sets the stage for existential gains. Conversely, combatting existential inequalities is also requisite to achieving greater economic equality, for exploiting popular bigotry is one of the most effective ways elites can avoid redistributive demands: this is, in fact, what the work of Finseraas (2010) and Solt (2011) suggests.

This may seem counterintuitive in an era where the struggles for economic and existential equality appear to have been successfully decoupled, with victories for the latter happening alongside defeats for the former. Although these gains for existential inequality are very real, the equalization is most pronounced on (economically)

horizontal lines, not vertical ones. As Therborn (2013) points out: “Having to accept that indigenous peoples have their own history and culture, or that homosexuals have the same right to sexuality as heteros, may be culturally irritating to some – who therefore resist. But for many people, and especially the urbane, well-heeled elites of the neoliberal dispensation, it is no big deal – and to some a claim to enlightenment” (Chapter 8). In other words, existential equality can be embraced in ways that do not challenge private centres of power or the organization of capitalist society. American historian Andrew Hartman (2016) highlights this difference between horizontal and vertical existential equality when he argues that there “is an enormous difference between ‘liberalizing social relations,’ which radicals can chalk up as a victory, and ‘democratizing and equalizing social relations,’ which the Left has failed miserably at achieving.” As historians Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps put it: “What does it mean that anyone of color can sit in the front of the bus, for example, or that it contains a wheelchair lift, if buses, heavily used by the working poor and elderly, now come with much less frequency and at greater cost to riders because of privatizations and cuts to public transit budgets?” (as cited in Hartman, 2016).

Indeed, what does it mean that a black person is the president of the United States when he bombs people with faces blacker than his? What does it mean that a super-rich kleptocratic bigot will be the next president of the United States regardless of whether the female candidate wins? These contradictions reveal that gains for existential equality share a double movement similar to that of the right to vote mentioned in the last section (i.e. the movement toward universal suffrage has been coupled with moves to make the vote meaningless). Worse yet, the research by Solt (2011, 2012) above gives us reason to

believe that even horizontal existential gains can only progress so far in the context of growing inequality. It is as if there might be an elastic band connecting the different struggles for equality which allows these struggles to move in different directions, but only as far as the elasticity of the band allows. I fear we are already seeing a slow snap-back. Islamophobia is undoubtedly on the rise as are various other forms of bigotry in the West; to such an extent that they are now finding new institutionalized political voices in many of the increasingly unequal rich capitalist democracies.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) provide evidence for this theory of *connected equalities* when looking at the relationship between gender and income equality, finding that not only do “more unequal societies seem more masculine, at least in terms of the stereotypes” (p. 58), they also perform more poorly on measurements of the status of women:

In the USA, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research produces measures of the status of women. Using these measures, researchers at Harvard University showed that women’s status was linked to state-level income inequality. Three of the measures are: women’s political participation, women’s employment and earnings, and women’s social and economic autonomy. When we combine these measures for each US state and relate them to state levels of income inequality, we also find that women’s status is significantly worse in more unequal states, although this is not a particularly strong relationship [thus] factors besides inequality [also] affect women’s status. Nevertheless, there is a tendency that cannot be put down to chance ... Internationally we find the same thing ... Combining measures of the percentage of women in the legislature, the male-

female income gap, and the percentage of women completing higher education to make an index of women's status, we find that more equal countries do significantly better. [Again] other factors are also influencing women's status. But again, the link between income inequality and women's status cannot be explained by chance alone, and there is a tendency for women's status to be better in more equal countries (pp. 58-60).

It is important to note here the much like their findings on the relationship between income inequality and life expectancy, this relationship allows for gains to still be made, but in the context of an overall position which is relatively worse than the more equal states.

Putting connected equalities aside, a deference to authority is clearly not conducive to socialism as we have defined it here. Surely a key characteristic of the socialist mind is the kind of intellectual self-defence mechanism where one is constantly questioning authority and hierarchy. Not blindly rejecting all authority and hierarchy mind you, but interrogating it and making it justify itself; if authority and hierarchy cannot legitimize or justify itself, we must then work to dismantle it. This is essentially what Chomsky (2005, p. 178) believes should be the task of anarchists,¹¹² but surely this is the task of the entire Left. Yet Solt's (2012) research suggests that this task is far less likely to be taken up, even by the putative or theorized Left, in the more unequal rich capitalist democracies. Hence this is yet another reason socialists must get serious about redistributive reforms.

¹¹² "I think it only makes sense to seek out and identify structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination in every aspect of life, and to challenge them; unless a justification for them can be given, they are illegitimate, and should be dismantled, to increase the scope of human freedom" (Chomsky, 2005, p. 178).

Socialists should take two other important things away from this discussion. First, the kind of nationalism and religiosity that is viewed as most pernicious by the Left appears to grow alongside inequality, thus further adding weight to the argument that redistributive reforms must be pursued in earnest. Second, however, socialists ought to be careful not to dismiss and oppose all nationalism and religiosity due to reified conceptions of these phenomena, for it would be ignorant to do so and likely to only further alienate people from the Left in more unequal societies. Many on the Left already realize this to be true in regards to religion, but too many fail to realize that this is important for national identity as well. Allow me to illustrate this by way of an anecdote.

I recently attempted to organize a fundraiser for the provincial Fight for \$15 & Fairness campaign (Ontario), which I am presently an organizer for in Ottawa. The fundraiser was planned as an alternative Canada Day party, where guests were invited to celebrate the social movements that seek to improve the wellbeing of our society on July 1st, as opposed to participating in a meaningless or jingoistic celebration of the state. This, however, provoked a cantankerous ‘call-out’ on social media which accused me and my co-organizers of being apologists for nationalism and genocide, and that also suggested our reformism was futile. To our surprise, our attempts at justifying the event were met with silence, while the call-out was widely liked and shared online, even by some fellow reformists.¹¹³

Of course, the above anecdote is fairly ridiculous, for the celebration of reformist social movements is not really nationalism in any common sense of the term. Although

¹¹³ I believe this tells us something about the call-out culture widely associated with ‘identity politics.’ Also, I could not help but wonder if the public platform combined with sensitivity to social evaluative threats could help explain why this dialogue ended up being so rigid.

our choice of Canada Day did betray one of our objectives as community organizers: pulling different members of our community (including those with nationalist sentiments) to the Left by introducing them to friendly social and discursive spaces populated by Left activists.¹¹⁴ It was suggested by supporters of the ‘call-out,’ however, that an anti-Canada Day themed event would be the only acceptable event for July 1st. Yet this would clearly undermine our objectives as organizers, especially since, as the research by Solt (2011) revealed above, almost everyone in the world has nationalist sentiments to some degree or another. As socialists, then, we should be helping them to question and qualify their nationalism, not alienating them with a flag burning demo. Despite the tenuous link our event had to nationalism—at least one that apologizes for genocide—it did cause me to think at length about how I feel about national identity and the Left’s relationship to it.

National identities matter, especially in the context of a hegemonic ideology of globalization that celebrates cosmopolitanism and ‘global citizenship’ in an effort to justify the economic agenda of the wealthiest people and corporations in the world. Furthermore, people find meaning in national identities, and this is to be expected. Indeed, Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) point out that forming common identities is a natural characteristic of humans which betrays our social nature. Specifically, they highlight “our tendency to feel a common sense of identity and interdependence with those with whom we share food and other resources as equals. They form the in-group, the ‘us’, with whom we empathize and share a sense of identity” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 209). Thus, *only* believing in the legitimacy of a single common identity, either a proletarian one, or one of a common humanity, is futile; as is believing only in the

¹¹⁴ Another one of our objectives is to bring activists and Leftists of different persuasions together, but this has gotten us into a bit of trouble with the more sectarian types as the anecdote above suggests.

legitimacy of marginalized identities (national or otherwise), which appears to be in vogue with many on the Left today.

Of course, the particulars of national identity are often largely contrived by national elites, but not always and not entirely,¹¹⁵ and this does not make the identity any less real to people who identify with their nation. Nations shape culture, and cultures give us a common framework of meaning, albeit not a static or uniform one. Trying to eliminate national identity by claiming it is inherently illegitimate or immoral will likely be viewed by many as an attempt to uproot them from that framework. The proponents of identity politics and post-colonial theory should know better than anyone how harmful that can be. Many of the immigrants and refugees who come to this country surely feel proud to have become Canadians—who are Leftists to tell them that they are wrong to?

The problem of nationalism is not new for the Left. In fact, it is one of the major motivating factors behind what American political scientist Sheri Berman (2006) has identified as the two major revisionist movements that rejected orthodox Marxism in the 20th century (fascism and social democracy). “Marx had famously argued that workers ‘had no fatherland.’ He claimed their primary ties were to workers across the globe, not to other social groups in their countries, and that their struggle to transform the world transcended national borders” (Berman, 2006, p. 60). Berman (2006) points out that these ideas inspired an obstinate orthodox Marxism that informed many of the Left political parties during the mid-to-late 19th century. For example, Germany’s Social Democratic

¹¹⁵ “Canadians certainly view their health care system as crucial to national identity: 85 percent say that eliminating the public plan would ‘result in a fundamental change to the nature of Canada’” (Kliff, 2012). Here we see something that was, at least in part, the result of a popular struggle for a fairer society forming a significant part of a national identity.

Party (SPD)¹¹⁶—via Karl Kautsky—enshrined this internationalist view in the 1891 Erfurt Program, by communicating “a view of nationalism as an instrument of the ruling class that held no interest for the proletariat and was doomed to fade away as material conflicts came to an end” (Berman, 2006, p. 60). Of course, this view was based on faulty historical materialist predictions that foresaw an inevitable proletarian revolution.

Nationalism did not go away, however, and socialists largely failed to respond to it effectively, which had devastating consequences. Moreover, nationalism, as a political force, has experienced only a minor decline since the two World Wars. Granted, it has been more salient in some locations than in others at times, but it has never stopped being a major force in global politics, as any ‘realist’ will surely tell you, and it is an increasingly powerful one in the West today. If the Left fails to respond to nationalism in a meaningful way again today, the consequences could again be dire. The answer is not to champion an inherently oppressive and hierarchical nation-state of course; it is instead to pursue the project of building a more equal and fair (national) society with a socialist horizon and a commitment to international solidarity—the latter will, in fact, be necessary for any genuinely socialist project to succeed in the medium-to-long term.

As we saw above, a more equal society does not lead to an increase of nationalist sentiment, despite the predictions of the cohesion theory of nationalism, which argues that “people are more likely to see themselves as part of a single, unified nation when their economic circumstances are indeed more similar” (Solt, 2011, p. 823). This theory makes intuitive sense, and does seem to be a logical outcome of social democratic prescriptions, such as T.H. Marshall's (1963) argument for social citizenship, but it does

¹¹⁶ The SPD was “the leading party within the predominantly Marxist Second International (1889-1914)” (Townshend, 1996, p. 19).

not appear to be the reality. Solt's (2011) research suggests that greater equality actually tempers the presence of a more unreasonable amount of pride in one's nation. If we consider what has been discussed in earlier chapters, and in the first section of this chapter, specifically how profoundly inequality impacts our physical, social, and psychological being as well as our personalities, behaviours, view of 'others,' and access to political information this actually makes a lot of sense. Why would we expect people in more healthy and functional societies to have more jingoistic nationalist sentiments?

More than anything—and this may be the most difficult pill to swallow—socialists must come to realize that any realistic socialist strategy necessarily presupposes at least some degree of nationalism (though this must be coupled with a meaningful internationalism). At the very least this is true insofar as engaging with the state-capital nexus on its own terrain is necessary. Marx understood this reality insofar as he argued that “[t]hough not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie” (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 482). Moreover, alongside claims in *The Communist Manifesto* that the struggle of communists is an international one, we see a relatively practical political program to be enacted at a national level, calling for nationalization of various industries and new public programs like universal education. Yet a nationalist project, as Marx describes it, makes little sense as ‘form’ without any ‘substance’. At least some of the latter is surely requisite to the success of the project, even if the ultimate goal is inter/post-nationalism.

At least some degree of economic sovereignty from international and regional capitalist powers is no doubt requisite to any socialist project that is (necessarily)

organized around existing public centres of power. This will inevitably involve a national identity component, even though it must also be coupled with, and will undoubtedly rely on, actionable commitments to (a socialist) internationalism. National identity does not ebb and flow in a vacuum; the broader context is hugely important. A fading national identity does not necessarily give way to proletarian internationalism, just as capitalism in crisis does not necessarily give way to socialism. Indeed, national identities in the rich capitalist democracies have only really faded since WWII insofar as they have been somewhat displaced by the identities promoted by global capitalism (whether regional, cosmopolitan, civilizational or global in orientation), and occasionally displaced by the political and commercial culture of proximate and powerful states as well. In Canada, for example, our national identity increasingly gives way to American commercial culture and politics,¹¹⁷ as well as to an increasingly hollow cosmopolitanism and mythologized multiculturalism.¹¹⁸

For many European countries, national identity has been somewhat displaced since the economic and now political union, not by a European identity forged by the genuine internationalism of the 99%, but by a European identity largely (though not wholly) contrived by European elites. The pendulum appears to now be swinging back with nationalism apparently on the rise; in response, the Left cannot cede the terrain of national identity to the Right, nor can it accept their xenophobia. Our task, then, is to build an evolutionary socialist nationalism that is not at odds with a meaningful anti-

¹¹⁷ Canadian conservative nationalist George Grant (2005) understood this when he said that “[a]ny hope for a Canadian nation demanded some reversal of [cultural and economic integration with the United States], and this could only be achieved through concentrated use of Ottawa’s planning and control. After 1940, nationalism had to go hand in hand with some measure of socialism” (p. 16).

¹¹⁸ In Canada, we cling to an increasingly meaningless national identity that is most effectively propagated by the Liberal Party; I polemicize about this in *Canadian Dimension* (see Krauter, 2015).

racist and anti-imperialist internationalism. A smattering of Left economic policies are, to varying degrees, being combined with Right wing nationalism by some of the new political forces we see today. This is not dissimilar to the development of the Nazis and the Fasci a little less than a century ago.

We must understand that simply identifying bigotry and a more general ignorance as the characteristics that explain support for Right nationalism is a narrow and self-defeating perspective. A perspective that would have been equally narrow and self-defeating in the era of fascism: “Hitler enjoyed genuine popular support in Germany because most Germans associated National Socialism first and foremost not with racism, violence, and tyranny, but with an improved life, national pride, and a sense of community,” which were, in part, the result of Nazi efforts to reduce inequality and increase social mobility (Berman, 2006, p. 148). We must not allow ourselves, then, to once again let our (necessarily) ambivalent relationship to the nation-state and to liberal democracy prevent us from unifying to offer a competing national/societal project, especially if neo-fascist political forces continue to rise.

Finally, let us not think for a moment that this rise in fascistic political forces in Europe, or the Trump phenomenon in the US, is unrelated to alienation. Harvey (2014) is correct when he argues that these “are manifestations of deeply alienated factions of the population seeking political solutions” (Chapter 17), or simply connection and belonging. Indeed, ethnographies of far-right groups confirm this (see Little, 2016).¹¹⁹ Harvey (2014) is also correct to highlight that some degree of nationalism may be necessary for

¹¹⁹ Ultimately, Right wing nationalism as a “response to universal alienation is both understandable and terrifying in its implications. It is not as if, after all, right-wing responses to these kinds of problem have not had massive historical consequences in the past” (Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17).

the Left. He points to the psychiatrist, philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, who understood that “liberation would have to be constituted in nationalist terms. But ‘if nationalism is not explained, enriched, deepened, if it does not very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism, then it leads to a dead end’” (Conclusion). Hence Harvey (2014) poses this question to the Left: “Can we not learn from that history [of fascism] and shape anti-capitalist responses more appropriate to a progressive answer to the contradictions of our times?” (Chapter 17). To which I would add: can we not learn from the Social Democrats in Sweden who succeeded at the same time that fascism was succeeding elsewhere (in no small part because they engaged with national identity in a meaningful way)?

5.3 On Diagonalist Political Strategy

It was suggested in the introduction to this paper that “much of the Left right now, being very autonomous and anarchical, is actually reinforcing the endgame of neoliberalism” (Harvey, 2016b). By now it should be becoming clear why this is. The argument, however, against a rigid horizontalism, and in favour of a more holistic political approach, can be further bolstered and enriched by a critique of totality. Let us return to the affable anarchist anthropologist David Graeber from Chapter 1—who is perhaps the leading horizontalist figure on the English speaking Left at present—to illustrate how.

Recall that leveling mechanisms were highlighted as an important component to egalitarian society (1.2). Wengrow and Graeber (2015, p. 604) noted the importance of these mechanisms for the maintenance of egalitarian hunter-forager societies past and

present, as did Kurnick (2015, pp. 405-406),¹²⁰ suggesting that egalitarian societies are not a natural phenomenon so much as they are suitable, achievable and maintainable. As for the applicability of leveling mechanisms in the present, Graeber (2015) appears to argue in favour of their use in *The Utopia of Rules* (pp. 201-202), but only in the context of already existing horizontal spaces, namely activist circles or ‘liberated’ spaces/territories like Occupy.¹²¹ For Graeber, these mechanisms do not appear to be applicable to already existing hierarchies, which is to say they are not applicable to the core of the socio-political organization of capitalist society, where their application is needed most.

Instead, Graeber’s prescriptions for Left political strategy, which appear to have been most comprehensively developed in his 2013 book *The Democracy Project*, endorse “movements that are not trying to work through or become governments; movements uninterested in assuming the role of de facto government institutions like trade organizations or capitalist firms; groups that focus on making our relations with each other a model of the world we wish to create” (p. 192). Graeber thus supports

¹²⁰ Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) also note the importance of leveling mechanisms:

Rather than reflecting an evolutionary outbreak of selflessness, studies of modern and recent hunter-gatherer societies suggest that they maintained equality not only through the institutions of food sharing and reciprocal gift exchange, but also through what have been called ‘counter-dominance strategies’. Sharing was what has been described as ‘vigilant sharing’, with people watching to see that they got their fair share. The counter-dominance strategies through which these societies maintained their equality functioned almost as alliances of everyone against anyone whose behaviour threatened people’s sense of their own autonomy and equality (p. 208).

¹²¹ Graeber appears to have a bit of a blind spot when it comes to observing the (often necessary) hierarchies that exist within (and without) the ostensibly ‘liberated’ or ‘horizontalist’ spaces he has written about. In his account of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), for example, Graeber (2013) ignores the existence and importance of inner leadership circles, which were crucial to OWS’ appearance, growth and sustained presence (Marom, 2015). Similarly, in his description of the rebellious city El Alto, Bolivia, Graeber “seems to overlook [that] there are a lot of nested hierarchies that link the ‘spheres’ and levels [of totality] with each other and that allow coordinated counterforce. Leaders and leadership experiences are essential to make those hierarchies work ... Despite what Graeber has suggested in his writing on the subject, this is no horizontalism, nor ‘consensual process’” (Kalb, 2014, p. 130).

prefigurative political strategies which “create liberated territories outside of the existing political, legal and economic order, on the principle that that order is irredeemably corrupt” (p. 259). Unfortunately, this is a fundamentally flawed political prescription (if pursued in isolation), for leveling mechanisms must at some point be administered at the core of existing social structures, not from outside of them, if the goal is to transform existing society.

To understand why Graeber supports such a narrow political strategy, one needs to try and uncover some of his assumptions about humans. Graeber appears to subscribe to a 19th century anarchist view, which underpins many anarchist political prescriptions, namely that “capitalism [is] a violation of pre-existing natural laws of human sociability that [will] re-assert themselves if the domination of state and capital [are] forcefully brought to a close” (Haysom, 2014, p. 21), or in Graeber’s case, rendered redundant through the construction of substitutive alternative structures. Indeed, we can see this idea operating in *Debt* when Graeber (2011) argues that

in the immediate *wake of great disasters*-a flood, a blackout, or an economic collapse-people tend to behave the same way, *reverting to a rough-and-ready communism*. However briefly, hierarchies and markets and the like become luxuries that no one can afford. Anyone who has lived through such a moment can speak to their peculiar qualities, the way that ... *human society itself seems to be reborn*. This is important, because it shows that we are not simply talking

about cooperation. In fact, *communism is the foundation of all human sociability.*

It is what makes society possible (p. 96, emphasis mine).¹²²

Although Wengrow and Graeber (2015) argued that we “just have to bid farewell to the ‘childhood of man’” (p. 613), the above suggests that Graeber did not always feel this way. If he had, he might not have prescribed the limited political strategy that he did in his 2013 book.

Indeed, although Wengrow and Graeber (2015) appear to refute the “contention that humans are naturally prone to equality, and that the first, and most simple, human societies were strongly egalitarian,” and appear to agree that “strict egalitarianism is a complex form of social organization that requires sophisticated leveling mechanisms to maintain,” Graeber still seems to assume that egalitarianism is “a natural baseline from which more hierarchical societies evolved” (Kurnick, 2015, p. 412). The problem here is not that humans do, in fact, have egalitarian elements to their nature, nor is the problem that humans do, in fact, flourish in more egalitarian settings, nor is the problem that most of human existence was, in fact, characterized by societies more materially equal than those that are dominant now; these are not problems, because they are all true.

Rather, the problem here is a failure to grasp that humans can and do adapt to hierarchical settings, and that this, in turn, turns on elements of our nature while suppressing others, from the pre-natal environment onwards. Thus, the broader environment has already overdetermined our nature to some degree before we ever

¹²² Of course, we saw in Chapter 4 (4.44.3) that humans are indeed social, and even cooperative, by nature, and share basic social and material needs, but we also know that humans have adapted to dominance hierarchies, and have traits and strategies that can be activated when born into such a context. Our adaptable nature was also suggested by the work in Chapter 1, namely by the fact that more or less equal societal organizations could result from environmental factors like seasons, and social factors like communal leveling mechanisms.

experience a natural disaster—so there is no rough and ready communism we will revert to, at least not a unitary one that can be held on to or one that tells us ‘who we really are.’ An analogous claim can be made for prefigurative politics: our nature is to some degree overdetermined before we ever show up to our first ‘liberated’ activist space or horizontalist collective, and it continues to be overdetermined by social totality even after we get there. Alienation cuts deeper than what any liberated moment in space and time can heal, and this means that we must engage directly with the mechanism that is most directly responsible for the distribution of wealth and the reproduction of our society: the state.

My friend and teacher Keith Haysom (2014), in his excellent critique of Graeber (2013) also points to overdetermination as a reason why the Left cannot rely on prefigurative politics alone. Haysom (2014) notes that for Critical Theorist Georg Lukacs, although totality presumes “the integration of macro-, mezzo- and micro-levels of social order,” it also allows for “windows of freedom that make possible the creation of counter-institutions based on non-colonized relations [however] it is also likely to point out that *such windows continue to operate within the total structure of society*” (Haysom, 2014, p. 38; emphasis mine).¹²³ Using this conception of totality and understanding of overdetermination, Haysom (2014) argues “that *micro*-political forms of resistance [such as those prescribed by Graeber] which make a virtue of their direct and multiple nature may err when the structural cause of the form of domination in question ... operates at a *macro*-level, which is not only beyond the reach of their direct action, but

¹²³ For Lukacs, totality is made of (partial) totalities that are subordinate to it, and these subordinate totalities are overdetermined by more complex totalities (Haysom, 2014, p. 38). I have been operated under similar assumptions throughout this paper.

which inevitably continues to shape and determine its limits and possibilities from without” (p. 38; emphasis in original).

Haysom (2014) offers the “micro-political environment of the [Occupy Wall Street] General Assembly” as an example of this problem: it “may not ‘recognize the *legitimacy*’ of the status quo, and it may challenge ‘the fundamental *premises* of our economic system’, but this does not necessarily generate meaningful social or political power such that it could, qua micro-totality, upset the order by which it remains ‘overdetermined by totalities of a *higher* complexity’” (p. 39; emphasis in original).

Haysom (2014) notes that this is especially true for occupations, like Occupy Wall Street (OWS), that are largely *symbolic*.¹²⁴ “OWS, because it placed itself at a distance from the actual institutions and practices of power, production and government, produced a functioning basis for direct democracy, only in the sense that ‘model UN’ conferences are the functioning basis for the real thing” (Haysom, 2014, p. 41).

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) supplement this kind of critique when pointing out the inefficiency of micro-scale solutions to society’s health and social problems.

The health and social problems which we have found to be related to inequality tend to be treated by policy makers as if they were quite separate from one another, each needing separate services and remedies.... These services are all expensive, and none of them is more than partially effective. For instance, differences in the quality of medical care have less effect on people’s life expectancy than social differences in their risks of getting some life-threatening disease in the first place. And even when the various services are successful in

¹²⁴ Unlike “those of the Argentine crisis of 2001, where places of work were not only occupied but re-appropriated and horizontally re-established by their workers” (Haysom, 2014, p. 40).

stopping someone reoffending, in curing a cancer, getting someone off drugs or dealing with educational failure, we know that our societies are endlessly recreating these problems in each new generation (p. 26).

This makes clear the need for a holistic political strategy; one that can be manifest at the macro-level (as well as subordinate levels). Reversing inequality must be at the heart of this strategy.¹²⁵

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) also note something else that incidentally makes clearer the problem of totality and overdetermination. When reviewing nearly 170 academic papers on the relationship between health and inequality they concluded that “there was overwhelming evidence that inequality was related to health when both were measured in large areas (regions, states or whole countries), [but that] the findings were much more mixed when inequality was measured in small local areas” (p. 28). This actually makes sense, they argue, because it is not inequality *within* deprived communities that is a causal force behind ill health so much as the fact that those communities are deprived *in relation to* the rest of society. Here we see that ‘the structural cause of the form of domination in question’ *is* operating at a *macro*-level, which is not only beyond the reach of various *micro*-level services, ‘but which inevitably continues to shape and determine their limits and possibilities from without.’

This is not to say that prefigurative politics and micro-level services are to be avoided; in fact, Haysom (2014) rightly endorses the prefigurative politics of Graeber insofar as he argues that horizontalism is a *necessary* force for societal transformation, just not a *sufficient* one. Moreover, our empirically grounded understanding of alienation

¹²⁵ “Understanding the effects of inequality means that we suddenly have a policy handle on the wellbeing of whole societies” (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011, p. 33).

also provides us with a pretty strong endorsement of prefigurative politics. Maté (2014) highlights this well when he emphasizes

the importance of people getting together and struggling in a healthy way for a different life, because if it's the loss of control, and the isolation, and the suppression of self-expression that are the greatest causes of stress, then surely *one answer* to the stress of this culture is to get together and to express ourselves and not to be silent and to connect with other human beings, or as Joe Hill said: don't mourn, organize! (emphasis mine).

Worker co-operatives could also be seen as a crucial prefigurative strategy, for the growth of co-ops not only reduces income inequality (due to their democratic structure), it also works to mitigate the alienation felt by workers by giving them control over their work.¹²⁶ That said, the limitations and failures of co-ops remain a classic example of the problem of totality and overdetermination.

The crucial point here, then, is that a dogmatic horizontalism “that refuses to tarry with the paradox of ‘using political means to transcend what for now passes as politics’, is to refuse to engage with the historical moment in which one finds oneself, and thus to deprive oneself of the resources of struggle that are available” (Haysom, 2014, p. 25).¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Recall the Whitehall studies reviewed in Chapter 3 (3.4), which suggested that “people seem to thrive where they have more control over their work” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011 p. 256). It is also worth noting that Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) liken the movement towards employee-ownership to a movement towards community; they emphasize that a democratic workplace gives people the opportunity to have a strong sense of community in their lives, and that this could prove extremely beneficial to individual wellbeing.

¹²⁷ This is an adaptation of Marx's characterization of 19th century anarchists, namely that they are “bourgeois doctrinaires and displaced gentlemen who are stupid or naïve enough to forbid them every real method of struggle because all the arms to fight with must be taken from existing society, and because the inevitable conditions of this struggle do not unfortunately fit with the idealist fantasies that these doctors of *social science* have deified under the name of *Liberty, Autonomy and Anarchy*” (as cited in Haysom, 2014, p. 24).

This critique of prefigurative politics is essentially a Marxian one. For Marx, “the individual, no matter how radicalized, cannot exempt herself from the totality of social-relations in a capitalist society.... The only way for the individual to win back her freedom from society ... is to further socialize, to *go through* rather than around society” (Haysom, 2014, p. 36, emphasis in original). In effect, this means that engaging with public centres of power is a necessity,¹²⁸ but without losing sight of the horizontalist ethic. What is needed, then, is a *diagonalist* political strategy.

5.4 Towards a Politics of Anti-Alienation

Having a mass movement engage public centres of power via multiple institutions/strategies is easier said than done, of course. However, it is not impossible. For this to become a reality there would clearly need to be a broadly defined political project that could mobilize, or at least speak to, the majority of the citizenry. Organizing around combating alienation could prove a useful framework. “Confronting collectively the multiple alienations that capital produces is a compelling way to mobilise against the stuttering economic engine that so recklessly powers capitalism from one kind of crisis to another with potentially disastrous consequences for our relation to nature and for our relations to each other. Universal alienation calls for a full-blooded political response” (Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17).

¹²⁸ Of course, Marx did not see control of the state as necessary out of some love for the state—in fact he was a lifelong critic of it. Rather, as Haysom (2014) points out, Marx understood that the state and capitalism shaped social totality to such an extent that

transformation occurs not merely by means of the diametric opposition of thesis and anti-thesis, but by means of the *determinate* negation of the former by the latter, within the determinate structure of the existing society. This structure, which defines the total organization of all of social classes, of all social, political and economic order and practice, cannot be negated by simple means of cancellation [or substitution], but only by means of re-appropriation. Such re-appropriation can only occur *from within* the structure as it exists, and not from some point of posited externality (temporally or spatially) from which bourgeois capitalism/statism could be excluded” (pp. 19-20, emphasis in original).

Universal alienation, moreover, *encourages* a full-blooded political response, for our understanding of it here effectively connects reformist struggle to the broader task of transformation.¹²⁹ From the perspective of an anti-alienation politics, as developed here, we can see that getting a handle on economic inequality is tantamount to getting a handle on the *potency* of alienation. This, of course, contrasts starkly with the orthodox Marxist belief in increasing relative deprivation as a spur to socialist action. Unlike some of the older incarnations of Marxian materialism, then, the materialism that has been developed here is far less economistic: while it recognizes the potency of the overwhelming and overdetermining force that is material inequality, and by extension the material organization of society, it also recognizes the absolute imperative for political action at every scale of totality to alter this organization and our trajectory.

History has amply demonstrated that when capitalism appears to be on the brink of collapse in societies characterized by inequality and its attendant dysfunction, it is liberal democracy that is far more likely to be the first (and only¹³⁰) thing to go. Enhancing capitalist contradictions, therefore, is more likely to imperil liberal democracy than capitalism. Furthermore, such a strategy would be tantamount to worsening the living conditions of most people in society,¹³¹ and as we have seen, increased relative

¹²⁹ Connecting reformism to anti-capitalist transformation is actually what Rosa Luxembourge argued for in her polemic against Eduard Bernstein during the revisionist debate within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) (Townshend, 1996, pp. 27-28). Her rationale for doing so can in some ways be bolstered, and in other ways be challenged, by the analysis of alienation here.

¹³⁰ Unjustifiably narrow definitions of capitalism allow for some to argue that capitalism was wholly jettisoned by fascists, but this seems entirely unreasonable given the privileges of capital in fascist societies. Even authoritarian communism contrived and maintained a system that shares many analogs with monopoly capitalism.

¹³¹ Which is frankly immoral, despite what any utilitarian calculus concludes.

deprivation does not result in the adoption of a socialist consciousness by the masses;¹³² rather it *most predictably* results in the increased appearance of mental and physical illnesses, deference to authority, pathological behaviours, dysfunctional personality traits, ideological pathologies, mistrust, and a warped view of others, as well as in the decrease of social capital, civic engagement and of the distribution of political information within society. Worst of all, these negative effects are largely concentrated within the constituency socialists most want to mobilize. Thus, although crises in dysfunctional societies may result in fairly radical political change and perhaps even in revolution, banking on socialism to gain the upper hand—and then to maintain it—in such scenarios is at best a crapshoot and, frankly, would represent a morally bankrupt gamble; even when socialist forces are the ostensible beneficiaries of such a crisis, they are nevertheless limited by the uncertainty and the undeveloped consciousness of the public, as well as limited to a significant degree by global capitalism under US hegemony, *which requires deeply rooted popular commitment to confront*.

In these situations, the only democratic path forward for the Left has so far looked something like a social democracy that is far less transformative or ‘radical’ than the social democracy of the past (when there happened to be greater economic equality in the rich capitalist democracies). Take Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, two political figures of the Left (broadly understood) in two of the most unequal rich capitalist democracies, the UK and US respectively, as an example of the reality being described. Although their efforts are laudable, they do not represent a particularly radical agenda of transformation, as the ever-vindicated circles of the ‘radical’ Left will surely tell you.

¹³² Ultimately, any political program based on the enhanced suffering of the majority not only promotes dubious means to an improbable end, but is inherently anti-democratic.

Nevertheless, their relatively tepid, *yet genuine*, social democratic programs are the best that the Left in those countries can realistically hope for at this time.

Worse, there is no guarantee that these political figures, and the *movements behind them*, will succeed—indeed, Sanders has already lost, leaving his base divided and leaving Donald Trump as the most popular ‘anti-establishment’ candidate in the presidential election. In some of the relatively more equal countries of Europe that are experiencing economic crisis, we see a greater appetite among the population for radical Left politics, but even these political forces, manifest in parties such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, offer political programs necessarily limited by the exigencies of democracy as it currently exists and a neoliberal EU (see Panitch & Gindin, 2015). At this point, any moves towards Grexit, for example, let alone an attempt to jettison capitalism, would be incredibly anti-democratic, and could only be sustained through severe forms of coercion, and thus a rejection of socialism.

Despite a seeming consensus that politics in these countries has become extremely polarized, the reality is a little more complex. The finding in section 5.2 of this chapter that the more unequal rich capitalist democracies produce more centrist voters as a result of an unequal distribution of political information attendant to greater economic inequality seems to be at odds, at first glance, with the political situation in the US and UK. I would argue, however, that the reality of this centrism can be seen in the political visions communicated by Corbyn, Sanders, UKIP and Trump, and even more so in people’s response to them. Not only is the disapproval of their respective political visions usually expressed on centrist grounds, and this includes the partial disapproval of many

of their more reluctant supporters, but the visions themselves are characterized to a large degree by a deference to the political centre.

Take Trump, for example. Slavoj Žižek is overstating his point, but he is not *entirely* wrong to suggest that “Trump is really a centrist liberal:”

Read Trump closely – it is difficult to do, I know – and if you extract his total racist and sexist stupidities, you will see that here and there, where he makes a complete proposal, they’re usually not so bad ... He said he will not totally dismantle universal healthcare, raise the minimum wage, and so on ... Trump is a paradox: he is really a centrist liberal, and maybe even in his economic policies closer to the Democrats, and he desperately tries to mask this. So the function of all of these dirty jokes and stupidities is to cover up that he is really a pretty ordinary, centrist politician (as cited in Browne, 2016).

This is not to deny that there is some polarization happening here. I think what this suggests, however, is that we are seeing the kind of polarization that takes shape in uninformed and dysfunctional publics—a polarization along somewhat non-economic lines like Finseraas (2010) predicts: Robin Hood may end up being a social conservative in these unequal societies.

Undoubtedly, there is *some* polarization along economic lines too, but even at its extreme points these differences still largely fall within the acceptable ideological boundaries of the post-war period. This is of course good news insofar as neoliberalism is being chipped away, but here is the rub: it is not growing inequality that has produced this polarization as much as it is the economic crises (which then drew attention to inequality). Of course, it could be said that growing inequality *is* what led to the

economic crises that allowed for the Overton window to widen, and this is partially true; *however*, crises flow not from inequality so much as the contradictions inherent to capitalism that can themselves result in the growth of inequality. Furthermore, these contradictions and their attendant crises¹³³ are not the exclusive property of the unequal rich capitalist democracies; crises are not magically expelled from the more equal rich capitalist democracies, though they may be less common and less severe. The question, then, is when contradictions inevitably produce crises, what kind of society is more likely to respond to them in a way that moves towards socialism and not away? It is likely to be the more equal societies, of course, for reasons that should be apparent given what has been discussed throughout this paper. When confronted by the limits, contradictions, or crises of capitalism, we must be in a position to *further socialize*.¹³⁴

A politics of anti-alienation can help us pursue this task by building support for a broad based reformist movement that maintains a socialist horizon. One way it can do this is by avoiding some of the rigidities of many ‘class struggle’ analyses. If Kalb is right that class represents a ‘bundle of relations’ (Kalb, 2015, p. 14), then an analysis of alienation provides us with a coherent framework with which to identify these various relations, without getting *too* hung up on factors like what colour the collar of someone’s shirt is. Furthermore, given the social class gradients that we know apply to the many effects of varying degrees of alienation, we can argue that a politics of anti-alienation benefits virtually all of society, with benefits that increase the further down the socio-

¹³³ Crises “are nothing more or less than the periodic collisions of the contradictory forces of capitalist economy” (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 49).

¹³⁴ In a sense, then, this means that one of the earliest and most notable revisionists, Eduard Bernstein of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), was right to argue that instead of being destroyed, liberal institutions need to be developed (Townshend, 1996, p. 24).

economic ladder one is. In other words, a politics of anti-alienation can form the basis of a socialist politics that is fought not just on behalf of a narrowly understood class, but for and by the alienated, which essentially represents everyone in society, with those occupying the bottom of the social ladder having the most to gain and those at the top having the least to gain (yet gaining something nonetheless). This is in line with the sentiment today of many on the activist Left who are directing their political animus towards those they identify as the 1%, i.e. not the small business owner down the street. An anti-alienation politics, therefore, meshes well with a politics of the 99%.

This is not dissimilar to the kind of class analysis that was offered by many of the social democratic parties of the 20th century, such as the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SAP) in Sweden, and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Canada. In a review of the history and policy of the latter undertaken by its National Secretary and National Chairman in 1943, for example, there is a chapter presciently titled *Political Action for the 99%* (Lewis & Scott, 2001). Like the SAP¹³⁵ in the mid-20th century, the CCF referred to 'the people,' e.g. the 'people's movements' and the 'people's political instrument' (Lewis & Scott, 2001, p. 75, 93). This speaks to the fact that both these parties, and many of the other revisionist social democratic parties, believed they should be the political instrument not just for the proletariat, but also for farmers, and members of the middle class (see Berman, 2006, Chapters 7–8).¹³⁶ This belief in the need to move beyond a narrow focus on the proletariat—contra orthodox

¹³⁵ See Berman (2006, pp. 162–163).

¹³⁶ Of course, the idea was that whether someone was middle class, a worker, or a farmer, they joined the CCF because they were committed to building a socialist society. In the words of Tommy Douglas on the 50th anniversary of the Regina Manifesto (the founding document of the CCF): "If I could press a button tonight and bring a million people into this party, and knew those people were coming for some ulterior motive, but they didn't understand the kind of society we are trying to build, I wouldn't press the button, because we don't want those kind of people" (as cited in Rodriguez, 2016).

Marxists—stems back to the early revisionists in the late 19th century (see Berman, 2006, Chapter 2). That said, social democratic parties did not simply adopt wholesale the revisionist analyses, like those of Bernstein, and rightly so. Instead, they had much in common with Marxian thinking, such as a Marxian understanding of crisis, Marxian critiques of capitalism, and a (post-capitalist) socialist horizon.¹³⁷

Unfortunately, Marxian elements largely disappeared from view, as did the socialist horizon, starting from the neoliberal shift of the 1970s onward and the concomitant seduction of most social democratic parties by the siren song of technocrats. We are now beginning to see, however, a revival of parliamentary socialism within old social democratic parties, like the British Labour Party, and new ones like Podemos. An anti-alienation political agenda could help connect the reformism of these parties to a better defined socialist politics, or put another way, a clearer socialist horizon, and it could do so without dogmatic and exclusionary conceptions of class. An anti-alienation politics, or really any democratic program on the Left, should obviously strive not to alienate a majority of people.

It would be a great irony if Marxian political thought were to return to socialist political parties in the form of anti-alienation politics, for as Harvey (2014) points out: in “the lore of traditional communist parties,” it was the belief in an inevitable transition to communism that “was seen as a scientific and technical rather than a subjective, psychological and political question;” alienation, on the other hand, “was excluded from

¹³⁷ Marx had such an impact on the totality of socialist thought it is near impossible to escape his influence. Perhaps this is itself a form of overdetermination. Thus when I say that there were Marxian elements to the vision of mid-20th century social democratic parties, it does not necessarily mean that the socialists within them identified as Marxist or Marxian, or would even concede that there were specifically Marxian elements to their vision.

consideration since it was a non-scientific concept that smacked of the humanism and utopian desire articulated in the young Marx of *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* rather than through the objective science of Capital” (Chapter 17). Yet we have shown here that Marx’s theory of alienation is in many ways more scientifically verifiable than the scientific socialism of Capital. The old “scientistic stance failed to capture the political imagination of viable alternatives in spite of the passionate beliefs of adherents to the communist cause. Nor did it provide any spiritually compelling and subjective (rather than scientifically necessary and objective) reason to mobilise arms in a sea of anti-capitalist struggle” (Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17). An anti-alienation politics informed by materialist holism, however, could succeed where this old ‘scientistic’ stance failed, for it can provide a ‘scientifically necessary and objective’ reason to mobilize as well as a spiritually compelling and subjective one: human flourishing.

A politics of anti-alienation also makes clear that, although we may struggle against capitalists and other elites, they are ultimately just a proxy for a system of alienation (capitalism) itself that we seek to temper, modify and ultimately transform. Here critical theory’s development of a Marxian analysis of capitalism is extremely helpful, namely the critique of totality (which I have been attempting to deepen throughout this text). From “the perspective of the critique of totality, a capitalist society ... is not simply one in which the means of production are owned by capitalists for the purpose of producing surplus value from the labour of the working class; it is one in which *the production of exchange values trumps all other imperatives, and as a result the process of capital accumulation colonizes all social spaces and interactions*” (Haysom, 2014, pp. 34-35, emphasis mine). This colonization, with its accumulation through

dispossession, and its augmentation of economic inequality generally, is the motor of alienation. It is this capitalist imperative and the attendant spread of instrumental rationality against which incremental gains are to be won.

A mass movement committed to these ends requires a people's political instrument at the scale of macro-totality; in other words, it requires a national political party working to transform society as well as to forge international relationships with those committed to similar ends. For the moment, there are no true mass movements in most (or perhaps all) rich capitalist democracies, and for the movements that are or were recently active, the actual participants generally make up a relatively small number of people. As Haysom (2014) points out:

the entire population of regular Occupy participants across the entire continental United States ... even at the movement's height did not represent but a tiny minority of even their apparent constituencies. That this could be so (and that the "99% vs 1%" rhetoric that the movement popularized could in fact be stood on its head as a statistically accurate description of the ratio of non-participants to participants) speaks not to any moral failing on Occupy's part, but rather to the limitations of its *organizational and tactical form* (pp. 7-8, emphasis in original).¹³⁸

This is a far cry from social democracy at its peak: in the early 1980s, for example, the SAP had a membership that was approximately 15% of Sweden's population or just

¹³⁸ Furthermore, as fellow Canadian socialist and political economist Sam Gindin (2016) recently pointed out: although "movements raise the banner of participatory democracy, their institutional weaknesses often result in less-than-democratic internal procedures" (Gindin, 2016). See Marom (2015) for a first-hand experience of this.

under 20% of the electorate, with around 40% of the electorate voting for the SAP in 1982.¹³⁹

The incipient return of parliamentary socialism to the UK Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn has seen the party membership explode, more than tripling since 2014.¹⁴⁰ The latest membership total I have seen reported is 640,000,¹⁴¹ which does not include the countless members who were either denied the right to vote in the current leadership election or were rejected/expelled altogether as a result of party establishment chicanery.¹⁴² Nevertheless, this suggests that a renewed social democracy could prove to be a potent tool in organizing, mobilizing and educating the public; whether such a project will be effectively pursued with Jeremy Corbyn as leader remains to be seen, but there are promising signs. That said, the internal resistance to Corbyn and his supporters so far is a testament to how anti-democratic social democratic parties can be.

Yet all organizations of the Left have democratic deficits, especially the feted movements, which often have underdeveloped or inefficient democratic structures.¹⁴³ Should we really be surprised at this given the nature of totality and overdetermination? For some who have written-off political parties altogether, the best way forward for the Left is some form of social movement unionism,¹⁴⁴ but “the problem with most proposals

¹³⁹ These numbers are my back-of-the-envelope calculations using the Wikipedia page for Sweden’s 1982 election (“Swedish general election, 1982,” 2014), SAP membership figures from Mathers, Taylor, & Upchurch (2012, p. 182), and population data from the World Bank (2016).

¹⁴⁰ 2014 membership total from Keen & Audickas (2016).

¹⁴¹ This is the number of members receiving ballots in the current leadership according to a recent article in *The Guardian* (Gayle, 2016).

¹⁴² If these people were not excluded/rejected/expelled by the Labour Right, the membership numbers could easily be as many as four or five times what they were in 2014.

¹⁴³ See footnote 138.

¹⁴⁴ Yet, the similarities between the large trade unions and social democratic parties are hard to ignore. Both kinds of representative organizations for working people must negotiate and compromise with capital in one way or another, and both—like all structures of representative democracy—are flawed and

for social movement unionism is that they tend to underestimate the depth of unions' internal problems and overestimate the strength of movements. Stitching actually existing unions and social movements together may yield some positive results, but such loose alliances are essentially pragmatic and temporary. *The sum of their inadequate parts remains an inadequate whole*" (Gindin, 2016, emphasis mine). My own experience working in both confirms this. In order to transform our society, we must organize and institutionalize at a societal level. Requisite to this is the formation or reappropriation-then-transformation of a political party. That this is what we must do should no longer be in doubt.

5.5 Left Identity Politics

The history of social democracy (especially the recent history), like the history of anarchism and communism, has many blemishes representing failures, perversions and betrayals of principle. It is also a history that represents long-standing internecine feuds on the Left, perhaps more than any other history. This may cause some to immediately dismiss political prescriptions for reformist parliamentary socialism. That said, what I prescribe is not a simple return to an old social democracy; what is needed, rather, is a *new* democratic—or dare I say evolutionary—socialism that is different in its institutionalization and more holistic in its approach. Many on the Left will, unfortunately, still find this difficult to stomach, and may flatly refuse such a proposition. To this I would say: refuse if I have grievously misunderstood political reality. Do not refuse because you cling to some sectarian identity. My experience in the real world of Left activism has taught me that the differences between those who identify with

corruptible. Yet some of my comrades in the labour movement will work in earnest within the trade union movement while totally eschewing parliamentary politics, as if these similarities did not exist.

different varieties of socialism are often quite small. The differences can be quite real, of course, and when they are, they tend to be differences of opinion over political strategy, rather than horizon.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, a great deal of difference seems to me to be contrived—there is, unfortunately, a lot of radical posturing.¹⁴⁶

In understanding that the major differences between socialists are often matters of political strategy, this work hopes to convey that an incremental path to greater equality is the only realistic path forward. Although this work demonstrates that one of the primary means of achieving a more socialistic society is fostering greater equality, it still leaves plenty of room for debate on some of the means of employing this means. Japan performs exceptionally well on Wilkinson and Pickett's (2011) index of societal wellbeing, for example, yet it achieves its high level of equality through narrowing differences between people's *pre-tax* incomes, thus making large scale redistribution unnecessary.¹⁴⁷ The Scandinavian countries, on the other hand, achieve greater equality through more robust redistributive policies and public services. Thus, there is likely some room for different strategies to be pursued in lieu of building a massive welfare state, for economic inequality is not simply a problem of public spending; in fact, there is no correlation between government spending and inequality in the rich capitalist democracies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, pp. 183-184, 245-246).

¹⁴⁵ Of course, sometimes the differences reveal that someone who identifies with socialism does so incorrectly, and actually holds fundamentally anti-socialist views.

¹⁴⁶ The founding leader of (the most recent incarnation of) Canada's social democratic party, Tommy Douglas, seems to have also cared little for radical posturing: after meeting with members and ministers of the revolutionary Communist government of Spain in 1936 he recalled that "they certainly didn't impress me as having very radical ideas. We would have thought of them as Lloyd George Liberals" (as cited in Thomas, 2009, p. 106). Though, in this case, the problem was more than posturing, and Douglas actually referred to the communist government as 'counter-revolutionary.' A charge that is vindicated by George Orwell's (2016) observations in *Homage to Catalonia*.

¹⁴⁷ In fact, Japan spends around the same (per capita) on the welfare state as the US (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011, p. 245).

In terms of a means to greater equality or to socialism, however, it should be noted here—though it should not *need* to be noted—that the brutal dictatorial means, like those of the Bolsheviks, must be rejected, and those on the Left that still apologize for these dictatorships (even during the early stages) should give it a rest.¹⁴⁸ I do not wish to deny that they wrought “drastic resource equalizations, often in brutal ways, of housing space as well as of land and income,” nor that “Communist revolutionary equalization also extended to gender relations, attacking entrenched patriarchy head-on” (Therborn, 2013, Chapter 9), nor even that these equalizations did benefit the health of many: in Eastern Europe, for example, “the life expectancy gap with Western Europe narrowed from ten years in 1930 to two years in 1965” (Therborn, 2013, Chapter 9).¹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, these gains came at far too high a price: a denial of political and work-life freedom, and thus a rejection of socialism.

Of course, anarchists have long been credited with predicting this outcome. Indeed, long before the Bolshevik revolution Mikhail Bakunin had predicted that a ‘dictatorship’ of the working class would inevitably result in the tyranny of a new minority as opposed to genuine majoritarian rule, and “with the benefit of our 140-year hindsight on the rise and fall of ‘real-existing socialism,’ Marx and Bakunin’s clashing predictions ... would certainly seem to grant the role of visionary truth-seer not to Marx but to Bakunin” (Haysom, 2014, p. 15). It is worth noting, however, that there are also social democrats who could be attributed with some amount of ‘visionary truth-seeing,’

¹⁴⁸ If the Socialist Revolutionary Party maintained government instead of being destroyed and persecuted by the Bolsheviks alongside all the other Left opposition groups (‘infantile Leftists’), perhaps we would all celebrate Russian socialism today.

¹⁴⁹ See my friend and Carleton Political Economy colleague Carter Vance (2016) on ‘moral line-item vetoes.’

but they seldom are. German Social Democrat (and disciple of Marx) Karl Kautsky (2002), for example, called out the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in Russia for what it was (an actual dictatorship and a failure to achieve socialism) from the beginning, and he documents the violent and authoritarian nature of the Bolsheviks, including Lenin and Trotsky, in his 1919 book *Terrorism and Communism*. Not only was Bolshevik treatment of those who *they* identified as bourgeois initially brutal, but they set about to permanently subjugate the bourgeois as a new underclass, to be forever subordinate to ‘the proletariat.’¹⁵⁰

The masses too, however, were robbed of liberty and were subject to many different forms of coercion. Kautsky (2002) argues that in an effort to imbue the masses with ‘communist morality,’ the Bolsheviks employed “the miserable expedient with which the old society endeavoured to absolve itself from the results of its own sins, namely, the *tribunal, prison and execution*, in other words, Terrorism” (Chapter 8, emphasis in original). In the current epoch, however, it is Chomsky (2008)¹⁵¹ who sums up the Bolshevik revolution¹⁵² most bluntly when he flatly points out that once Lenin ascended to power—despite a temporary Leftward shift in the bent of his writing beforehand—he and Trotsky “moved at once to eliminate the organs of worker’s

¹⁵⁰ “Hence, by transforming what should have been the social struggle for liberty, and for the raising of the whole of humanity on a higher plane, into an outbreak of bitterness and revenge, which led to the worst abuses and tortures, Bolshevism has demoralised the proletariat, instead of raising it to a higher level of morality” (Kautsky, 2002, Chapter 8).

¹⁵¹ Chomsky refers to himself as a libertarian socialist, but differs substantially from anarchists when it comes to political strategy, leading one editor of his work to claim that Chomsky raises the question of “what anarchist practice actually is, and how it differs from that of, say, *social democrats*” (Pateman, 2005, p. 10, emphasis mine).

¹⁵² He calls it a coup.

control,” thus they were “moving to destroy socialism.”¹⁵³ The reason why the Soviet dictatorship has been associated with socialism for so long, then, is not because of any genuine commitment or fidelity to socialism, but because the two largest propaganda agencies in the world (that of the US and of the Soviet Union), for their own quite different reasons, had agreed that this “destruction of socialism is socialism” (Chomsky, 2008).¹⁵⁴

To this I would add that conceiving of authoritarian communism as a ‘form’ of socialism would allow for the case to be made that the Fasci and National Socialists should also be granted this titular privilege (thus further evacuating the term of meaning). If we think that the dictatorial implementation of certain elements of socialism warrants ignoring breaches of the most fundamental of principles of socialism, then we must acknowledge fascists as our own. For both the Bolsheviks and fascists, to greater and lesser degrees, combined the political programs of Left and Right in a way that denied the most fundamental principle of socialism: workers’ control over their life activity. If we choose not to ignore this fundamental principle, then we must agree with Chomsky (2014) that there was more socialism in Western Europe than there was in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, because at least workers had some control and influence over their governments in the former. If we agree to pursue an anti-alienation politics, then surely we must defer to this principle of control over one’s life activity. There is an underlying assumption at play here, however: liberal democracy is not a form of bourgeois government that is little different from bourgeois dictatorship (as many

¹⁵³ For a full history of this version of events see Maurice Brinton's (2005) *The Bolsheviks and Workers' control: The state and counter revolution*. It should be noted that the name Maurice Brinton was actually a pen-name for neurologist and libertarian socialist intellectual Chris Pallis. Also see Chomsky (1986).

¹⁵⁴ That and the fact the Soviets had taken control of the international (Chomsky, 2008).

Marxists once claimed¹⁵⁵), nor is it simply a means to an end (as Luxembourg suggested), nor is it simply an end in itself (as many liberals believe); rather it is a means to an end which is not *completely* distinct from that end.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ See Berman (2006, pp. 28-29, 56).

¹⁵⁶ This is essentially to agree with Bernstein over Luxembourg, for in their debate Luxembourg appeared to value democracy for purely instrumental reasons, while Bernstein saw something inherently valuable in it that needed to be developed (Townshend, 1996, pp. 27-28).

6 Chapter: Conclusion

6.1 Equality Trap?

What about the concerns raised at the outset of this paper? The concerns that social democrats often capitulate to the demands of capital, or are simply co-opted by capital; that they often pursue only mild to moderate reforms that are too easily reversed; that they perpetuate capitalism, by saving it from crisis through redistribution-driven consumer demand stimulation, and ultimately produce a more materially comfortable and thus more complacent citizenry. In essence, this paper has (so far) responded to these concerns by demonstrating that greater inequality will not and *cannot* lead to genuine socialism, claiming instead that incrementally achieving greater equality is the only realistic path forward. There are more direct responses to these concerns, however. The first should be that they are, in fact, legitimate concerns. Hence I will now deal with each of them in turn, with particular emphasis on the concern over a complacent citizenry, or what one could call the *equality trap* thesis, for this has proven an effective narrative concerning social democracy.

(1) Not all social democratic parties, not even all of the ones with a neoliberal posture, are or have become simply co-opted by capital. Claims that social democratic parties are no longer different from any other capitalist party are often based on a reified understanding of these parties. Co-option cannot be conflated with rightward drifts, influence, and infiltration. For example, I know many genuine socialists (myself included) who currently work inside of Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP), which is one of the social democratic political parties that has experienced this drift. Many more in

the NDP may not be socialists, and of course many are ‘Mulblairites,’¹⁵⁷ but there are some Galbraith-style liberals and Red Tories as well. Is it still a socialist party? Not at the moment, but that does not make it ‘just another capitalist party’ either. Moreover, the NDP could become a socialist party again, in the same way that parliamentary socialism is beginning to reassert itself in the UK’s Labour party. Would a new party be better? Perhaps. That has been the pattern in PR electoral systems, and is yet another reason why socialists should back PR.¹⁵⁸ In SMD electoral systems in the meantime, however, the more feasible route appears to be a reappropriation of already existing ‘Left’ parties.

(2) Although social democrats often push for mild reforms that can be easily reversed, this is not always the case—some social democratic reforms are quite difficult to reverse. This is especially true of the introduction of universal public services/programs which tend to, once implemented, create publics that can be mobilized to defend these programs if and when they come under attack. (3) As was implied in the last chapter (5.4), reforms do not appear to perpetuate capitalism so much as they perpetuate (and hopefully transform) liberal democracy. Furthermore, although social democratic reform may stem or attenuate some capitalist crises, they also appear to enhance other contradictions, lead to other crises, and push up against certain limits of capitalism and the Welfare state, as was arguably the case in the late 1970s. This should not necessarily be seen as a bad thing.

¹⁵⁷ This is a nickname for Third Way types in the NDP which is, as far as I can tell, a group that is not actually identical to the group that supported (Right-wing) Mulcair in the recent leadership convention vote.

¹⁵⁸ Socialists have been backing PR since as far back as the SPD’s 1891 Erfurt Program (Social Democratic Party of Germany, 1891).

(4) Not all reforms, nor all manifestations of a welfare state, nor all manifestations of a social democratic project, will necessarily lead to a complacent citizenry. If the Left is to reconstruct the Welfare state, then it must construct one that emphasizes autonomy and self-direction, and one that cannot be easily instrumentalized by the Right to pacify or control the lower classes, or to reward only the middle classes. Furthermore, the project of the electoral Left cannot simply be service provision, it must also be transformation, even if that transformation is gradual. In other words, economic democracy and economic planning ought to be central to democratic socialist projects going forward.

This idea of an equality trap is essentially the problem that the Frankfurt schooler Herbert Marcuse (2002) grappled with in his classic work *One-Dimensional Man*: “there is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the ‘good’ life” (p. 53).

If the individuals are satisfied to the point of happiness with the goods and services handed down to them by the administration, why should they insist on different institutions for a different production of different goods and services?

And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that the satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to think, feel, and imagine for themselves? (Marcuse, 2002, p. 53).

There are rebuttals that can be offered in response to Marcuse’s analysis that are worth exploring here, for they suggest that even concerns over the problematic Welfare states of the postwar period creating an equality trap were misplaced. One of the weaknesses to Marcuse’s analysis is the fact that in the years following the publication of *One-*

Dimensional Man (1964) many did not appear comfortable with the 'good life' offered by the Welfare state at its peak, for reasons that appear not at all dissimilar to Marcuse's criticisms of it.

In fact, the student movements of the 1960s were, at least to some extent, inspired by Marcuse's (2002) *One-Dimensional Man*, and he was even seen by some at the time as an intellectual leader of the counterculture movements (Curtis, 2002). "Contrary to the forecasts of the founders of the welfare state, social protection and benefits had not reconciled populations with capitalist society, nor had the procedures for permanent negotiation and arbitration defused social antagonisms. In fact, the opposite was the case" (Gorz, 1999, pp. 10-11). In a perverse way, neoliberalism responded to the individualism and the anti-work sentiments of the 1960s with the commodification of individuality and with the 'flexible' labour market. It was as if the invisible hand of the market was actually a monkey's paw unwittingly wished upon by the 1960s youth.¹⁵⁹

As the Marxian social philosopher André Gorz (1999) points out, the neoliberal shift was "essentially [a] political response to what, towards the middle of the 1970s, was called 'the crisis of governability'" (p. 9).

That crisis, the chief preoccupation of the public and private decision-makers grouped together in the Trilateral Commission, showed itself at all levels of society: at the state level, in schools and universities, in companies, towns and cities, in hospitals and *in all those apparatuses which were supposed to ensure the cultural reproduction of society*. In the United States the crisis assumed quasi-insurrectional forms ' from 1964 onwards.... By 1967, the 'dissidence' had

¹⁵⁹ As we shall see, however, it was not a monkey's paw, but the public relations industry who had discerned and deformed their desires.

reached the universities and secondary schools of West Germany. It then spread into the industrial centres of the rest of Europe and was continued into the middle of the 1970s (until 1980 in Italy) in the form of industrial action radically different from the customary strikes: rejection of imposed work rhythms; rejection of wage differentials; refusal to kow-tow to bullying foremen; self-ordained reductions in the pace of work ... and, quite simply, refusal to work.” (pp. 9-10, emphasis mine).

The report from the Trilateral Commission—an elite global policy planning board¹⁶⁰—that Gorz refers to here was titled the *Crisis of Democracy*, and it pretty much concluded that there was too much of it. It expressed concerns over things such as: “‘privatistic youth’ who challenge the work ethic in its traditional form,” and “the effectiveness of ‘those institutions which have played the major role in the indoctrination of the young’” (Chomsky, 1981).¹⁶¹

The way neoliberalism solved the ‘crisis of governability,’ namely the way it has changed the shape of state and capital (and one could add here the Left as well), is telling,

¹⁶⁰ “Emerging at the watershed of recent economic globalization in 1973, the Trilateral Commission (TC) was launched from within the Bilderberg meetings by David Rockefeller as a forum to foster effective collaborative leadership in the international system and closer cooperation among the core capitalist regions of northern Europe, North America and Japan – the ‘triad’. It continues a consultative ruling-class tradition, bringing together transnationalized fractions of the business, political and intellectual elite during several yearly meetings, which it convenes at the national, regional and plenary levels. Unlike the secretive Bilderberg, however, the TC ‘sought to develop a profile with greater transparency, public activities and sophisticated publications, responding to the greater sensitivity towards public relations’” (Carroll, 2010, p. 42).

¹⁶¹ Shortly after the report was published in 1975, many of its authors were appointed to significant positions of power in the Jimmy Carter administration in the US, and appeared to carry out the report’s prescription to “restore a more equitable relationship between government authority and popular control” (as cited in Chomsky, 1981). “All of the top positions in the government — the office of President, Vice-President, Secretary of State, Defense and Treasury — are held by members of the Trilateral Commission, and the National Security Advisor was its director. Many lesser officials also came from this group” (Chomsky, 1981).

for it suggests that the Welfare state, or the state as central leveling mechanism, began to be perceived as an existential threat by capital. As Gorz (1999) puts it:

By intervening, regulating, protecting and arbitrating in all fields, the state had ... become vulnerable by the very scope of its functions. It was, therefore, urgent — and this was the unspoken agenda of the Trilateral Commission — to substitute for this over-visible and too easily assailable organizing mechanism an invisible and anonymous one whose unauthored laws would be irresistibly imposed on everyone by force of circumstance as 'laws of nature'. The mechanism in question was the market. The same line of reasoning was applied to the 'crisis of governability' afflicting companies. The gigantic scale of the great factories and administrations typical of Fordism ... made companies extremely vulnerable. There too it became urgent to replace the over-visible power of the central organizing mechanism with forms of de-centred self-organization (p. 11).

Thus, far from the Welfare state being an efficient pacifier of working people and socialist demands, it became seen by elites as too salient a target for more radical demands.¹⁶²

That neoliberalism was going to win the day was not clear at the time, however. There were significant developments in socialist political parties in the late 1960s and 1970s that pointed in a direction very different from the neoliberal path that was eventually taken. As Harvey (2005) points out in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*:

¹⁶² It should be noted here, however, that even though the state appears to have been robbed of power, and capital now appears to be too mobile to tame, these changes are vastly overstated for political reasons. 'The cult of impotence,' as Canadian journalist and social democrat Linda McQuaig (1999) calls it, has proved an effective narrative employed by governments to justify cutbacks and inaction. For a statistical demonstration of how deindustrialization has been overstated in the West see Harman (2009, Chapter 14).

Communist and socialist parties were gaining ground, if not taking power, across much of Europe and even in the United States popular forces were agitating for widespread reforms and state interventions. There was, in this, a clear political threat to economic elites and ruling classes everywhere, both in the advanced capitalist countries (such as Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal) and in many developing countries (such as Chile, Mexico, and Argentina) (p. 15).¹⁶³

It was in one of the most equal countries that the boldest alternative was proposed, namely the ‘Meidner Plan’ in Sweden that was enthusiastically embraced by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO).¹⁶⁴ The “plan literally offered to gradually buy out the owners’ share in their own businesses and turn the country into a worker/share-owner democracy” (Harvey, 2005, p. 15). Unfortunately, the SAP under Olof Palme seriously watered down the radical elements of the Meidner Plan before implementation (Nilsson & Zachariah, 2016), and Palme was assassinated shortly thereafter (Östberg, 2015).

This failure to follow through with a radical path forward was paralleled elsewhere too; for example, the infamous ‘U-turn’ by the socialist government in France led by François Mitterrand, who had once upon a time promised to break with capitalism and found a socialist society: “You can be a manager of capitalist society or a founder of a socialist society.... As far as we’re concerned, we want to be the second” (as cited in Birch, 2015).¹⁶⁵ Despite these failures of social democracy (from which it has never

¹⁶³ “Elements of the British Labour Party pushed for more comprehensive forms of economic planning. And ... the Socialists under Francois Mitterrand moved to nationalize vast swaths of the French economy, including 90% of the country’s banks” (Maisano, 2012).

¹⁶⁴ “The proposal was received enthusiastically by union activists and adopted at the LO convention in 1976 to outbursts of applause and singing of ‘The Internationale.’” (Nilsson & Zachariah, 2016).

¹⁶⁵ “Reform or Revolution? I want to say . . . yes, revolution. And I would immediately point out . . . the daily struggle for structural reforms can be revolutionary in nature. But what I have just said could be an alibi if I did not add a second sentence: violent or peaceful, revolution is first a break. He who does not

really recovered), I believe these stories should also be understood as examples of how much more radical social democracy was then, in the context of a crisis at the apogee of social democratic progress, than it is now. Although these parties failed to follow through on their radical promises, these stories from the past betray a significant appetite amongst the population at the time—of the kind that simply does not seem to exist in today’s rich capitalist democracies—not just for meaningful reform, but for genuine transformational moves towards socialism.¹⁶⁶ Does this not make sense given what we know about the totalistic impact of (in)equality in the rich capitalist democracies?

There is one last connection between the non-conformism of 1960s youth and the rise of neoliberalism, a subtler one, which is also worth exploring here, for it serves not only to problematize further the equality trap argument, but it also highlights a very real threat: an *inequality trap*. Corporate America, outside of its representatives at the Trilateral Commission, had also become concerned with the counterculture of the 1960s, not least because some corporate actors were seeing a decline in demand for goods within the new generation (Curtis, 2002). The Bernaysian psychoanalysis, which had informed marketing techniques (for both commodities and politics) since Edward Bernays had coined the phrase ‘public relations’ (to replace the word propaganda) back in the interwar years, evolved in response to 1960s counterculture. Focus groups (a Bernays invention) and new psychoanalytic surveys (which Abraham Maslow helped pioneer) were employed by marketing firms in the late 1970s to figure out how to co-opt and

accept the break — and the method that follows from it — one who is not willing to break with the established order . . . with capitalist society, that person, I say, cannot be a member of the Socialist Party” (as cited in Birch, 2015).

¹⁶⁶ Behind both of these examples is the story of a politician who appeared to have arrived at a radical Left position due to a Leftward shift in the public mood before ultimately falling back Rightward (see Birch, 2015; Östberg, 2015).

commodify these desires for autonomy and individual liberty. One significant result was the values and lifestyles (VALS) research methodology, which as one of the lead researchers suggested, helped corporations to understand people's deeper desires in order to better sell them things (Curtis, 2002). Counterculture was thus translated into one of many VALS categories, namely 'self-actualizers' or 'inner-directives,' that could also be targeted and sold commodities to.¹⁶⁷

This evolution in Bernaysian psychoanalysis was likely transmuted from the corporate arena to the political one (as had many previous developments in public relations¹⁶⁸) as early as the Reagan and Thatcher campaigns. This can help explain the cross-class appeal that Reagan and Thatcher—the progenitors of neoliberalism—had that allowed them to win. The 'inner-directive' lifestyle was apparently targeted, and even taken to its extreme, by Ronald—"take government off your back and turn you loose"—Reagan and Margaret—"there is no society"—Thatcher. The VALS team actually studied the British and American electorate during these respective elections and their findings, according to their program manager, were that it was the 'inner-directives' "that made the difference in those elections ... and really showed the power of [the VALS] approach" (as cited in Curtis, 2002).¹⁶⁹ VALS-style focus groups and marketing research were

¹⁶⁷ It was this development in marketing that the late American comedian Bill Hicks (2013) 'joked' about after saying that 'people in marketing should kill themselves': "I know what all the marketing people are thinking right now 'Oh do you know what Bill's doing? He's going for that anti-marketing dollar. That's a good market. He's very smart.'" It was this development as well that UK folk musician Billy Bragg (1988) sang about with the lyric "revolution is just a tee-shirt away!"

¹⁶⁸ Bernays himself worked regularly for both capital and government, selling cigarettes to women and wars to the masses. Moreover, Bernays' book *Propaganda* was a favourite of Joseph Goebbels (Curtis, 2002).

¹⁶⁹ Ironically, it was a critique of the Freudian psychoanalysts in the US—Bernays was Sigmund Freud's American nephew—that had partially informed Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (Curtis, 2002).

subsequently adopted by the Bill Clinton and Tony Blair campaigns—the progenitors of the Third Way (neoliberalism)—in the US and UK respectively (Curtis, 2002).

This understanding of the apparent need for marketing techniques to evolve not only suggests, once again, that the Welfare state was failing to adequately pacify the masses, but also something quite different. In chapters 3 and 4 we saw that greater inequality, and the increased sensitivity to status competition and status insecurity it produces, fuels consumerism. It does so, in part, because marketers exploit this increased sensitivity to status insecurity and social evaluative threat within society. If it is true that effective evolutions in propaganda techniques can help explain the failure of social democracy and radicalism in the 1970s, then we must acknowledge that allowing inequality to grow only enhances the public’s vulnerability to this manipulation. It can only serve to increase the presence of the alienating consumerism that was discussed in Chapter 4 (4.2)—which seems obviously linked to VALS—and to further distance people from socialist politics. Certainly inequality traps¹⁷⁰ are a much graver and real threat to humanity than some imagined complacency *unique* to the relatively more functional societies.

6.2 Expanding the Floor of the Cage

One of the key implications of materialist holism is that the Left must use and push the existing structures in our society, like the state, to their limits. This is an

¹⁷⁰ In a 2013 article on the connection between income inequality, trust and political corruption, Uslaner uses the term ‘inequality trap’ when arguing that corruption, mistrust and inequality reinforce each other: “the ‘inequality trap’ stems from the ‘stickiness’ of inequality, trust, and corruption over time. Each persists over long periods of time and it is difficult for a country to escape this trap—either to advance upward or to fall downward, leading to an inequality trap” (p. 3604).

elementary point that Chomsky (1997) summarizes well by paraphrasing a metaphor used by unionized rural workers in Brazil:

We know we're in a cage. We know we're trapped. We're going to expand the floor, meaning we will *extend to the limits* what the cage will allow. And we intend to destroy the cage. But not by attacking the cage when we're vulnerable ... You have to protect the cage when it's under attack from even worse predators from outside, like private power. And you have to *expand the floor of the cage*, recognizing that it's a cage. These are all preliminaries to dismantling it (emphasis mine).¹⁷¹

In other words, we must expand the floor of our cage if we are ever going to be able to step past the bars. Yet how do we achieve this expansion now? Will capital even allow a return to the Welfare state?

There seems little reason to be certain that it will not. This is so because the institutions of the Welfare state, and the economic planning associated with it, are conducive to increased economic growth, worker productivity, and demand (see Meidner, 1993). Thus, a strengthening of the Welfare state could still represent a way for large swaths of capital to increase profit in the medium term. The short and long term are a tougher sell, of course; however, our trajectory towards ever greater inequality will surely result in ever greater catastrophes, even for capital. Now the latter may not always see the forest for the trees, but there are elite transnational groups and institutions that serve this function (as does the bourgeois state). If the changing bent of IMF publications is any indication, then coordinated capital may be willing to accept at least some sort of a

¹⁷¹ “Unless people are willing to tolerate that level of complexity, they’re going to be of no use to people who are suffering and who need help, or, for that matter, to themselves” (Chomsky, 1997).

reintroduction of state intervention (on behalf of the population) in the near future. Surely the less equal rich capitalist democracies could at least make gains that would keep them within the realm of currently existing levels of equality elsewhere. This alone could have a tremendously positive impact on the world; imagine the US and the UK were as equal as Sweden, or even Germany?

Despite what some on the Left suggest, the institutions of the state can have relative autonomy from private centres of power, and could theoretically be used to create a relatively more equal, democratic, functional, and ultimately socialistic society, and it could do so without *grossly* interfering with capital accumulation (in the short-to-medium term). Indeed, within the more unequal rich capitalist democracies there seem to be limitless avenues to initially pursue. In my country, for example, the introduction of a national housing program could actually reduce state expenditures and promote economic growth in the medium-to-long term by lessening the burden on other state structures and by increasing income tax revenues, while at the same time increasing the supply of labour and the demand for goods. Something similar could be said for a universal daycare program. The state could also stop borrowing from *private* banks to finance itself, freeing up significant revenue to raise up the lower rungs of society. It could create new crown corporations that would pull labourers out of the private market and provide the state with revenue. It could foster the creation of co-operatives and empower unions. It could redirect already existing subsidies to capital in a way that better serves the public. It could better allocate R&D funds. It could foster decommodified cultural production. It could foster the creation of more independent and better resourced media platforms. It could better fund post-secondary education. This list could go on for quite a while, but it should

already be clear that a program for a relatively more equal society is electorally feasible, at least in the short-to-medium term. That said, however, the same old reformist policies will not be enough to maintain a trajectory towards socialism longer than previously.

To be sure, there are no shortcuts to a socialist society, for there is no such thing as a socialist society which one could shortcut to. Moreover, when revolutionary shortcuts have been attempted, they either betray basic principles of socialism¹⁷² or set the stage for counterrevolution,¹⁷³ or sometimes both.¹⁷⁴ There is no shortcut, because there is no discernible endpoint of history. Orthodox Marxists were simply wrong about this. Thus Haysom (2014) is correct when he argues that we must accept

that though struggles for change target social totality, that successes on this front can never themselves be total in nature ... as a result of the necessarily incomplete and flawed understanding of either domination or emancipation that any group, party, theory, generation, etc. of radicals possesses at any given coordinate of space and time ... our very success in challenging and/or overturning structures of domination will necessarily generate a learning process amongst both ourselves (if we are open to it) and our successors by which either our ends or our means (or both) will have turned out to be either off-target [or] insufficient (p. 52).

We must still have a horizon of socialism in mind. This just means that some of the specifics of this horizon will inevitably change as we progress towards it, *pushing a smaller horizon ever further*. This also means that socialism as a horizon at any point in

¹⁷² As many communist revolutions have.

¹⁷³ As did the Spanish revolution.

¹⁷⁴ As was the case with the Paris Commune.

time need not be overly defined with blueprints for utopia, but basic principles should be maintained (that allow for reinterpretation over time).

From the basic principle of socialism stated at the outset of this paper¹⁷⁵ coupled with our new materialist understanding of inequality, alienation, totality and overdetermination, we can derive some general strategies at these coordinates in time and space which ought to define our pursuit of a more socialistic society. We know already that a crucial means to this end is wealth redistribution, and our analysis here suggests that this is so not simply because of some notion of fairness (which is also important), but because greater equality generally translates to an increase of self-directed (genuinely social) life activity—to species-activity. So of course we do not strive for greater equality by any means necessary; we strive for greater equality in a way that enhances this result. Thus an expansion and enhancement of political and economic democracy is in order. This means encouraging the strengthening and growth of worker organizations like unions and cooperatives, but also making moves towards a ‘work’ free society, i.e. where people no longer have to work for others to survive. We could begin to pursue this through a guaranteed annual income (GAI)¹⁷⁶ coupled with public and cooperative development of technologies geared towards a post-work (and post-carbon) future.

There are some legitimate concerns over the implementation of a GAI, not least because it represents a potential break with the established worker identity, but also

¹⁷⁵ The principle that we should organize our societies in a way that allows all people to be self-directed and in control of their life activities, at least to the extent possible given the exigencies of any collective.

¹⁷⁶ The GAI could eventually become something like the nationalization of the wage-system (and thus of private property) that Marx (2000) sees as a ‘crude communist’ path to socialism in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: “The community is only a community of labor, and of equality of wages paid out by communal capital – by the *community* as the universal capitalist. Both sides of the relationship are raised to an *imagined* universality – *labor* as the category in which every person is placed, and *capital* as the acknowledged universality and power of the community” (p. 43, emphasis in original).

because it is an idea that some on the ‘free-market’ Right believe can legitimize a further privatization of public programs and services (see Rozworski, 2016). To this I would say that the Right is playing with fire, and we should ensure they get burned. As was suggested above, implementing a public program can create a public that will defend it. It can create another site of struggle against the instrumental rationality of the capitalist imperative. Once a government starts paying out an annual income, future governments will be reluctant to remove or decrease this income, and there will surely be popular pressure for it to be increased. Furthermore, I see no reason to believe that the introduction of the GAI will convince citizenries of the virtue of privatized public services. We struggle now for a higher minimum wage and against privatization, why would we not struggle for a higher annual income and against privatization in the future?¹⁷⁷

The latter strategy—public and cooperative development of technologies geared towards a post-work (and post-carbon) future—is crucial, for some degree of societal self-sustainability is requisite to any *long-term* socialist project, which will inevitably be rigidly opposed by concentrated centres of mobile/‘global’ private power at some point. A huge part of building a self-sustaining society is democratizing energy via a combination of community-controlled and nationally managed renewable resource technologies. This also happens to be an existential and moral imperative at the moment. Societal self-sustainability also implies that international socialist alliances of support that are not mediated through capitalist market mechanisms are important to build:

¹⁷⁷ These are not mutually exclusive struggles, for the former could, in fact, increase pressure for and the need for the latter (see Frase, 2016).

something like this can be observed in nascent form within the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA).

The hope of some post-Marxists that the current trajectory of technological development is already leading to the emancipation of the multitudes is misplaced. Instead, Marcuse's prediction in 1964 that new technologies were helping to foster a 'totally administered society' seems much closer to the mark (see Marcuse, 2002). A quite prescient prediction, too, considering that for the generation growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in the context of Cold War technological competition, the future of technology likely looked quite a bit different than what we have ended up with. The technologies that we have ended up with have not proved conducive to a new era of leisure time or the further exploration of the 'final frontier,' as many of the predictions at the time Marcuse was writing would have had it; rather they have "proved most conducive to surveillance, work discipline, and social control" (Graeber, 2012).

As Harvey (2014) points out: "Many people find themselves with less and less time for free creative activity in the midst of widespread time-saving technologies in both production and consumption" (Chapter 17). Meanwhile, adds Graeber (2012), "despite unprecedented investment in research on medicine and life sciences, we await cures for cancer and the common cold, and the most dramatic medical breakthroughs we have seen have taken the form of drugs ... tailor-made to ensure that the new work demands don't drive us completely, dysfunctionally crazy." This is surely not a coincidence.¹⁷⁸ On some

¹⁷⁸ "A case could be made that ... the shift [in technological development post-1968] was not so much a reorientation toward market-driven consumer imperatives, but part of an all-out effort to follow the technological humbling of the Soviet Union with total victory in the global class war—seen simultaneously as the imposition of absolute U.S. military dominance overseas, and, at home, the utter rout of social movements" (Graeber, 2012).

level, capital must be aware of the ever-present danger “that freely associating and self-creating individuals, liberated from the chores of production and blessed with a whole range of labour-saving and time-saving technologies to aid their consumption ... might start to build an alternative non-capitalistic world” (Harvey, 2014, Chapter 17).

Despite what some post-Marxists *seem* to suggest—it is nearly impossible to understand what they are saying most of the time¹⁷⁹—there is no reason to believe that new cellphones and an increasingly policed internet are going to give way to an unmonopolizable knowledge economy that presages a socialist society. Instead, we should be following Graeber's (2012) lead and asking:

Where ... are the flying cars? Where are the force fields, tractor beams, teleportation pods, antigravity sleds, tricorders, immortality drugs, colonies on Mars, and all the other technological wonders any child growing up in the mid-to-late twentieth century assumed would exist by now? Even those inventions that seemed ready to emerge—like cloning or cryogenics—ended up betraying their lofty promises. What happened to them?

What happened to them is that the trajectory of technological development is largely determined at the heart of the state-capital nexus: publicly funded R&D with privatized profits. A significant portion of state-led technological development is geared towards military goods (the military-industrial complex), but other elements of capital also rely on this arrangement. Virtually every component of many of Apple's products, for example, have been developed by state-funded projects (see Mazzucato, 2014, Chapter 5).

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, the writings of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.

There is no reason to believe that a socialist government could not push technological development in a different direction. This may smack of central planning, but our economy is already planned fairly centrally, as is evidenced by the current trajectory of technological development and by the bureaucratic structure of the massive corporations that populate the fairly oligopolistic markets which currently characterize the economies of rich capitalist democracies. John Kenneth Galbraith made these observations long ago, arguing that greater organization and planning within capitalist firms was an imperative of technological development and specialization (see Galbraith, 2001, Chapters 5-6). Some degree of economic planning is not only imperative, it can be quite efficient, even at the state level, as the experience of the war time economy taught many in the West. As it stands, “science and technology and intellect have not been devoted to ... overcoming the onerous and self-destructive character of the necessary work of society;” there is reason to believe, however, that much “of the necessary work that is required to keep a decent level of social life going can be consigned to machines—at least in principle—which means humans can be free to undertake the kind of creative work which may not have been possible, objectively, in the early stages of the industrial revolution” (Chomsky, 2005, pp. 136-137, 141).

6.3 Diagonalist Social Democracy

None of this will be possible without significant democratic control over the economy and a deepening of political democracy.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, if our societies are to

¹⁸⁰ We have a long way to go. Chomsky correctly argues in the recent bio-pic/documentary *Requiem for the American Dream* that, in a genuine democracy, the annual day a society pays taxes should not be dreaded by the public—it should be celebrated. “It’s a day when the population gets together [and] decides to fund the programs and activities that they have formulated and agreed upon. What can be better than that?” (Hutchison, Nyks, & Scott, 2015).

respond to inevitable capitalist crises by further socializing, then enhanced and expanded political and economic democracy are even more crucial. Certainly one of the reasons that the Meidner Plan was watered-down beyond recognition before implementation was that the SAP leadership was inadequately accountable to the will of the majority of its base. The higher-ups *and* the rank and file of the LO (for which the SAP was essentially a political instrument) enthusiastically embraced the Meidner Plan, before singing the Internationale in unison (Meidner, 1993, p. 224). Far from an inevitable outcome of capitalism, then, the failure to meaningfully implement the Meidner Plan was due, at least in part, to a democratic deficit. A preliminary list of reforms that could prevent such a situation in the future could be: to increase the frequency of democratic decision making within parties and governments; to create new democratic decision making mechanisms using online platforms; to give the membership of parties control over the formation of election platforms; to implement participatory budgeting at the national level. As usual, the list could go on. Here, Jeremy Corbyn gives the Left hope: "I believe in the wisdom of ordinary citizens. That's why we are launching proposals to extend democracy in every part of public life: in national politics, communities, the economy and the workplace – and in our own party" (as cited in Mortimer, 2016).

The Left political party is requisite to transforming society in a socialist direction, but it must be opened up to social movements and greater democratic controls—it must truly become a people's political instrument. What we need, in short, is *diagonalist social democracy*. This means that "[a]part from accepting that different strategies tend to rely on different organization forms and leadership styles, it will be necessary to consider possible *inter-strategic innovations* which allow organizations to develop their own

immanent practices as are necessary to their form, while partaking in wider and different forms of decision-making within the larger movement” (Haysom, 2014, p. 51, emphasis mine).

Consciously making connections between organizational forms and their respective strategies is essential, for these different strategies are already interdependent: we need change at the level of macro-totality that is conducive to more political activism at a local level, but we also need Old Left institutions capable of making change at the macro-level to be connected to and kept in check by Left movements and their horizontalist ethic. This is in line with what Haysom (2014) argues, namely that we need “to create tangible improvements in the economic conditions of the least advantaged which will entail (for them) a greater freedom to engage in horizontal politics, while making the agencies of effective political and social mobilization more open and responsive to horizontal challenges” (p. 51). To which we must add, here, that it is not simply the economic conditions that redistributive reforms will ameliorate, but the political, spiritual, health and social conditions as well. *The greater freedom to engage will be multidimensional.*

An interesting feature of materialist holism is the fact that it emphasizes the importance of totality, and the material organization of society, without falling into economistic understandings of political change. Yes there is overdetermination, there are feedback loops, and there are stubborn trajectories, *but political actors can organize to alter these trajectories, to reverse these feedback loops, and to alter totality in a way that is reflected at every scale, including at the scale of their individual reality.* Furthermore, the fact that reformism or incrementalism can and should be seen as the most effective

form of transformational politics not only means that mobilizing and organizing the public can be achieved in less than alienating ways by socialists who closely guard their fidelity to socialist horizons, but it also means that *there are a huge variety of issues that can be used to mobilize our constituencies, which we can then realistically connect to a broader transformational struggle.*

Our materialist holist analysis also suggests that transforming our society in a democratic egalitarian direction is also a process of *transforming ourselves, on every rung of an ever-shorter societal ladder, including on the top, but especially on the bottom (the constituency of the Left).* This understanding is often missing from debates where socialists argue over reformism's limits and the necessity of a decisive moment of 'rupture' with capitalism. If there is to be a decisive moment of rupture, as some appear to desire (see Riley, 2016), then let it be when the rungs of the societal ladder are closest together and thus the establishment of a new order more likely to be socialist and sustainable. We are not the subjects we hope to create, and therefore we cannot view our (or their) world in the same way that they will. Another world *is possible*, but it will not be our world to reproduce.

This is the inevitable conclusion of a materialist holist analysis, for we have seen here that dysfunction wrought and exacerbated by material inequality is reflected at every scale of totality, even at the nano-level of individual totality—the latter being especially true for the Left (constituency). To say that material inequality overdetermines social totality *is also to say, then, that reformism—or a lack thereof—overdetermines the Left.* Thus, materialist holism not only identifies the mirrors of totality, it identifies the way in which we can change our reflection. Prefigurative politics can help us to change who we

are (to a limited extent) in a given moment, but redistributive policies (leveling mechanisms) administered from the political-economic core of our society can help us to produce subjects who are not like us, to alter the trajectory of the reproduction of society. That said, prefiguration and centralized leveling mechanisms ought not to be seen as mutually exclusive strategies; indeed, inter-strategic linkages ought to presage not only a diversity of tactics approach, but also some degree of strategical synthesis. Diagonalist social democracy should be the product of such synthesis.

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