

INTRODUCTION TO A TEXT CALLED “A CRITIQUE OF LEFTIST ASCETICISM”

The appeal from the depravity of the present to a golden age of pristine innocence found at once its most vehement and its most artless expression in the writings of the German reformers. Like the return to nature in the eighteenth century, it was the cry for spiritual peace of a society disillusioned with the triumph of a too complex civilization.

~R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*

I.

Our present political problems can be aptly traced to our politics of regression. The liberal order that saw itself as victorious in the 90s and unleashed a wave of prosperity in the following years, finally reached its limit: globalization and the financial crisis broke the illusion of economic and geopolitical stability brokered by American imperialism. And amidst the continued descent of world economies to stagnation, our political imaginary has become incapable of envisioning an alternative; at best, belief in capitalism has become a religious credo where crises are part of its homeostatic organic system. Liberalism has to be perennial; its economy, although oscillating from one crisis to another, can be properly managed. But ten years after the financial crisis, liberalism is scoffing for air: the financial crisis revealed that the prosperity of the economy is reserved for the elite and, once they failed, governments would rather bail the elites out at the expense of the working and salaried middle classes.

The financial crisis of 2008 tragically started an irreparable chain of economic crises that shattered the legitimacy of the post-ideological liberal order. But the catastrophic result of neoliberalism's tragedy is the lack of economic and political alternatives to theorize and solve the problems liberalism itself created. Furthermore, the political center—the political status quo of neoliberal politics—became, in the face of successive crises, the movement of incompetence. The problems created by the crumbling centrist power left everyone with no choice but to revisit

old nostalgic illusions, a regression to happier and serene times. What can be called as “regressive politics” is the mutation of neoliberalism into a politics of aggressive assertion of nationalist nostalgia for the simplicity of the pastoral past; as Peter Sloterdijk remarked in *Rage and Time*, centrist parties and the post-communist and social democratic left have become incapable of organizing rage into a lucrative political project and have been confined in the last decades into a puerile politics of compromise and appeasement.¹ Out of the detachment of the center and the left with the demands and sentiments of the majority, the disparate outrage of the unorganized masses lends itself to the opportunism of nationalist and populist politics.

Populism thrives in nostalgia and much of their nostalgic reveries are founded on their fascination for military dictatorships, conservative societies, and the harmonious patriarchal provincialism. Its government policies reflected their nostalgia: neoliberal economic policies are continued (and intensified), while liberal culture is replaced with a virulently masculine patriarchal familialism. But despite the clearly repressive and intolerant policies of populist regimes, they have remained popular and have gained the support of both the working and middle classes. What this means for both the radical left and the liberal center is that their perception of the masses as a social agent that knows what it wants and would act accordingly to address different issues is a fatal assumption. What the left and the center failed to see is how populist politics is, by its very nature, utopian. Nostalgia for the pristine pastoral simplicity and feudal harmony is expressed in political discourses as a utopian project, a natural historical destiny disturbed by an easily nameable external obstacle (drug users, globalist agendas, migrants, etc). Such a political practice preys upon the repressed outrage and dissatisfaction of the majority and, by appealing to the serene tranquility of simpler times, creates a narrative out

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 206-207.

of these repressed energies which are then invested into the political project of populist regimes, giving them legitimacy from the mass base.

More than political opportunism, the populist wave shows an uncomfortable truth: the political mainstream from the different shades of the center to the radical left have been fully detached with the masses they claim to represent. At this point, Ernst Bloch's observations on the rise of fascism still echoes today. He described a left that is mired in its own romanticism of its scientific critique, rejecting the mystical component that underlies the revolutionary energies of its aspiration.² Distancing itself from its "mystical" or "chiliastic" past, the utopian lacuna can be easily filled by the right; Bloch:

The Nazi was creative, so to speak, only in the embezzlement at all prices with which he employed revolutionary slogans to the opposite effect. With which—alongside the shabby nonsense of the backmost tables reserved for regulars—he used the dark luster of old phrases and patinated the revolution which he claimed to be making. Such an old phrase is the Third Reich, sonorous through the very triple character alone ('as in a fairytale'), sonorous as the third coronation of Germany (after the medieval Reich and Bismarck's Reich).³

Just like the Nazis, the populist wave is adept at reframing the past to project its political program. In the case of Germany in the 1930s, the Nazis appealed to the victories of its imperial past to steer the nation and resurrect its lost glory which it believed it can achieve through the purification of the German race. With the populist wave, the stereotypical populist discourse appealed to the defense of national integrity against external enemies that threaten the tranquil internal harmony of nation. Both share the goal of defending the nation against any internal and external enemies; but Nazism and populism could not have risen to political prominence without crisis. The political nature of their regressive politics comes from presenting crisis as an

² Bloch had mind the Leninist Orthodoxy which viewed the revolution as a historical stage, arising out of the contradictions of bourgeois democracy.

³ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 117-118.

augmented reality: encasing economic and social instability into a Manichaeian dualism between the heroic destiny of the nation and whatever name the conspiratorial antagonists would take. The leftist response to this Manichaeian narrative is to present its own Promethean myth of the proletariat, writing of its struggle in the same language as the heroic myths of old, extolling the working class as a proletarian Sigurd killing the capitalist dragon(s) and its economic project as the Elysian fields of material prosperity successfully deprived of contradictions—a theme it draws from primitive cultures.

The task of this essay is to begin from what I perceive to be the problem opened by Capitalist Realism. In my view, our political deadlock comes from a pervading ascetic rationality that remains latent in how we perceive and orient ourselves in the contingencies of reality. I believe that in exploring this theme amounts to a greater understanding of how neoliberalism has become persistent and our inability to counteract it. To explore this theme requires an erudite analysis of disparate topics that have no inherent relation to each other, but nonetheless show the immanence of ascetic rationality. Thus, rather than starting from a thesis statement, the purpose of this introduction is to present the thematic course of the succeeding essays to give direction to their interventions into disparate realities of late capitalism. What better way to trace the slow descent of the left to utopian impotence than by exploring its formal break with chiliasm.

II.

Marxian literature on religion is sparse and concentrated on the polemic nature of Marx and Engels' early work. From these body of work much of which are disputations against the young Hegelians and Ludwig Feuerbach, religion is neither regarded as a manifestation of reason (Hegel) nor a delusion of the individual (Feuerbach); rather, religion, as Marx concluded in his "A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", is a collective opiate that numbs

a concrete experience of suffering. In the language of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, “just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operate independently of the individual—that is, operates on him as an alien divine or diabolical activity...It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.”⁴ Labor, as the alienation of man from his essential activity, becomes, in the capitalist mode of production, an activity that is imposed on him; religion, in a similar manner, is a loss of self, an alienation of man from himself, displacing his essence for the divine.

The humanist platitudes of the 1844 *Manuscripts* would soon give way to the theoretical consequences of class struggle. The historical materialism that would evolve out of the humanism of the early period was expected to scientifically study the historical processes of the formation of the working class and the capitalist mode of production. It was formulated with the ontological assumption that history is a history of conflicts, where one class or one mode of production develops to violently replace another. Capitalism did not develop out of the spontaneous self-actuality of reason (that of the advancement of market relations), but from a series of violent conflicts, displacing societies and cultures. This conception of historical progress forms the theoretical foundation of Friedrich Engels’ study of the 1525 peasant uprising from its emergence as an offshoot of the Protestant Reformation, its revolutionary activities and goals, and to its subsequent failure; he probes into the proto-proletarian nature of Thomas Müntzer’s peasant movement and how the reformation’s religious outrage developed into revolutionary outrage. Despite the obviously religious theme of *Peasant War in Germany*, the religious themes serve as a backdrop to the emancipatory energies unleashed by the revolutionary peasants and how their failure and the pyrrhic victory of the feudal lords sets the

⁴ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1990), p. 111.

stage for the development of the modern proletariat. *Peasant War in Germany* established the historical continuity of the proletariat with the long line of insurrectionary activity of German millenarianism and, at the same time, asserts its historical break between chiliastic proto-communism and the science of historical materialism. Writing of Müntzer's communism, Engels: "By the kingdom of God, Müntzer meant a society with no class difference, no private property and no state authority independent of and foreign to the members of society. All the existing authorities insofar as they refused to submit and join the revolution were to be overthrown, all work and all property shared in common and complete equality introduced."⁵ Chiasm thrives in metaphors and the semiotic displacement of communism as "kingdom of God" appeared to Engels as the proto-proletarian tendency possessed by the chiliastic peasants of 1525; at the same time, the semiotic displacement of their notion of emancipation implied a semiotically displaced conception of the revolution whose its function is both to establish an egalitarian and distributive society to make its parishioners into true believers worthy of being admitted to the kingdom of God.

Rather than establishing the historical parallelism between the 1525 peasant war with the revolution of 1848, the continuity and rupture (to use J Mouffawad Paul's terminology) between the millenarian peasants and the modern proletariat is in the kind of communism they aspired to. Even with the proto-communist message of Müntzer's theology (a tendency shared by all millenarian insurrections), the goal was to achieve a distributive "communism of consumption". The appropriation of property and labor into common activity implements a just redistribution of goods.⁶ This crude form of communism appealed to a class whose livelihoods were threatened by the burgeoning mercantile capitalism and speculative finance; for these threatened class, the

⁵ Frederick Engels, *Peasant War in Germany*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1990), p. 422.

⁶ Roland Boer, *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology V* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), p. 117.

accumulated power and riches of the mercantile class was symptomatic of material greed and unrepentant sinfulness that to equate the Flemish and German merchants with Roman popery was common propaganda during the reformation.⁷ The explicitly hostile attitudes of the German reformers with both financial and mercantile capital inspired much of the hot rhetoric that Müntzer would utilize against the religious and political authorities of his time. However, even with his intense rhetoric, at the core of German millenarianism is the appropriation of the Catholic monastic tradition, continuing its charism of community life and communal ownership. With the mendicant and monastic orders practicing their charism nominally, while enjoying their amassed wealth and power, Müntzer's league took the spirit of monasticism as the model of an egalitarian society, the kingdom of God on Earth. This makes the Müntzer's millenarian movement an ascetic offshoot of Lutheranism, a revolutionary variant opposed to Luther's dreary authoritarianism.

The millenarian movement that formed itself around Müntzer's theology was ascetic as they are revolutionary and this ascetic component differentiates them from the proletariat. A primitive communism of consumption requires an ascetic component: it ensures that the distribution of goods is shared equally with no excess consumption or unnecessary waste of resources. Capitalism renders this ascetic component unnecessary. Machinery and large-scale production rendered the communal activity of labor and guild based production obsolete. While artisanal and craft-based production would survive into the 19th century and, as a class, would forge an alliance with the proletariat, the industrial revolution ensured that this mode of production is no longer tenable and the craftsman of old would be integrated to the working class. The development of capitalism and industrial production generated various reactions

⁷ See. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 103.

during the early decades of the 19th century and Marx and Engels' vision of a scientific socialism enjoyed did not enjoy an immediate hegemonic dominance.

The industrial revolution was more than just a historical stage of the proletariat's Promethean struggle; it was also a stage of conflicting notions of communism. The internal conflicts within the worker's movements, strewn variously along utopian regressive socialism and reformist socialism, attest to the contradictory and determinative capacity of advanced material production and existing social relations.⁸ Marx began by creating a conceptual system to theorize the material contradictions generated by the expansion of capitalism and understand its social and political consequences. To achieve this, he had to speak in the language of the foe, the dominant theories on political economy; this allowed Marx to speak of capitalism in terms of scientific certainty. Armed with this theoretical insight, Marx hoped to express the proletariat's vision in scientific terms; to do this required a break from a still prevalent chiliastic tendency.

The encounter between Wilhelm Weitling and Marx best describes the necessary rupture between scientific socialism and chiliastic insurrectionism. However, in Marx's entire polemic encounter, this significant dispute was not solidified into any of Marx's texts aside from a few remarks in the second volume of *German Ideology*, where he saw Weitling's communism as a simple variant of French utopian socialism⁹ or with Engels' scathing remark on Weitling in the history of the Communist League.¹⁰ With a lack of theoretical texts, we are left with Weitling's own summary of his encounter with Marx in 1846 and Pavel Annenkov's account of the same event published in 1880; these two texts offer two distinct perceptions of the encounter.

⁸ Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*", trans. Lucio Colletti, in *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 425.

⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *German Ideology*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 461.

¹⁰ Frederick Engels, "On the History of the Communist League" <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1885hist.htm>.

For Weitling, the meeting of 30 March 1846 was filled with animosity. He describes the animosity Marx and Engels had for any notions of “handicraft communism” and “philosophical communism” or any direct construction of communism in the revolution to come. The focal point of disagreement boiled down to Marx and Engels’ assertion that the revolution should allow the progressive bourgeoisie to take power and not a direct imposition of communism.¹¹ Weitling did not expound in detail the kind of harsh words shared by him and Marx during the encounter; rather, he expressed his disappointment at the kind of political and financial backing Marx possessed and how it limits his theoretical and political radicalism. Weitling’s letter is vague on the specific points that he and Marx violently disputed that this letter written the day after the encounter and can be described as a rant mixed with rage and disappointment.

A clearer account was made by Annenkov that it deserves to be cited in full.

As soon as he had finished his address, Marx raised his head and put this direct question to Weitling:

“Tell us Weitling you have made so much stir in Germany with your communist propaganda, you have gathered so many workers and made them lose their jobs and bread; what arguments do you have to justify your social-revolutionary agitation, and what do you intend to base it on in the future?”

I still remember the very form of this abrupt question, which opened a passionate discussion in the little group; a discussion which did not last long, as I shall show. Weitling apparently wanted to keep the discussion on the level of liberal high-sounding platitudes. With an expression of a certain gravity and seriousness, he began to explain that it was not his concern to create new economic theories. He had to adopt those which were best fitted, as it turned out in France, to open the worker’s eyes, teaching them not to trust promises and to put all their hopes in themselves. He spoke at length, but to my great surprise, his speech was in form too tangled and unclear, quite the contrary to Engels. He often repeated himself, he corrected his own language and made painful progress toward conclusions which usually came too late or else came too soon, being earlier than his presuppositions. Now, he had before him listeners of a different sort than he had been used to having around at his shop, or who read his journal and pamphlets on the economic conditions of our epoch. The result was that he lost both freedom of thought and expression.

¹¹ Wilhelm Weitling, “Letter to Moses Hess (31 March 1846)”, available in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1846let1.htm> (accessed: 7 January, 2019)

He would no doubt have spoken longer if Marx, with eyebrows raised in anger, had not interrupted him to reply. The essence of this sarcastic response was that it was nothing but deceit to rouse the people without giving them a solid basis for their action. By awakening the fantastic hopes just spoken of, Marx continued, one will never save those who suffer, but one will certainly lead them to their ruin. In Germany especially, going to the workers without scientifically precise ideas and without concrete teachings is the equivalent of making dishonest propaganda, without knowing what one is doing. That requires, to be sure, an enthusiastic apostle on one side, but also on the other nothing but donkeys who listen with their mouths open. Here, he added with a brusque movement of the hand, here we have a Russian among us. In his country perhaps the role you are playing would not be out of place. There and there only unions of absurd apostles with absurd disciples can form and subsist, with any real success. In a civilized country like Germany, Marx continued, nothing can be produced without a solid and concrete doctrine; and up to now nothing has been produced but noise, a harmful excitement, and the ruin of the very cause one had set his hand to.

Weitling's pale cheeks colored and his speech suddenly became free and lively. In a voice trembling with excitement, he undertook to prove that a man, who had gathered hundreds of men around him in the name of justice, solidarity, and fraternal love, could not be called a trivial and useless man. He said that he, Weitling, was consoled for the attacks of that evening by the hundreds of letters, declarations, and testimonials of gratitude he received from the most distant provinces of his country; he said that his modest preparatory activity was more importance for the common cause than the literary criticism and analysis deployed apart from the suffering world and the people's torments.

As he pronounced these last words, Marx furious, smashed his fist on the table so violently that the lamp swung. Then rising, he cried: "ignorance never did anyone any good."¹²

Marx points out the fatal shortcoming of Weitling's primitive communism and apocalyptic chiliasm. The latter's theoretical deficiency was his lack of a proper theoretical understanding of the present material conditions; at the very least, his communist message was a mixture of apocalyptic chiliasm and a hodgepodge of French communism and anarchism. Although he was able to convince a great number of workers into his cause, the lack of a rigorous analysis of the material conditions would put the workers in the dark, unable to act properly to the intricate contradictions of a capitalist society. This small encounter might be considered a footnote to the

¹² Cited from: Hans Mühlstein, "Marx and the Utopian Wilhelm Weitling" *Science and Society* vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1948): pp. 128-129.

grander and intricate polemics that Marx and Engels would write against the likes of Feuerbach, Stirner, or Proudhon, but this dispute, unlike the ones against the philosophical socialists and the left Hegelians who are petty bourgeois in education, was aimed at a distinctively proletarian tendency, shared by many members of the League of the Just who saw themselves as the inheritors of Jacobin ideas, Gracchus Babeuf's egalitarian communism, and, in the case of the German faction, Müntzer's millenarianism.

Historical materialism has to view the millenarian past as a necessary failure: despite its mass appeal and effectiveness at consolidating the masses for a singular emancipatory purpose, it is limited by its own utopian romanticism.¹³ As the dispute between Weitling and Marx show, millenarianism aspired to put an end to the present and force the future within it (in Toscano's words: "the collapse of the City of God into the City of Man"¹⁴); this purely negative reaction to the development of the economy has to adopt a regressive social model, patterned after its reframing of the past and its theologization.¹⁵ The Marxist rupture, therefore, insists not on resisting the development of the economy through the pure negativity of millenarian fervor, but in allowing it to develop, letting its contradictions abound. Marx:

The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations, it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, philosophic—in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of their conflict and fight it out....No social order is even destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replaced older ones before the material condition for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.¹⁶

¹³ Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 47.

¹⁴ Alberto Toscano, "The Resurrections of Thomas Müntzer", Preface to *Wu Ming Presents Thomas Müntzer* (London: Verso, 2010), p. viii.

¹⁵ Toscano 2017, 48; Tawney 2014, p. 95

¹⁶ *Early Writings*, 426.

This statement from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* constitutes the teleological component underlying the kind of determinism associated with historical materialism. But the problems with this determinism are associated with the assumption that like God in scholastic philosophy, Marx gave to the economy the same ontological privilege of a foundational principle: this straw man conception of historical materialism offered a convenient starting point to dismiss historical materialism and the notion of class struggle, its direct sociological consequence. Against the dismissal of historical materialism and class struggle as variations of essentialism, one must propose a radical re-expression of Marxist materialism. As Žižek pointed out countless times, the underlying assumption of historical materialism that the progress of economic and social development necessarily leads to the emergence of the proletariat, the formation of socialism, and, then communism, is its fatal premise. Rather than an economistic determinism, Marx labored to express, in materialist terms, the self-actualization of the Spirit that the ultimate synthesis, the reconciliation of the spirit within its self-consciousness, finds its materialist expression in the liberation of productive forces from its bourgeois control and that this liberation would eventually reconcile the worker and his product. Much of the tragedy that befell socialist nations came from the devotion of bringing this dialectic into actuality. Mark Fisher describes this ardent socialist devotion to this dialectical credo as the “Leninist superego”: the belief that the possibility of socialism in the hereafter could fundamentally redeem the means leading to it.¹⁷

Marxian teleology implied its own version of apocalypticism and asceticism. Even as historical materialism broke away from the pure negativity of millenarianism, a variant of ascetic thinking can be discerned in historical materialism, as a consequence of its material teleology

¹⁷ Mark Fisher, “Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)” in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher from 2004 – 2016*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater Books, 2018), 1138 (PDF).

and political economy. Expounding on the social character of labor, Engels describes the dictatorship of the proletariat as the self-actualization of the social character of labor: by subtracting the mechanisms of production from its bourgeois ownership, the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the public ownership of the means of production, can finally orient its productive capacity for the common benefit of everyone.¹⁸ The ascetic character of this dialectical insight can be located in the ambiguity of Engels' statement: his position seems to imply that collectivization is necessary to the notion of public ownership that to wrest the forces of production from private property requires the mobilization of all for the benefit of all. Kojin Karatani's alternative to this insight which advocate for cooperative production also requires the same level of collectivism, albeit in voluntaristic terms.¹⁹

We can now define what constitutes the ascetic reason that binds both the emancipatory project of the left and nostalgia of the right. The project of emancipation always assumes the need for a positive negation to negate the negative aspect of the initial emancipatory moment. However, while the process of double negation is necessary to the authentic moment of emancipation itself, the problem lies on how to perceive the double negation itself. For the millenarians that preceded Marx and historical materialism, to negate the present is to concretize eschatology, preparing the world for the hereafter. With historical materialism, the hereafter survives in the guise of "communism", the necessary pinnacle of history's progression. The ascetic component that underlies millenarianism and materialist emancipatory projects lies in its demand for collective sacrifices to achieve the actualization of its project, believing that the success to come would retroactively redeem the sacrifices made to achieve it. Ascetic reason relies on the semiotic procedure that political transformations are historical stages replacing

¹⁸ Frederick Engels, *Socialism Utopian or Scientific?* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2008), pp. 393-394.

¹⁹ Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kosho (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2003), p. 284.

another and that the arrival of an alternative would eventually stabilize the chaotic contradictions of the moment; at the heart of ascetic reason is a master-signifier that captivates desire into an insatiable cycle of demands and partial satisfactions. For this reason, Žižek called communism the name of a problem torn between the ideological utopia of the left and the pragmatic nationalist utopia of the right.²⁰ The need therefore arises to reimagine communism within a new ontological plane one that is slowly determined by digital structures and algorithmic flows.

Returning to the break between millenarianism and Marxism, a line of continuity still exists between the chiliasm of the past and Leninism (as the practice of Marx's theory). As Fisher's notion of the Leninist superego shows, Leninism, especially its revolutionary program in 1917 leading to the revolution, rests its faith in the socialism of a hereafter, violating the law of historical stages of historical materialism to introduce socialism in an industrially backward empire; the revolution and its socialist aspiration was, to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, a leap of faith necessitated by the situation. But perhaps our appreciation of the Bolshevik legacy is misplaced: we are fully aware of the revolutionary legacy of 1917, the violence of the initial moment of emancipation; however, the radical legacy of the Bolsheviks cannot be confined at that initial moment of subtraction. What we need to appreciate more with the Bolshevik experience, according to Žižek, is its courage to trek the uncertainty of history without the legitimizing power of an external necessity or a conception of the laws of history. In the 1920s, the end of the civil war saw two initial models of the Bolshevik promise impossible: the Kronstadt uprising rendered the idea that a revolutionary party in power is sufficient enough to represent the people and embody their aspiration; in a similar fashion, the failure of a pan-European revolution to occur (especially with the failure of the German revolutionary experience) rendered the Bolshevik notion of a world revolution impossible. These two events

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 77.

along with the backwardness of the post-war Russian economy forced the Bolsheviks to reframe the coordinates of the Socialist revolution's subtraction from history.

The early 1920s was pivotal for the Bolsheviks for the reason that it was the only time when the Bolsheviks were treading uncharted territory, trying to determine the future of the Soviet republic; rather than the self-organization of the masses, the collective culture that emerged during the times that led to the October Revolution, a modicum of alienation from the central government was visible in the early years of the Soviet Union. This theme of alienation is exemplified in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The utopian component of this experimental documentary was starkly different from the collectivist ideology that would be prevalent in the 1930s, the height of Stalinism; rather, we see the tapestry of everyday life: theaters have regular shows, the cities are electrified, and people enjoy various things from more than sufficient food stuffs to small luxuries, and so on. Throughout the film, the juxtaposition between machine and human life portray a type of utopia—a vision for what the Soviet state could have been—that envisions the synthesis of the biological and the mechanical, a form of proto-cybernetics and socialist Taylorism. Thus, when Stalinism reintroduced patriotism with its distinct Russianness into Soviet culture, it must be seen as an attempt to reconcile the people with the state apparatus; to use Laclau and Mouffe's terms, the Stalinist culture of collective cooperation and organization tried to reinsert a socialist passion to political and everyday life.²¹ Stalinism is, therefore in all respects, Leninism's ascetic sect: its nationalism, assertion of cultural identity, and reinvigoration of the culture of collective organization are ideological

²¹ This distinctive character of the Stalin era can be seen literary and cinematic tropes employed from the 1920s to the 1930s. During the 1920s, there was a vibrant sci-fi literary scene (in the figures of Platonov, Bogdanov, and the Soviet Cosmists) that formed the literary component of Russian modernism. However, during the 1930s up to the 1950s, we see the return to a distinct patriotic cliché mixed with socialist imagery and the vibrant sci-fi modernist literature began to fade. Popular culture during the Stalin era were composed mainly of patriotic clichés combined with the celebration of collectivization and Soviet life expressed in musical romantic comedies (like the films of Grigori Alexandrov) and historical epics (Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*).

regressions to repress the inherent negativity of 1920s Bolshevik modernism; it aimed to present an alternative to modernism based on a socialist rearticulation of old social organicism. As a form of Leninist asceticism, Stalin's cultural conservatism is sustained by its renormalization of Marxism-Leninism within the orthodox dialectic of historical stages and the assertion of an organic social form, serving as a model for the centralized state institution revolving on Stalin. For Žižek however, this conservative reaction was necessary; the modernism prevalent in the 1920s which he described as a "biopolitical dream" was more perilous than the conservative culture that succeeded it: the latter introduced a form of stability to everyday life than the chaotic negativity that the modernists celebrated in the form of social mechanization. It was in Stalin's time that the Soviet Union was actually human all too human even in its most horrific terror of its purges and the ascetic rationality of its aspirations.²²

The problem with Žižek's defense of Stalin's cultural conservatism was that it saw the mechanization of society and the human being as symptomatic to a kind of biopolitics. However, from his own reframing of the October revolution, he writes of how the early 1920s was a pivotal point in Soviet history and philosophy: a time when the intelligentsia and party activists were working out to create a new culture and a new way of life²³; in a similar way, the cultural reconstruction of the Soviet Union also necessitated the need for a new literary practice to envision the uncertain destiny of the people. The satirical utopias of Bogdanov and Platonov were attempts not just to create a new literary scene, but an act "to tarry the negative" and speak from the perspective of the negativity of revolutionary practice. As a double negation, their form of the utopian novel was an expression of a problem that was faced by every Bolshevik—including Lenin. Marxism achieved its break with millenarianism not with Marx or Engels, but

²² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 212-214.

²³ Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" in V.I. Lenin, *The Day After the Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. xlix-li.

during the uncertain early years of the Soviet Union, when any notion of a socialist hereafter disappeared as well as the certainty provided by the dialectical laws of the stages of history. Hence, while the event of October 1917 was the political event of the Idea cleaving through history, its “cultural October” was achieved during the 1920s at the height of Russian modernism.

III.

Would a similar utopian imaginary thrive today when material prosperity is linked to a specific model of capitalism and its bourgeois culture? One can even assume that with the passage to late capitalism, anything pertaining to utopian thinking disappeared, replaced with a spontaneous pragmatism and individual autonomy. On the contrary, the opposite is true: late capitalism and the specific bourgeois culture founded on personal branding and responsibility, are, in practice, products of a thriving utopian imagination that viewed the market as an organic reality which must be imposed on all facets of social reality. Hence, to say that late capitalism is the post-ideological stage of capitalist development is horribly mistaken; what won in 1990s is a new ideology and utopia, a pragmatic utopia founded on a notion that the survival of today’s reality rests on allowing the market to dictate every coordinate of our reality.

The term “pragmatic utopia” is an elusive one, an oxymoron, since the constitutive aspect of pragmatic utopia is the belief in the autonomy of external reality and the aversion to any preconceived models of society. What makes the notion of a pragmatic utopia properly utopian is its regime of appropriation, retroactively necessitating itself; it always recreates itself, ever unsatisfied with its present form, yet persistent in maintaining its legitimacy in its assertion of its own necessity. It is this tension between an ever persistent reality and a plastic entity that we need to adjust to which defines capitalist realism that predetermines our life under capitalism.

Faced with this predetermined existence, the counter-culture tried to present an alternative utopia. To break the hegemonic ice of post-war consumerism and middle class culture, the rebellious attitude that defined the counter-culture (permissive sexuality, psychedelic musings, and so on) were poised against the dreary middle class culture that emphasized patriarchal harmony, social reification, and segregation, alongside an intensified Taylorist management of the industry; the counter-culture aspired for an alternative radically different from the American bourgeois culture and Soviet collectivism. More than a cultural fad, it was a period where the structures of capitalist life, the materialist prosperity of the post-war economy and the genteel suburban communitarianism were disputed and its contradictory nature revealed, unraveling its inherently racist and exploitative side. Thus, to be free from this economic system requires an alternative culture and economy, radically different from the drudgery and banal everydayness of consumerist lifestyle.²⁴

For Fisher, the problem of the left was its failure to politicize the aspirations of the counter-culture; in consequence, the latter had to struggle separately from the economic and political agendas of the left. The separate struggles of the counter-culture and the political left, prevalent in the study of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, were instrumental in ushering the neoliberal turn; more than a set of economic deregulatory policies, neoliberalism was a normalization of the counter-culture's aesthetic. Individualism, permissive hedonism, and various counter-culture aesthetic practices (from the aesthetics of the psychedelic era to the ghetto gangster aesthetic) were integrated into the new consumer market and economic ethos of the neoliberal era, attesting to the ferocious normalizing power of the neoliberal reaction.²⁵

²⁴ Fisher 2018, 1126 (PDF).

²⁵ Fisher 2018, 1129 (PDF).

However, was the culture of excess really the spirit of the neoliberal reaction? While Fisher is right to describe neoliberalism as the tragic appendage of the counter-culture's aspirations, there was in the prevalent conservatism of the neoliberal reaction a tension between capitalist excess and the moralism of the period. Despite the monetization of the counter-culture's aesthetic practice and the acceptance of its values in popular culture, the excess associated with the thriving economies of the 80s and the 90s is counteracted by a kind of conservative popular asceticism. Adam Kotsko already described this tension between neo-conservatism and neoliberalism in the political theological terms of demonization and redemption, providing the political economic establishment a hermeneutic mapping of human action within a market society that reconciled social conservatism with multiple identities as well as a way to understand deviation as an irredeemable sin against the capitalist economy of grace. Demonization and redemption are but two terms in a capitalist soteriology; as a political theology of a pragmatic utopia, the narrative is incomplete without a well-expressed spirituality, an asceticism for the perpetual communion with the market's graces.

Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) is a testament to such spirituality. The film portrayed every dirty tactic in Wall Street trading: insider trading, stock manipulation (raiding), fraud, and so on. Interspersed in the film are scenes of Budd Fox (Charlie Sheen) and Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) enjoying the perks of their illicit activities. *Wall Street* then proceeds to show its moralism: learning that Gekko plans to close Bluestar airlines after acquiring it walking off with the employee's accumulated pension fund, Bud uses the same dirty tactic he learned from Gekko to force him to relinquish ownership of the company, saving it and its workers. *Wall Street* attests to the kind of asceticism of the neoliberal turn; if the excess was its only spirit, then Gekko would have been its patron saint, representing every value that the unfettered market

economy represents: egoism and the unbridled will to power. Yet, the cultural ethos rejects this obvious excess of its economics.²⁶

The popular asceticism associated with neoliberalism can be described in theoretical terms as a form of “banal Kantian deontology” than a simple reaction to liberalism and a defense of traditional values. At its core, duty and self-sacrifice are elevated as self-sufficient virtues which by themselves demand the subject to deny himself the pleasures of life and devote himself to economic work and patriotic duty. More than a hermeneutic framework that sought to construct a set of social norms (a system of morality or a way of life) and a system of reality (an ontologization of the economic), the ascetic rationality at the root of neoliberalism constitutes a kind of spirituality, a personality required to retain one’s place in the good graces of the neoliberal project.

The use of explicitly theological language is not an exaggeration; critical literature on neoliberalism and its specific regime has taken a theological turn because of the pervasive and totalizing power of the neoliberal turn (in which a naïve Marxism that relied on rigid class analysis and economic determinism just could not properly analyze). Kotsko’s *Neoliberalism’s Demons* (2018) is aware of the limitations of purely economic and previous political theological approaches which by themselves rely on antinomies (ideology and state, sovereignty and biopower, the economic and the political, and so on). In an attempt to circumvent these binaries, Kotsko argued that a political theological analysis of neoliberalism should “express the deep

²⁶ I find it ironic that the celebration of neoliberal excess did not come from American pop-culture, but from Japanese pop-culture, the same culture that Alexandre Kojève celebrated as the pinnacle of cultural snobbery. As Hiroki Azuma observed, the emergence of the Japanese economy as the second biggest economy have rendered its snobbish culture obsolete and replaced by a distinctive consumer society. One can only look at Japanese pop-music in the late 70s and 80s (the so-called “golden age of the idol industry”) with its banal lyrics celebrating good life, consumer society, the nightlife, love life and so on to describe the spirit of the celebration of its economic prosperity. However, its path towards its own variant of ascetic rationality is paved by its own experience of crisis and the dismantling of its own economic prosperity founded on the bubble economy. At this point, much can be written further.

convictions of a particular community at a particular time and place about how the world is and ought to be.”²⁷ Politics, economy, and theology all share a distinctive capacity to express both descriptive and normative claims, legitimizing entire systems of meaning. Thus, even if Kotsko tries to distance himself from Lacanian psychoanalysis and Žižek, his political theology of neoliberalism describes the difficult Lacanian process of “squaring the circle” of the economy and politics. Ascetic rationality is a vital component of this intricate process of squaring, since at its core is its reconciliation of two contradictory aspects of the neoliberal turn: material prosperity and austerity.

Neoliberalism was premised on austerity that promised long-term gains at the cost of comfort and security. More than assertion of freedom, individuals must be austere as the government is austere to stir the economy into greater levels of competitiveness. Invoked in this stage is not hedonism, but a collective spiritual discipline that requires a denial of pleasure as a premise to enjoy life. Even though neoliberal economies suffered setbacks and crises, its tight grip relies precisely on ever intensified forms of austerity and discipline, a fact that united neoliberalism with the populist wave and the latter’s preference for reducing liberties in the name of social harmony, discipline, security and prosperity.

Ascetic rationality functions as neoliberalism’s self-legitimizing discourse that defines the operations of the will. Hence, from the perspective of political theology, it does not merely provide us with a cognitive mapping to create our reality, but also the manner by which subjects should orient themselves within this reality. Kotsko’s notion of demonization only describes neoliberalism’s outside, but for those who still enjoy the state of grace an ascetic norm is required.

²⁷ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 30.

Rather than consumerist excess, neoliberalism has emerged to valorize the virtue of restraint. Rather than a celebration of wealth, it has celebrated intelligent and austere expenditure and the sacrifice of comfort for projected higher yields of productivity. Ascetic reason harks back to Nietzsche who in the *Genealogy of Morals* wrote of the ascetic ideal:

For an ascetic, life is a self-contradiction: here rules a *resentiment* without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful and basic conditions; here an attempt is made to employ farce to block up the wells of farce; here physiological well-being itself is viewed askance and especially the outward expression of this well-being, beauty, and joy; while pleasure is felt and sought in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice.²⁸

Nietzsche is far from a thinker of political theology. But his insight into the “ascetic ideal” speaks of the perennial and immanent tendency in capitalist modernity that rather than liberate man from the fetters of backward thinking and servitude, have further restrained him to ever more complex systems of servitude, one that he is even willing to subject himself to.

This essay tasks itself in locating the vestiges of ascetic rationality in the deadlock of contemporary theory, the culture industry, religious reaction to social and economic issues, and current events and their interpretation. By pinpointing the myriad ways ascetic reason operates, we can unravel the fragility of neoliberalism’s squared circle and eventually set the stage for a proper framework for an emancipatory politics which will not rely on any ascetic regressivism.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walther Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), pp. 553-554.