

## CULTURAL THEMATIC

### Capitalism and the Sovereignty of Desire

It would be a poor monument, indeed, to the memory of Roland Barthes to celebrate, not writing, but consciousness “degree zero”; to deliver up to utterance a mode of knowledge which is amodal and antiseptic in character. For too long, has not *theoria* remained under the sign of a falsifiable alienation, a recorder and interpreter of the flat horizon of administered society, rather than assuming the position of confessor to executioners and victims in the slaughterhouse of “normalizing” society, to the witnesses of carnival time in high capitalism?

For that weary, restless interval between the renunciation of the positivistic “analytic” and the abandonment of the false start of late critical theory, it seemed inevitable that the categories of bourgeois society, however problematical, would continue as the vehicle for the inscription of desire onto the social body, onto society. When the world swirls in a half-dream of madness, when fiction is naturalized and then socialized as the stuff of realism, do we not have to be resigned to the sad fate of sheltering consciousness in the illusion of the facticity of the object, of grounding the claims of reason on a dramatic play of force, of power and capital, between an artifact called the State and an historical *imaginaire* termed Economy?

William James once said that consciousness is a born traitor; and I consider that this is so with regard to the recession of critical reason towards the disappearing-point of scribe, of mute flunkey, before the ensemble of everyday institutions. Consciousness flees from its basis in the silence of unuttered remembrance, from duration, to take refuge in the tidy task of assembling random jottings on the discourse of institutional conflict. The eroticism of the concept, the sensuality of Barthes’ *écriture*, is repressed so as to better adapt the mutinous elements of imagination to the role of history’s cipher. A geology of bourgeois society would thus reveal only a horizontal plane of analogically, not causally, related social processes — an axis stretching along the surface of our recognition which congeals in mind under the relative signs of State, Power, Ideology and Capital. But the horizontal axis of bourgeois society, Foucault’s conventicle of normalizing society, has no moment of vertical eruption. Where, after all, in the discourse of normalization, surveillance and categorization — the full *coda* of administration — are there to be found even whisperings about the contingent nature of human passion, about the *Leviathan* as a shroud, a death-mask? Where in the language, the *parole*, of capitalism is there an utterance, a word or a murmuring, which by the defensive realism of its form does not seek to

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repress the return of the unconscious; to hold outside the political conventicle the weeping within the body which is the ransom exacted by bourgeois society itself.

Now, in the social armistice of capitalism, have we not reached the vanishing point of human agency? And is not at least one common element in the political legacy of Marcuse and Sartre the recognition that Capital demands for its sustenance the denial of ontology, and the sequestration of desire within a general, normalizing discourse. Seemingly in this century the complexity of the life field has been simplified by the spread of the dull routines of the “hospital-theatre” — Rieff’s image of society which has gone over, after Freud, to the primal of psychological man. The multiplicity, the “differentness” of social experience has been strained through the white sound of centering institutions. All eyes now turn outwards to the localization of power in the “juridical mechanism” of the State,<sup>1</sup> to the positioning in the market-place of rights of jurisdiction over exchange, and to the grounding of legitimation in the sphere of the socio-cultural. It is as if the universalisation of capital, of domination, however horrific, has made unproblematical the terms of discourse concerning the nature and condition of our institutional confinement. The domiciling of the classical mediations of power and money in the centering institutions of the State and Economy is now the routinized, and rationalized, alphabet of capitalism. Within the logic of this alphabet develops the critique of political economy and the equally eloquent indictments of early critical theory. Within the social grammar of capitalism, within the levelling of the unconscious in favour of the normalizing discourse of Polity and Economy, there occurs the orderly imprisonment of body, mind and desire. Weber’s depiction of ascetic morality as the originating impulse of capitalism proves to be prophetic of the incarceration of the social body in a generalized systems-theoretic. Capitalism has as its secret the transparency of the operations of the Apparatus of sequestration: it unfolds before Critique as a dreamlike condition of narcissism and bestiality. And critical reason is misled by the absence of mystery, by the surfacing of desire in the form of the most banal and denotative of concretions, into the self-guilt and self-flagellation of displacement — politicians of the liberal regime beg in the streets for degradation; intellectuals invent the discourse of the crisis-ridden revolutionary subject; and even file-keepers scheme on the sly as to how the “secret” of bureaucracy might be best revealed to the mob at the door.

Before Foucault, the trial of capitalism takes place in an epistemological venue in which both parties to the case, Critique and Apologia, are ensnared as polarities of the same discourse. But now, *theoria* may be dragooned into liberation, for it is confronted with the task of following the flight of power and property, of desire, to the shadowy realm of society, of culture. In a brilliant series of essays, including the “Right of Death and Power over Life”

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and "On Governmentality," Foucault suggests that the modern era is typified not only by the emergence and extension of an "apparatus of security" but by the development, since the eighteenth century, of a "double movement" of power.<sup>2</sup> Foucault claims that what is enigmatic in our society is the transformation of power from its original meaning as a regulatory, juridical mechanism, from the law of interdiction of the Sovereign, into a "strategic grid" of "relations of force" concerned with the administration of life — with the disciplining of the body and the surveillance of that modernist invention, the demography of "population." In the eloquence of Foucault's phrase, power "has escaped the body of the Sovereign . . . it retreats into the shadows of society": a society "equipped with an apparatus whose form is sequestration, whose aim is the constitution of labour-power, and whose instrument is the acquisition of discipline . . ."<sup>3</sup> A political technology of life, of the public administration of the sexuality of the individual and of the social habits of the population, replaces the appropriative, death-dispensing, power of the state, of the Sovereign. In Foucault's terms, the "discourse of the king" dissolves and is substituted for by the discourse "of him who sets forth the norm, of him who engages in surveillance, who judges the normal from the abnormal — the discourse of the teacher, the judge, the doctor, the psychiatrist, and finally above all, the discourse of the psychoanalyst."<sup>4</sup> Power, as a field of force relations, takes wing from the *imaginaire* of Polity; embedding itself under the sign of surveillance, under the banner of "reality principle" in the interstices of society.

The flight of power beyond its institutional basis in the "juridical being" of the State anticipates the inscription of power as a "lived relation" on the body of the individual, and through the "norm" on the social body itself. A change in the meaning of power is necessary. In a lecture delivered at the Collège de France, Foucault traces the elements of a re-reading of power: a discourse on power which would free the concept from its grounding in the juridical mechanism, from its reduction to appropriation, and from its subordination to a mode of production.<sup>5</sup> The thematic of radical consciousness, of consciousness which infiltrates beyond the logic of the discourse of normalization, has to do with deciphering the ensemble of knowledge-power-body. Following Foucault, the field of domination, of sequestration and surveillance, has now shifted its "sittings" to the ambiguous realm of human sexuality, the beleaguered family, the "great forgetting" of madness, and the disciplining of labour. More harshly, the Gulag of the Soviet Union has been transposed into the everyday "carceral institutions" of the West: Bentham's Panopticon reveals liberal democracy to be true only in the moment of its inversion. And as Barthes has testified even the Word has now been imprisoned. Power, the normalizing power of the discourse of the human sciences, has fled from its sanctuary in the prohibitions of Law; property, as

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anticipated in the conception of “possessive individualism,” has also been inscribed in desire on the body, and in pain on the labouring being.

Reason must cease its slumber. Capitalism, following the flight of power and property beyond the vocabulary of State and Market to the more serious, and more dangerous, realm of society, is not caught up in a dramatic advance. Capitalism, this ensemble of relations of appropriation and prohibition, returns to its primal, to the sovereignty of desire. And desire, in the insistent eroticism of the field, the mediation, of power-property speaks the language, the lullaby, of domination: it is the tongue of macho administration, the fleshy texture of subordination under the sign of the performance principle, the loving torment of capitalist life. And power itself speaks; it whispers from within the body; it is the censor which gazes inward to block the reminiscences of the unconscious and which dictates outwards as conscience. Foucault says that ours is a society of the celebration of the confessional; if this is so then the confessional is, ironically, conducted through the screen of power-property, once inscribed on the surface of population.

To discover the nature of the confession of culture, we have initiated in this journal an occasional section dealing with the thematic of cultural interpretations. Following our initiative of last issue in which there was an investigation of the form and content of the moving image, the contemporary film, this number contains a major review section which surveys recent publications organized around the theme of “Psychoanalysis, Ideology and Language.” While the journal has never been the partisan of any one viewpoint, the thematic and research strategy involved in the review section of this issue are further illuminations of the relation of the unconscious, ideology and utterance in a time when capitalism comes under, once again, the open sway of desire.

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### Notes

1. Here I have reference to Michael Foucault's thesis that power, in its first inscription on society, is sited in the institution of law, in the legislative utterance of the Sovereign.
2. See particularly, Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, pp. 135-155; and also, M. Foucault, “On Governmentality,” *Ideology and Consciousness*, 6, Autumn, 1979.
3. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, editors, *Michael Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979, p. 64.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
5. *Op. cit.*, “Power and Norm: Notes,” pp. 59-66.