

The Intellectual Under Trump: Between Solitude and Solidarity

Jon Catlin

“Professor Adorno,” begins a 1969 interview with the German-Jewish critical theorist, which would turn out to be his last. “Two weeks ago, the world still seemed in order—”

“Not to me,” Adorno interjects.¹

To the intellectual falls the unhappy task of permanent dissatisfaction with the status quo. Theodor W. Adorno thus called his way of thought “the melancholy science.” During his exile from Nazi Germany as a persecuted Jew twenty-five years earlier, Adorno had cited Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his “reflections from damaged life”: “The life of the mind only attains its truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation.”²

The weeks and months since the election of Donald Trump have been clouded by such a mood of intellectual desolation. What power can ideas have when all we see on the horizon is increasing violence—against our democracy, its laws, the most vulnerable members of our society, and our planet? Trump’s undisguised abuse of power defies understanding and overwhelms reflection. Intellect itself seems paralyzed.



In my seminar the morning after the election we could do little but stare in

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1. Theodor Adorno, “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower?” in *Language without Soil*, trans. and ed. Gerhard Richter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

2. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 15.

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silence. Professors were called upon not to impart new knowledge, but to teach to mourn. After 9/11, the second “Where were you when...?” event of my generation will be the night Trump was elected. I was with friends, and the spectacularly wrong projections kept me in willful ignorance as I saw, live on television, one state after another fall. Finally, I saw my home state of Wisconsin—three or four states behind the Democratic “blue wall”—going for Trump by several points with well over half of the counties reporting as the clock approached midnight. At this I got up and went home, pretending not to have understood what I had seen until, the next morning, I was forced to.

What followed were weeks of uncertainty, a radical reevaluation of the biases and assumptions that prevented us from seeing Trump’s victory coming. In vain we hoped there would be some way—the idiosyncrasies of the electoral college, recounts, impeachment—that would keep Trump out of office. But already we mourned for what this would mean for the already-precarious, the already-bject, the already-persecuted: the immigrants, the women, the Muslims, the queers, the poor, the sick, the old, the incarcerated, the children left behind.

At no point after the election did I feel fear, no doubt on account of my own privileges. Rather, I felt what I describe only now as intellectual defeat. Jacob Mikanowski, a fellow historian, perfectly captured my despondence in an essay in *The Point*:

Three days on, it feels like an abyss has opened up. I thought I knew something, I thought I understood the world, and I didn’t... I trusted polls, I trusted experts, I trusted insiders. I should have trusted my instinct as a son of exiles and grandson of refugees. I’ve spent half my life studying history and politics, and I feel as if it hasn’t taught me anything. Social science assumes that a pattern governs human affairs. I think all we have is a wheel of fire. I’ve started to think that all history gives us is stories, stories that accumulate meaning like springs and burst through at the appointed time.³

3. Jacob Mikanowski, “An Ill Wind,” *The Point* (Nov. 2016).

After this utter failure of expert knowledge from the media, pollsters, academics, and politicians themselves, I had to erase and

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redraw the lines of my intellectual commitments.

I returned to the book that has influenced my thinking most profoundly, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, which Adorno wrote in exile in the United States shortly after realizing the full extent of what had happened at Auschwitz. For the first time I found myself identifying less with its images of messianic hope than with its deep currents of nihilism:

There is nothing innocuous left... For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity. All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity.

As suggested by Adorno's title *Minima Moralia*—an inversion of the classical ethical treatise *Magna Moralia* once attributed to Aristotle—for we who live after Auschwitz, the good life is irrevocably finished. “*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*”—“Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.” For we who must live on today, the only responsible course is to shed light on horror: “There is no remedy but steadfast diagnosis of oneself and others, the attempt, through awareness, if not to escape doom, at least to rob it of its dreadful violence, that of blindness.” It falls to the intellectual to hold off society's willing descent into barbarism, but Adorno maintains only the dimmest hope in that possibility:

That intellectuals are at once beneficiaries of a bad society, and yet those on whose socially useless work it largely depends whether a society emancipated from utility is achieved—this is not a contradiction acceptable once and for all and therefore irrelevant. It gnaws incessantly at the objective quality of their work. Whatever the intellectual does is wrong.

Useless yet indispensable, intellectuals cannot steer the course of history, but their position at a critical remove from society can grant them uncommon views into present unfreedom. Where Nietzsche remarked, “It is even part of my good fortune not to be a house-owner,” Adorno adds, “Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home.” The intellectual is

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4. Martin Jay,
Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America (Columbia University Press, 1986).

a *permanent exile* from his or her own culture, forever out of place.⁴

In lectures he delivered for the BBC in 1993 on the idea of the intellectual, Edward Said calls Adorno “the dominating intellectual conscience of the middle twentieth century”:

*Paradoxical, ironic, mercilessly critical: Adorno was the quintessential intellectual, hating all systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste. For him life was at its most false in the aggregate—the whole is always the untrue, he once said—and this, he continued, placed an even greater premium on subjectivity, on the individual’s consciousness, on what could not be regimented in the totally administered society.*⁵

5. Edward Said,
Representations of the Intellectual (New York: Vintage, 1996), pp. 54–55.

It is precisely at moments like ours that “the whole” seems false: the most basic structures of our world—democracy, the media, capitalism—seem bankrupt. As Adorno wrote, “there is no way out of entanglement.” If the public sphere is rotten, it can seem that “the only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one’s own existence” by retreating into private life.

Yet a common critique of Adorno’s exilic doomsaying applies in our moment as well. When a fellow student in one of my classes called Trump’s election a watershed, saying it was then that they realized this country was not a community of tolerance, a professor paused and asked, “What privileges and blindnesses allowed Trump to be that breakthrough?” So many others have not had the privilege of maintaining hope in democratic social life up until now. It is, after all, a privilege to have a merely *intellectual* crisis when so many live in precarity.

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A friend texted me a few days after the election: “Has this week improved your prospects as a historian of catastrophe?” *Too soon*, I thought. As a graduate student, I am lucky to spend my days thinking with invested colleagues and mentors, but I am at the same time haunted by the fact that the dark period of history I study has proved so relevant for today. Recent articles have boldly suggested that

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the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, a mid-century intellectual movement of which Adorno was a founder, “knew Trump was coming.” As much as part of me welcomes this surge of interest in an otherwise obscure group of Marxist cultural theorists, these are dark parallels indeed: “The combination of economic inequality and pop-cultural frivolity is precisely the scenario Adorno and others had in mind: mass distraction masking elite domination,” *The New Yorker’s* music critic Alex Ross wrote. “If Adorno were to look upon the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, he might take grim satisfaction in seeing his fondest fears realized.”⁶

6. Alex Ross, “The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming,” *The New Yorker* (Dec. 5, 2016).

Of course, history never happens twice. But as a project of institutionalized memory, historical practice is one of the most powerful resources we have against the lack of attention, care, and foresight Trump displays daily. Adorno wrote in his meditations on politics after Auschwitz that a “lack of historical awareness [*Geschichtsfremdheit*]” fulfills “the nightmare of a humanity without memory.”⁷ He considers this sensibility as typified by Henry Ford’s 1916 remark in an interview in *The Chicago Tribune*: “I don’t know much about history, and I wouldn’t give a nickel for all the history in the world. It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today.” A hundred years later, Trump might have tweeted these words—at 3am, and in garbled English—to justify upending democratic traditions and to defend a worldview of redemptive racism not far from Ford’s notorious anti-semitism.

7. Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (1960; Stanford, 2003), p. 478 n. 11.

I’ve been struck by the way anti-intellectualism today is anti-historical for its refusal to acknowledge the wisdom of our forebears and the democratic institutions they built—especially the development of the social welfare state



It is the truth that you are unable to challenge.
It is not hard at all to challenge Socrates.

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in both Europe and the United States as a concerted effort to keep the fascist populism of the 1930s at bay. Such forgetting entails exactly the regression into positivism that Adorno warns against, whereby “humanity divests itself of memory and breathlessly exhausts itself in continually conforming to what is immediately present.” Living without history, with regard only for the present as it is, means seeing the present world as natural, as the only way things might be. Historical forgetting thus implicitly entails justifying and excusing the present’s faults and injustices. Without a capacity for historical reflection, we are without any standpoint from which to realize the contingency of the present, and to judge it morally. In this spirit, the German novelist W. G. Sebald once remarked that “if people were more preoccupied with the past, maybe the events that overwhelm us would be fewer.”⁸

8. W. G. Sebald in Maya Jaggi, “Recovered Memories,” *The Guardian* (Sept. 21, 2001).

9. Martin Shuster, “Holocaust Statements and Identity in/of for the World,” *Culture on the Edge* (Feb. 9, 2017).

10. Hannah Arendt, “From an Interview,” *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 26, 1974).

In the same anti-historical, smash-everything spirit as Trump, his Chief Strategist Steve Bannon has claimed to be a “Leninist” in the sense that Lenin “wanted to destroy the state, and that’s my goal too. I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today’s establishment.”⁹ He has remarked that Trump’s administration thinks of itself “as virulently anti-establishment.” Rather than calmly returning America to the racial hierarchies of the 1950s, this administration seeks to incite enough chaos and violence that the public, desperate for stability, becomes putty in Trump’s hands and plays along until it is too late. As Hannah Arendt remarked decades ago: “Totalitarianism begins in contempt for what you have. The second step is the notion: ‘Things must change—no matter how, Anything is better than what we have.’”¹⁰ Trump’s term began with a classic cups and balls routine. Chaos from measures like the travel ban distracted the media and the public’s limited attention from less-visible power grabs undertaken simultaneously: executive orders aimed at corporate and environmental deregulation and the regulatory capture of agencies that defend the public interest.

Most historians who have weighed in on whether Trump is a fascist have answered in the negative, for at least three reasons: First, Trump lacks popular support—being elected by only 27% of the electorate and having record-low approval ratings in the low-40s. Second, fascism in both Italy and Germany in the 1920s through

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the 1940s was characterized by the widespread use of private party police and state-sanctioned violence against political opposition. Third, as the intellectual historian Anson Rabinbach recently said to me, completely straight-faced: “Trump’s not a fascist because he doesn’t read.” (A *sad* photo from Trump’s first week in the White House showed his bookshelves filled only with display copies of *The Art of the Deal*.) Fascists actually read. They knew their history, myth, and romantic philosophy, and they often presented radical modern transformations in the idiom of national tradition, invoking ideals that resonated.

Needless to say, these differences do not erase salient historical parallels, not the least of which is identification with Nazism from Bannon and others within Trump’s administration. Perhaps the most important fascist element is Trump’s claim to represent “the will of the people,” that is, the white America of foregone “greatness,” implying the exclusion of all others as not only dispensable but a threat. The political theorist Jan-Werner Müller has thus recently defined populism in terms akin to Carl Schmitt’s claim that “the sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.” While all politics makes recourse to values within a political community, populists derive their power from deciding who fits within the political community in the first place: “The point is that populists claim a privileged understanding of what the real people—by definition morally irreproachable—are like and wish for. Every populist operates with a symbolic and ultimately moral distinction between the real people and those who don’t belong.”¹¹

One of Bannon’s chief problems with the United States today is its inability to produce a strong American nationalism, since it is perpetually undermined by the fact that, as he has remarked, “there are people in New York that feel closer to people in London and in Berlin than they do to people in Kansas and in Colorado.”¹² Hearing rhetoric like this leading up to and in the wake of the election, I started to sense that I might just be one of the so-called “coastal elites” Bannon targets as un-America. Though white, an Eagle Scout, and raised Christian, the course of life has taken me further and further from those “real American” roots. But it took physically being back in one of those places for me to feel just how much I had

11. Jan-Werner Müller, “Real Citizens,” *Boston Review* (Oct. 26, 2016).

12. Cited in Shuster.

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changed.

In the days after the election, I drove halfway across the country, from New Jersey to central Wisconsin, to celebrate Thanksgiving with my family. I passed through what many coastal elites refer to as “flyover country”—regions only encountered from the window of an airplane, or as destitute sites exoticized in the pages of the *New York Times*. Days before my trip, the *Times* had in fact published a chilling series of maps entitled “The Two Americas of 2016,” which geographically divided the electorate into “Trump’s America” and “Hillary’s America.” Along the highway, I reacted with disbelief at first sight of “Trump That Bitch” and “Hillary for Prison” bumper stickers on the oversized trucks flying past me in my eco-friendly Subaru. Walking into my first rest stop in western Pennsylvania, I couldn’t overcome the sense that the people around me were in so many ways not like me—most wearing either sweatpants or hunting camo, people around my age with two or three children. I found the roadside signage garish and the fast food options repellant. So this is Trump country, I thought. I exchanged knowing glances with the few other outsiders passing through, easily identifiable, like me, by their Levis and Converse.

But I wasn’t just passing through. It dawned on me that when I entered my family home I would find still more Trump-supporters to reckon with. I knew that maybe this trip, like some others before, I would go hunting and pretend just for an afternoon that owning a dozen guns is normal. Somehow it took this election for me to feel wrested from that culture for good; the rift that started widening when I went off to college had hardened into a set of mutually-exclusive worldviews. This other America now appeared as the Bizarro World of my own. The decades-long process of self-segregation of Americans by race, income, and education that Bill Bishop calls “the Big Sort” now seem undeniable. Sure, America has always been divided. My eighty-six-year-old grandfather from in rural Wisconsin has always spoken disapprovingly of “them city folk” who voted for Obama. But now it seems one is *either* a “coastal elite” or a “real American.” Both Democratic campaigns tried to re-appropriate the latter epithet for all working-class Americans—including women and minorities—but Trump stole

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their momentum, using divisive rhetoric around such apparently superficial differences as fuel for his rallies.

The idea that Trump was elected because a coastal elite got out of touch with real Americans is of course bunk. (Trump's administration is a who's who of privilege, composed mostly of Ivy League-educated neo-conservatives launched into the 1-percent by Goldman Sachs and Silicon Valley.) Yet Trump's administration is waging a multi-front culture war, and I am part of what Bannon calls the "new barbarism": Urban-dwelling, queer, vegetarian, more socialist by the day, someone who's had more non-white than white friends my entire life—I am the enemy in what Bannon calls the beginning of "a very brutal and bloody conflict" to defend "everything that we've been bequeathed over the last 2,000, 2,500 years."¹³ "We" meaning white people. The question today is: What must I, as a white person, assume responsibility for? Rather, what should I have been assuming responsibility for all along? As one of my professors, Cornel West, recently put it to our seminar: "Who will you tolerate in your coalition against tyranny?" How much will you compromise the purity of your positions and affiliations to resist Trumpism?

13. Cited in Shuster.

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We millennials who grew up in the glow of Obama's gradualist progressivism have undergone a shock from which we are still recovering. There were always new problems—drone strikes, income inequality, police violence—but Obama's charisma always cast them as fundamentally solvable, perpetually on the horizon of resolution, inevitable stops along the arc toward justice. Obama often remarks that his greatest lesson from eight years in office is that America is an ocean liner, not a speedboat. He invoked this metaphor in a recent interview to explain why he retracted his remark that Trump is "temperamentally unfit" to be Commander-in-Chief. Obama is an unrelenting gradualist: even if Trump turns back fifteen or twenty percent of his progressive legacy, he isn't worried because "there's still a lot of stuff that sticks."¹⁴ In his magnificent retrospective, "My President Was Black," Ta-Nehesi Coates undercuts this analogy:

14. David Remnick, "Obama Reckons with a Trump Presidency," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 28, 2016).

Obama says he always tells his staff that "better is good." The

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*notion that a president would attempt to achieve change within the boundaries of the accepted consensus is appropriate. But Obama is almost constitutionally skeptical of those who seek to achieve change outside that consensus.*¹⁵

15. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "My President Was Black," *The Atlantic* (Jan., 2017).

Though hailed as an "Intellectual-in-Chief," Obama fails as an intellectual (in Adorno and Said's sense) for the same reason he is an effective leader: instead of abhorring consensus, he tries to mold it. He has made history by getting his hands dirty and compromising with his enemies in order to make ideas like the Affordable Care Act a reality. For Coates, Obama's unshakeable trust in the American people stems from his being treated like a white person in his multiracial upbringing. By luck of circumstance, he dodged the poverty and discrimination experienced by most black Americans. As the son of an African immigrant, he is divorced from the chain of catastrophes of the black American experience from slavery, to Selma, to Ferguson. His experiences have helped him see white America as well-intentioned in a way that people like Coates cannot. He appointed the most highly-educated cabinet in history but remained beholden, in Cornel West's words, to "neoliberal soulcraft," failing to take seriously critical voices outside the ranks of Washington elites.¹⁶ In the final analysis, Coates does admit to wondering whether Obama could have done otherwise, given the pressure of being the first black president, and as so many questioned the very legitimacy of his candidacy.

16. Cornel West, "Pity the Sad Legacy of Barack Obama," *The Guardian* (Jan. 9, 2017).

Under Trump, liberal causes of the Obama era that once seemed pressing have lost their force and dissolved into symbolism. Four years ago, in my first article for *The Midway Review*, I drew from my own experience volunteering (closeted) in a local Boy Scout Troop to defend the organization—in which I had spent over half my life—against charges of being "a campus branch of the Hitler Youth Organization."¹⁷ Then the issue was suddenly resolved: after years of debate, Boy Scouts lifted the ban on gay youth in 2013, and then on gay adult leaders in 2015. In Trump's first weeks in office, Boy Scouts decided to admit transgender boys after a controversy involving an eight-year-old transgender Cub Scout who had been banned from his local group drew national attention. In its decision, they cited the fact that gender identity is determined differently on a state-

17. Jon Catlin, "Boy Scouts's Coming Out: Boy Scouts of America and the Threat of Gay Masculinity," *The Midway Review* (Autumn 2012).

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by-state basis, making one national rule ineffective. Suddenly, the antagonistic winner-take-all rhetoric of the culture wars suddenly gave way to quiet deferral to local autonomy. Overnight, the lofty, moralistic register I was so used to employing in such debates was rendered obsolete.

The broader terrain of gay politics has also changed radically. I still remember the moment in my first year of college that Obama came out in support of same-sex marriage. Upon watching his speech, I immediately donated to his re-election campaign in an emotional surge of recognition. After what came next, this seems ridiculous. In 2015, the Supreme Court declared state bans on same-sex marriage unconstitutional, bringing to a close another symbolic battle that had riddled American politics for over a decade. Public opinion has shifted so drastically on this issue that Trump has shown no interest in challenging it. Still, his administration pursues a “religious freedom” agenda that seeks to overturn antidiscrimination policies protecting LGBT workers. Based on exit polls, just 14% of LGBT people voted for Trump. Yet as many as 40% of French gays recently voted for the Trumpist, far-right Marine Le Pen’s National Front, apparently compelled by her quiet support of same-sex marriage and promises to check the flow of “anti-gay” Muslim immigrants.¹⁸ Homonationalism of this sort was also clear in Trump’s tweets after the Orlando nightclub shooting: “I will fight for you while Hillary brings in more people that will threaten your freedoms and beliefs.” It’s a transparent strategy: incite violence and divide the weakest members of society. Hillary’s grand coalition—Stronger Together—was intended to counter Trump’s scapegoating with a blanket policy of inclusion. But by including in that coalition everyone from Wall St. to Occupy Wall St., it lost coherence and political force.

18. J. Lester Feder, “How France’s Nationalist Party Is Winning Gay Support,” *Buzzfeed News* (Feb. 2, 2017).

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek recently noted how remarkable it seems today that overcoming gender segregation in bathrooms was the most divisive national issue just a few months ago. “On the websites of white American nationalists, LGBT Pride pennants are now sold together with the Confederate flag,” he remarks. “The rainbow flag is whiter than many think.”¹⁹ It is thus not so surprising that one of the alt-right agitators drawing the most attention today, Milo Yiannopoulos, is openly gay. He recently

19. Slavoj Žižek, “Zukunft nach Trump: Mehr Selbstkritik, bitte!” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Feb. 3, 2017).

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created a scholarship called “The Privilege Grant” exclusively for straight white men designed to put them “on equal footing with their female, queer and ethnic minority classmates.” (Never mind that people of Jewish origin like himself *were* minorities in very recent history.) He has joked that “in today’s permissive culture, it is easier to be an outrageously gay man than it is to present with the symptoms of so-called toxic masculinity,” leading him to try to become straight: “I want to feel oppressed again!”²⁰ This provides a similar lesson to the popular photo from the Women’s March on Washington: In the background, three white women in pink “pussy hats” cluelessly take selfies with the Capitol; just in front of them, marching, the black activist Angela Peoples appears in a “Stop Killing Black People” hat, holding a sign reading “Don’t Forget: White Women Voted for Trump.”

20. Milo Yiannopoulos, “I’m Sooo bored of being gay,” *Breitbart* (April 14, 2015).

These cases just scratch the surface of the contradictions of “identity politics” today. But there is no way of resolving them, since the terms of that entire discourse are contrived and false. The only way forward is to cast out new lines of force through coalitions that cut across divisions intended to weaken the opposition. The massive and diverse demonstrations at airports across the country in response to Trump’s anti-Muslim travel ban both won back the media spotlight for Americans standing up for civil liberties and in several cases also led to the release of detainees, physically disrupting the racist “business as usual” of the Department of Homeland Security. These new coalitions have taught us that “solidarity... means acting from the recognition that you have been pitted against someone who is not your enemy by someone who is.”²¹

21. Sarah Levy, “The Left Can’t Be Submissive,” *Socialist Worker* (Jan. 25, 2017).

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Where does this leave the intellectual today? The intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers recently debunked the conventional use of the term “post-truth”: “We do not live in an era stripped of truths. We live, to the contrary, in a political-cultural moment saturated with competing claims on truth, each insisting on its veracity. We have contrived to construct an open marketplace of truths, and it is not a happy state.”²² Rodgers’s fix is not as simple as re-educating consumers of media, for the problem strikes to the

22. Daniel Rodgers, “When Truth becomes a Commodity,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 15, 2017).

Look at that
magnificent head!



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root of the monetized and ratings-driven networks that create truth today. “As long as we can click on the truths we want,” he writes, “as long as truth is imagined as a desire satisfied in a politically and commercially saturated market, we will have a superabundance of facts that people hold as true. Everyone will get what he wants, and the public—and its trust in truth—will fall apart.” This predicament, while exacerbated by the internet, is not as new as those who blame “postmodernism”

or “relativism” for our intellectual situation have alleged. Adorno complained already in the 1940s that “there are no longer, for the intellectual, any given categories,” and that “bustle endangers concentration with a thousand claims.”²³ When nothing seems true, all that remains is the cacophony of social reality. But Adorno implores us to see that this reality is not *true* in any normative sense just because it simply *is*. On the contrary, it is a lie because it presents the contingencies and injustices of the world as it is as absolute, as the only way things might be.

23. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 29.

My own post-truth moment struck when I began to read up on the white nationalist alt-right leader Richard Spencer (a.k.a. the punched Nazi). Why? Not just because I am ashamed of his racist rhetoric. Not just because I am ashamed that in the days after Trump’s election he led a room of white men to perform the Hitler salute with cries of, “Hail Trump, hail our movement, hail victory!” It is because if Spencer had continued with his studies, we’d be colleagues.

Before his rise to alt-right fame, Spencer attended the University

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of Chicago and earned a master's degree in humanities. I recently heard that his thesis supervisor, German professor David Levin, found the thesis unscholarly and riddled with errors of judgment: C-level work. Its subject? None other than Adorno, whom Spencer allegedly claimed "was afraid to admit how much he loved the music of Wagner because Wagner was an anti-semitic championed by the Nazis."²⁴ One critic derives a "menacing" conclusion from this bizarre reading: that "Spencer's claim that Adorno later came to admire Wagner's famously anti-Semitic thought insinuated that if a Jew could appreciate that discourse, it might have some validity."²⁵ Such a facile reduction of criticism to anti-semitism would seem to fulfill Adorno's own fears about the reification of thought under late capitalism. It typifies what the renowned Frankfurt School historian Martin Jay has called "the transformation of 'the Frankfurt School' into a kind of vulgar meme, a charged unit of cultural meaning that reduces all the complexities of its intellectual history into a sound-bite sized package available to be plugged into a paranoid narrative."²⁶

Jay wrote this after being deceived into giving an interview about the Frankfurt School's Marxism for what turned out to be a right-wing conspiracy theory film about how the "cultural Marxism" the School developed was a form of "leftist thought-control" operating under the name of political correctness. As difficult as it is to understand such an appropriation, Jay writes, it is "even harder to imagine a way to counter it."

Another of Spencer's mentors, Paul Gottfried, is the son of Hungarian Jews who fled the Holocaust. He studied under the far-left Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse and yet, by the end of his career, was described as a "right-wing proponent of the Frankfurt school" and a founder of "paleoconservatism."²⁷ We see an equally strange confluence of leftist thought and the alt-right in the figure of Julia Hahn, a graduate of the UChicago class of 2015 who has recently been hired as special assistant to Trump. She has been dubbed "Bannon's Bannon," a figure whose views are so far-right that they "will make Bannon look moderate."²⁸ How does someone who once called the leftist queer theory of Leo Bersani "hugely inspirational" become a reporter at *Breitbart* and then an advisor to Trump's deeply homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic team

24. Josh Harkinson, "Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power," *Mother Jones* (Oct. 27, 2016).

25. Talya Zax, "Richard Spencer's Master's Thesis Was an Anti-Semitic Critique — of a Jewish Philosopher," *The Forward* (Jan. 17, 2017).

26. Martin Jay, "Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment: The Frankfurt School as Scapegoat of the Lunatic Fringe," *Salmagundi* (Fall 2010/Winter 2011).

27. Jacob Siegel, "The Alt-Right's Jewish Godfather," *Tablet* (Nov. 29, 2016).

28. Andrew Marantz, "Becoming Steve Bannon's Bannon," *New Yorker* (Feb. 13, 2017).

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by age twenty-five? Aside from sheer opportunism, what would lead someone from a Jewish background to associate with so many shameless anti-semites? At some point the cables got crossed.

Hahn is only the last in a series of UChicago alumni that challenge our assumptions about the merits of liberal education. “Not to wax too poetic about academia,” reflected Hahn’s classmate Eliza Brown, “but part of the idea of learning the canon is that it will, ultimately, make you a better person.”²⁹ Hahn forces us to rethink these assumptions. A similar disillusionment has followed the university history professor Rachel Fulton Brown’s recent confession that she “loves Milo” on platforms ranging from her blog, to the Divinity School’s website, to *Breitbart*. Brown, a historian of Christianity in the Middle Ages, praised Milo’s religiosity (he always wears two crosses), truth-telling, free speech advocacy, and the fact that he is, like herself, “a natural contrarian.”³⁰ Never mind his incendiary misogyny and Islamophobia and his defense of pedophilia. After reading Brown’s articles, a friend of mine wrote that he was “distraught” to discover that the person he called “certainly the best professor I had during my four years at the University” also had “this kind of political thought... hiding behind her academic work.” He had even read her blog before, but never suspected *this*. “I don’t know who this person is.”³¹

29. See Marantz.

30. Rachel Fulton Brown, “I Love Milo,” *Fencing Bear at Prayer* blog (Feb. 1, 2017).

31. Overheard at UChicago, Facebook group, (Feb. 18, 2017).

A profile of Spencer claims that he “knows that a white ethnostate is at most a distant dream, but,” echoing Bannon, “his more immediate desire is to shift the bounds of accepted political discourse.”³² He does this, like Milo, in large part through lectures to university students. Spencer is himself a product of an elite humanistic education. He studied avant-garde theatre at the University of Virginia and there discovered the writings of Nietzsche, whose “unapologetically elitist embrace of ‘great men’” Spencer embraced. He was then, it seems, drawn to Chicago for its historic ties to Leo Strauss, a conservative philosopher who has been called the “fascist godfather of the neocons” who urged the U.S. into the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars. We have to reckon with the fact that best of American liberal education churned out all of these figures, and that our universities are in no small degree implicated by their present intellectual undertakings.

32. See Harkinson.

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Spencer says he left graduate school “to pursue a life of thought-crime.” The question for the intellectual today is: what is the opposite of thought-crime, and how do we give it a public platform? Rodgers suggests that intellectual rehabilitation would, above all, “require a renewed commitment to truth’s complexity and the processes by which one searches for it.” Social reality in a pluralistic society will always be *complex*, as will its very representation amidst competing interests. The Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci famously wrote that “all men are intellectuals ...but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”³³ Hence it is more appropriate to speak of *intellectual responsibility* than restrict the task of thinking to a learned caste of *intellectuals*. With this said, I want to propose that at all levels, and at minimum, intellectual responsibility today means recognizing the increasing complexity of social life.

33. Antonio Gramsci, “Prison Notebooks,” in *An Anthology of Western Marxism*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 115.

The literature scholar Eduardo Cadava argued in a recent roundtable on rethinking the humanities in the era of Trump that despite important opportunities for activism, someone needs to continue “doing what we do”—thinking and teaching. One of the vital fruits of humanistic inquiry, as he put it, is the patience “to endure complexity.” From literature as well as from philosophy or music or history, one learns that the simplest story is rarely the truest one. David Devries, a Dean of Undergraduate Education at Cornell wrote last year that the defining feature of a liberal arts education is that it “equips one to be comprehensively alone.” He ponders, “Late at night, once the computers have shut down and the smartphones have stopped buzzing and televisions have gone dark and the rooms have settled into their creaking recovery from the day’s bustle, once you are finally alone with yourself, what will sustain you?”³⁴ Filling that void is what should motivate us as thinkers. In *How to Be Alone*, Jonathan Franzen similarly writes that he aims “to write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them,” but thereby aims to foster “a community of readers and writers,” in which members recognize each other by the fact “that nothing in the world seems simple to them.” This entails, he writes, “the reclamation of a sense of history,” the knowledge that there is more to human experience than life’s immediacy.³⁵

34. David Devries, “The Consolations of an Occupied Mind,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 10, 2016).

35. Jonathan Franzen, *How to Be Alone* (New York: FSG, 2002), pp. 84, 90, 93.

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Embracing complexity has a long legacy in the humanities. Michel Foucault translated Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" to speak to his own time as follows:

*The thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.*³⁶

Ironically, such a critique of tradition also demands a deep appreciation of history. Said wrote that intellectual dissent "involves what Foucault once called 'a relentless erudition,' scouring alternative sources, exhuming buried documents, reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories."³⁷ Foucault's project of genealogy traces historical differences over time in order to emphasize the contingency of the present—using "detailed archival research to singularize and 'event-alize' our relation to the historically determined forms in which we live and think."³⁸ Institutions like prisons and categories like madness are modern inventions with "chance beginnings" enacted about by people like us. They are not universally true but utterly contingent. By denaturalizing present modes of thought, Foucault cleared room for alternatives that might displace them.

Said noted that the tendency to see the world *critically*, as fundamentally strange, comes more instinctively to those who have experienced exile—literal, in Said and Adorno's cases, or social, on account of Foucault's homosexuality. From the exilic standpoint, Said writes, "you tend to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way," to see "situations



36. Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment," *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 32–50.

37. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. xviii.

38. John Rajchman, introduction to Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

All creation of every craft is a kind of poetry.

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as contingent, not as inevitable, look at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible.”³⁹ Intellectuals are thus tasked to open the horizon of social possibilities beyond the merely existent. As Adorno put it, “Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway.”⁴⁰ Given this imperative, it is crucial that we remain open to exilic modes of thought today, including those awaiting entry at our borders.

39. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp. 60–61.

40. Theodor Adorno, “Resignation,” p. 292.

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It remains a daunting question in our moment of contingency what kind of world we want to follow from the present one, but we should at least resist complacent calls for a “return to reason.” A recent *New Yorker* cartoon captures the problem. A man stands up backwards on his seat on an airplane and raises his hand as he addresses his fellow passengers: “These smug pilots have lost touch with regular passengers like us. Who thinks I should fly the plane?” Everyone raises their hand enthusiastically. When the cartoon was published, Trump had just nominated several cabinet members who had previously worked to abolish the federal agencies they will now run. It seems to perfectly capture the anti-expert currents of present populist fervor. But many on the Left were quick to object to the analogy of a democracy to an airplane: Isn’t a democracy rule by the people, not just experts? Isn’t something amiss in the hasty defense of technocratic expertise the cartoon plays upon? Trump has been called the “anti-wonk,” and I’ve heard this quality lauded by Trump supporters in my own family: “When Hillary opens her mouth, I don’t understand a word; when Trump speaks, he talks directly to me.” One of the clearest signs of national division is that most people I know would say the opposite. For all her flaws, Hillary won the popular vote in part for speaking on complex issues with intellectual honesty, resisting the soundbites and false promises that distinguished Trump’s campaign as fantasy and fraud.

Yet what the Clinton campaign, pollsters, and, frankly, most of us, missed was a true read on the electorate’s pain and anger. In the days after the election I read and shared articles with titles like

“Trump won because college-educated Americans are out of touch,” which critiqued naïve liberal identity politics and glorified the left-behind white Middle-American worker. That moment has passed. Such naïve narratives served to give us a momentary sense of intellectual security by pointing to a single cause to explain Trump’s rise, and thereby dodged the challenging fact that we *didn’t* see this moment coming, and that no story is so simple. An important part of enduring complexity today means teaching ourselves to recognize but not succumb to the anger of the age of Trump. As Pankaj Mishra writes in his new book *Age of Anger*, “Our political and intellectual elites midwived the new ‘irrationalism’ through a studied indifference to the emotional dislocation and economic suffering induced by modern capitalism.”⁴¹ Hillary was not the only one. The Remain campaign in Brexit remained aloof, until it was too late, to anger that had already swept in populist, despotic governments from Poland and Hungary to Turkey and India. Enduring complexity means resisting political dogmatism, especially the paternalistic notion that you, like the pilots in the cartoon, already know what is best for people before listening to their voices, the same error behind the DNC’s premature support for Clinton over Bernie Sanders.

41. Pankaj Mishra, “Welcome to the age of anger,” *The Guardian* (Dec. 6, 2016).

Anti-intellectualism has a long history in American life. In our current wave, which began with the Tea Party movement in 2009, intellectuals, and especially professors, have been characterized as out of touch, lazy, and overpaid. Several state governments have attempted to reform public universities into job-preparation factories with little regard for research. In 2015, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker incited enormous backlash by proposing to delete references to “the search for truth” from the University of Wisconsin’s mission statement. Known as the Wisconsin Idea, the document dates from 1904 and has been hailed as a model for public education nationally for claiming that “the borders of the University are the borders of the state.” In place of pursuing “instruction, research, extended training and public service designed to educate people and improve the human condition,” Walker saw the system as tasked primarily “to meet the state’s workforce needs.”⁴² The next year, he attracted still more scorn for effectively abolishing tenure by wresting control over hiring decisions and the continued existence

42. Dan Simmons, “Scott Walker backtracks from striking ‘truth,’ ‘human condition’ from Wisconsin Idea,” *Wisconsin State Journal* (Feb. 5, 2015).

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of academic departments away from the faculty government and to a “Board of Regents” that he appoints. Neither the faculty nor the administration now dictate the university’s priorities. Hailed by Walker as a victory that would make college more affordable, Walker’s meddling ironically cost the system an additional \$23.6 million in the first year alone in increases in salaries and research funding needed to retain the system’s faculty from being poached by other universities. The next year, the university dropped out of the top-five research institutions in the U.S. for the first time in forty-five years. Take note: this is what the destruction of public education looks like.

In such a climate, one can see how the humanities, considered frivolous, are first to be cut. In 2016, Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin proposed revising state funding for public universities to subsidize only those programs with career outcomes for graduates that fit the state’s priorities. “All the people in the world who want to study French literature can do so,” he said, “they’re just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayers like engineers will be, for example.”⁴³ Bevin, it was noted, majored in East Asian studies at a cushy private liberal arts college. (Walker didn’t graduate from his private college.) This attack on university autonomy is sure to continue, with federal support, under Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. We have already seen Trump’s proposal to abolish the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which funds PBS and National Public Radio). Together, these programs account for less than *one tenth of one percent* of the federal budget. Their destruction or privatization would do little to save money, and much to eviscerate the “public wisdom” upon which, as the NEH’s mission statement notes, democracy depends. These are all battles in a larger war in which, since 2008, government funding for public universities has shrunk by nearly \$10 billion, with per-pupil spending falling 18 percent.⁴⁴ The student debt crisis is the most obvious outcome of this trend, but truth also numbers among its casualties.

43. Patricia Cohen, “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding,” *New York Times* (Feb. 21, 2016).

44. “Meritocratic Myths,” Tanner Howard, *Jacobin* (Feb. 18, 2017).

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida interrogated the problem of university autonomy in a 1980 lecture he delivered at Columbia University for its graduate school’s centennial. Drawing

upon Kant's 1798 work *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Derrida asks, What are universities for? Whom do they represent? To whom are they responsible?⁴⁵ In contrast to Kant's ideal of human freedom as *autonomy*, universities (public, in Kant's Prussia) are structurally *heteronomous*, being answerable to the states that found them. With public legitimation comes public responsibility. Yet Kant insists that if universities are to be guardians of truth, only those within the university have the authority to regulate them. While states have the power to charter universities, Kant also asks that governmental power create the conditions for a *counterpower* that guarantees the university the freedom to come to its own conclusions about the true and the false. Among the faculties, philosophy, as the farthest removed from the worldly influence of commerce and state, occupies a privileged role. Both Kant and Derrida defend the university's indispensable role in resisting authoritarianism by allowing subjects to think freely and confer with others: "The university is there *to tell the truth*, to judge, to criticize in the most rigorous sense of the term." This mission is actively undermined by laws like one the House of Representatives passed in February, 2016, deeming government-funded science "in the natural interest." Intended to win back the public's support for research, the law plays upon a conservative suspicion that if "research comes from a university, it must be biased."⁴⁶

45. Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties," *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Richard Rand and Amy Wygant (Stanford University Press, 2004).

46. Peter Moskowitz, "The Campus Free Speech Battle You're Not Seeing" (Feb. 13, 2017).

Despite this higher mission, universities are, of course, fallible and flawed institutions. They can just as well serve as "a safeguard for the most totalitarian of social forms as a place for the most intransigently liberal resistance to any abuse of power." Derrida thus writes: "Today the minimal responsibility and in any case the most interesting one, the most novel and strongest responsibility, for someone belonging to a research or teaching institution, is perhaps to make such a political implication, its system and its *aporias*, as clear and thematic as possible." Universities must also tell the truth about themselves, and interrogate *their own* hierarchies and inequalities using all available means. A recent study reveals, for example, that an elite institution as wealthy as Washington University in St. Louis enrolls three-and-a-half times as many students from the top 1% income bracket (21.7%) as from the bottom

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47. "Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60," *New York Times* (Jan. 18, 2017).

60% (6.1%).⁴⁷ The numbers for UChicago are less astonishing, but over half of students there come from the top 15% of median family income. Such inequalities expose the myth of meritocracy in U.S. higher education. At the opposite end of the spectrum, of the ten most upwardly mobile institutions—colleges that move the most students from the bottom 40% of income to the top 40%—eight are public and five are part of the City University of New York (once hailed as “the Harvard of the proletariat”). Yet even at the latter, public funding is slipping. Between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of funding derived from student tuition at senior colleges nearly doubled, from 21% to 41%. And in 2016, Governor Cuomo proposed cutting \$485 million—a third of the school’s funding—from its budget.⁴⁸

48. See Howard.

Amidst the conflicts of the authority and responsibility of universities, Derrida introduces the Greek concept *mochlos*, a kind of lever or wedge, which he defines as “something to lean on for forcing and displacing.” As he elaborates: “When one asks how to orient oneself in history, morality, or politics, the most serious discords and decisions have to do less often with ends, it seems to me, than with *levers*.” Universities and those within them are embodied within particular institutional contexts, each with their own political levers to draw upon. From their unique access to communal insight and social resources, pressures can and must be levied. The effectiveness of the sanctuary campus movement to protect students at risk of deportation and those intervening to prevent ICE deportations speaks to the need to protect the most vulnerable among us.

In a recent letter to Trump signed by the presidents of forty-eight universities, Princeton University President Christopher Eisgruber urged the revoking of the President’s executive action, which “unfairly targets seven predominantly Muslim countries in a manner inconsistent with America’s best principles and greatest traditions,” charging it with “dimming the lamp of liberty and staining the country’s reputation.”⁴⁹ Eisgruber considered the effects on a personal level: “My mother’s family fled first from Germany and then from France—they were Jewish and they fled when the Nazis came to power—and they made it to this country in May of 1940. If we had a refugee ban in place in May of 1940 and my mother and her family had been turned away, they almost certainly

49. Abby Jackson, “Princeton, Harvard, and dozens of other top American colleges delivered Trump a searing letter accusing him of ‘staining the country’s reputation,’” *Business Insider* (Feb. 3, 2017).

would have been murdered.” Even at that time, immigration to the U.S. was so restrictive that the U.S. turned away the *St. Louis*, a ship with hundreds of Jewish refugees on board back to Europe, where most were murdered. A public opinion poll from January 20, 1939 reports that 61% of American respondents rejected taking in just ten thousand Jewish refugee children, and just 30% supported it. Taking the Holocaust as a moral touchstone for the Trump era should point us to the fact that so much more could have been done, then as now, to reduce the suffering of millions with the stroke of a pen. There is evidence that efforts like Eisgruber’s have paid off: In its decision to reject Trump’s travel ban, the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals cited students with rights to education and their universities among those wronged.⁵⁰ But these university presidents didn’t act alone: they had to be compelled to action by countless petitions and demonstrations by their students who stood up for those whose voices are not heard.

50. Blumenstyk, Najmabadi, and Brown, “Court Rebukes Trump’s Travel Ban, and Harm to Universities Plays a Key Role,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 9, 2017).

It can seem absurd to remain calm in such circumstances. Here historical precedent should keep us on edge. Trump may not be a fascist yet, but he effectively will be, the historian Timothy Snyder said in a recent interview, if he takes violent actions against his opponents.⁵¹ Snyder notes that Hitler was democratically elected with just under 37% of the vote in 1932. But his power was still largely checked until the German parliament, the Reichstag, burned down on February 27, 1933. The cause of the fire is unknown (it may have been the Nazis themselves), but the Nazis blamed it on their political adversaries, using the fire as a pretext to arrest leftists and send them to concentration camps. The Nazi party masterfully capitalized upon this crisis to pass the Reichstag Fire Decree “for the protection of people and state.” This soon led to the so-called Enabling Act, which allowed Hitler to rule by decree and revoked the civil liberties of free expression and due process. Fear generated by crisis was essential to establishing the Nazi dictatorship.

51. Timothy Snyder speaking with Jacob Weisberg, “His Rise to Power,” *Slate* (Nov. 22, 2016).

What will be our Reichstag Fire? The analogy may seem alarmist, but the reality is that, if recent history is any guide, chaos-inducing acts of mass-violence will occur in the U.S. in the next four years. Whether it is really “terror” or not hardly matters; Trump has demonstrated his ability to spin events in any direction that suits

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him. Even when there are no *disasters* (to use a favorite Trumpism), we have seen administration invent them in places ranging from Bowling Green to Sweden. Trump can, with renewed force, instill panic among the American people, and target scapegoats who do not fit with his image of America. Remember that we are dealing with the same Trump who wrote in 1989 that “civil liberties end when an attack on our safety begins.”⁵²

52. Trump wrote this in a 1989 full-page ad in the *New York Times*, cited in Timothy Snyder, “The Reichstag Warning,” *New York Review of Books Daily* (Feb. 26, 2017).

53. Paul Krugman, “When the Fire Comes,” *New York Times* (Feb. 10, 2017).

Paul Krugman recently challenged his readers to know what they will do “When the Fire Comes.” He observed that, as in Germany in 1933, “After 9/11, the overwhelming public response” was not critique but “to rally around the commander in chief.”⁵³ Krugman and Snyder raise some of the most important questions facing us: What will you do when disaster strikes? Before you mobilize, will you have done the intellectual work necessary to shield yourself and those around you from succumbing to the panic that can only play into Trump’s hands? Snyder stresses this last point by turning the tables on Trump: “If a terror attack happens in the United States, that is simply the Trump administration failing to keep its most basic promise. It is not a reason to suspend the rights of Americans or declare have a state of emergency. History teaches us the tricks of authoritarians. We can’t allow ourselves to fall for them.”⁵⁴

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54. Timothy Snyder, “We have at most a year to defend American democracy, perhaps less,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Feb. 7, 2017).

In lieu of a senior thesis, students in UChicago’s Fundamentals: Issues and Texts major attempt to answer the “fundamental question” they have spent four years reflecting upon. To my question, “What is the human response to catastrophe?” the historian David Nirenberg posed the following prompt: “Somewhere Nietzsche writes that a bourgeois housewife feels as much pain from a hangnail, as a bushman does when he loses a leg. And some Spanish wit once observed that ‘people who live in a golden age complain that everything looks yellow.’ Which is all to say: who decides what constitutes catastrophe or crisis? And how do they decide it?” I responded with a dialogue between two texts I had studied closely: *Hamlet* and Primo Levi’s philosophical reflections on his time in Auschwitz, *The Drowned and the Saved*. I wondered what allows Primo Levi to describe Auschwitz as his “university” while Hamlet

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in a situation of ghastly but predictable courtly corruption falls into despair. How can Hamlet cry that “time is out of joint,” calling his court “a prison,” while Levi investigates Auschwitz as an “excellent ‘laboratory’” of human experience? What does Hamlet know about the “thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” and man’s status as the “quintessence of dust,” when he has experienced but the loss of one man, compared to Levi’s thousands, and by unthinkable methods? What makes Hamlet’s world “a world where one has lost one’s way,” when outside the court nothing seems to have changed? Elsinore is no “*anus mundi*.” But perhaps one ought to reverse the question: How is Levi able to redeem moments of humanity amidst the suffering of Auschwitz, to admit, “luckily...there are among us those who have the virtue and the privilege of extracting, isolating those instants of happiness, of enjoying them fully, as though they were extracting pure gold from dross”?⁵⁵

55. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

What counts as a “catastrophe” is, I realized, almost entirely relative: Catastrophe comes the Greek for “overturning,” but what is overturned always depends on context. The same destruction and loss of life can be more or less catastrophic depending on the world-order it disturbs. Because we have a limited capacity to care about the suffering of others, it is always a matter of politics which suffering we are affected by and mobilize against. Like any other event, the

Holocaust, now considered the catastrophe of the twentieth century *par excellence*, had to be *made* into a catastrophe by outspoken victims, journalists, lawyers, historians, and public intellectuals.⁵⁶ Before the 1970s, this now-omnipresent event didn’t even have a common name.

56. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

I became fixated on figures like Adorno, who in the spirit of a public intellectual went on German public radio in the 1950s and ’60s to insistently *remind* willfully forgetful Germans that Auschwitz was the moral catastrophe everyone now takes it to be. It is precisely the fact that social conditions in West Germany had not fundamentally changed since



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the Nazi era—that another Auschwitz was still possible—that was, for Adorno, catastrophic. After the war, he remarked that “fascism lives on” because though the swastikas were wiped away, “the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.”⁵⁷ Indeed, while Adorno is most famous for his remark that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, he later claimed that by this he meant “not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam.” He added that Auschwitz “form[ed] a kind of coherence, a hellish unity” with the atom bomb and “torture as a permanent institution.”⁵⁸ While preserving the uniquely persecutory history of the Holocaust, Adorno was politically determined to link its barbarity with that of other events that took place long after it.

The work of calling catastrophes to public attention is a courageous kind of intellectual activism still urgently needed today. In a conversation with former UChicago Dean of Humanities Danielle Allen, Cornel West recently remarked in an Adornian spirit:

There's never been a “negro problem” in America; it's been a catastrophe visited on black people. Slavery wasn't a “negro problem.” Jim Crow wasn't a “negro problem.” New Jim Crow—not a “negro problem.” Ferguson's not a “problem,” it's a catastrophe—there's human beings down there!... “Jewish problem”? No, a catastrophe: 1492 to 1945, the expulsion of Jews from Spain and indescribable evil of the Holocaust—that's a catastrophe! “Palestinian problem,” that's not a problem: the Israeli occupation is a catastrophe. You have to talk about it in those terms even as you keep track of the humanity of our precious Jewish brothers and sisters who have to deal with 2000 years of catastrophic backdrop. Do we have the spiritual courage to love both Jewish brothers and sisters and Palestinian brothers and sisters, and do it in such a way that we preserve morality, spirituality, and integrity?⁵⁹

Knowing that we live in a catastrophic world changes the political demands placed upon us. West likes to quote Socrates in his defense in Plato's *Apology*: “The cause of my unpopularity is *parrhesia*—plain speech, truthful speech. It'll get you in trouble!” Especially among

57. Adorno, *Can one Live after Auschwitz?* p. 13.

58. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 101.

59. Cornel West, “A Conversation with Cornel West,” lecture sponsored by the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University (Oct. 5, 2016).

historians, opposition to this kind of analogy remains fierce. It may seem to some to commit the same error as Trump’s now-infamous statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day, which “all lives matter’d” the Holocaust by failing to mention Jews.⁶⁰ Martin Shuster, for example, condemns the statement for “literally whitewashing” the Holocaust and suggesting, in entirely ahistorical terms, “a thoroughly mythological approach to history as a narrative of the struggle between good and evil, innocent and not.”⁶¹ But, with West, we need to be able to recognize historical difference and at the same time recognize that suffering is not a zero-sum game. Snyder has explicitly called for Germans to “be generous with their history and help others to learn how republics collapse” because “right now the comparison we need to ponder is between the treatment of Muslims and the treatment of Jews.”⁶² Learning from past catastrophes certainly requires historical care, but it also demands the intellectual courage to decry injustice in every form.

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John Stuart Mill remarks in his autobiography that “no great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible, until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought.”⁶³ This, like Obama’s ocean liner, takes time. Žižek has thus rebuked the call for “an immediate counteroffensive” as “an echo of Trump’s own anti-intellectual attitudes.” He regrets that Trump has given people *of all political stripes* the excuse not to have to think, but insists that “the urgency of the situation is not an excuse: *especially* when time is pressing you have to think.”⁶⁴ As for his own plan of action, Žižek remarks, “You know what Lenin did, in 1915, when World War I exploded? He went to Switzerland and started to read Hegel.”⁶⁵

In the interview quoted at the opening of this essay, Adorno famously declared in the midst of the 1968 protests of German university students that he was “not afraid of the ivory tower.”⁶⁶ In a time of social unrest, he unapologetically claimed to be “a theoretical human being” whose next project—it was to be his last—was a hefty tome on aesthetic theory. While his students took to the streets demanding control over their own education and the denazification

60. Jordan Weissmann, “Team Trump just All Lives Matter’d the Holocaust,” *Slate* (Jan. 28, 2017).

61. Shuster, “Holocaust Statements and Identity in/of the World.”

62. Timothy Snyder, “We have at most a year to defend American democracy, perhaps less,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Feb. 7, 2017).

63. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London, 1873), p. 239.

64. Žižek, “Zukunft nach Trump: Mehr Selbstkritik, bitte!”

65. Slavoj Žižek, “Philosopher Slavoj Žižek settles the ‘Is it OK to punch a Nazi?’ question once and for all,” *Quartz* (Jan. 27, 2017).

66. Adorno, “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower?” p. 233.

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of German universities, Adorno refused to sign a letter of solidarity even though many protestors claimed his work as an inspiration for their activism. He said, “Even though I had established a theoretical model, I could not have foreseen that people would try to implement it with Molotov cocktails... In my writings, I have never offered a model for any kind of action or for some specific campaigns.” Yet the alternative is not resigned scholasticism: flip to any page of Adorno’s work, and you’ll find him deeply engaged with social conditions and attuned to the horror of suffering around the globe. As he explained, “I believe that a theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to praxis from the start.” He rejected above all the students’ violent methods—“the half-crazed activity of throwing rocks at university institutes”—and criticized their “prioritization of tactics” at the expense of critical thought, charging them of “actionism” and “pseudo-activity.”⁶⁷ One thinks of the old joke that UChicago is a place in which one asks, “That’s great in practice, but how does it work in theory?” Adorno asked whether, because critical thought, unlike politics, “effects change precisely by remaining theory,” one could not also say that theory “is also a genuine form of praxis.”

67. Adorno, “Resignation,” *Critical Models* (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 291.

Judith Butler reprises Adorno for our moment of protest in her latest book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Responding to Adorno’s cynical claim that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” Butler asks an important question of those who might attempt to resist by removing themselves from corrupt society out



of a sense of moral purity: “If I refuse that part of myself that is complicit with the bad life, have I then made myself pure? Have I intervened to change the structure of that social world from which I withhold myself, or have I isolated myself?”⁶⁸ Butler argues that movements like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street,

68. Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 217–18.

I always do what you advise.

and anti-Trump protests are not simply “resistance” movements, for they “say no to one way of life at the same time that they say yes to another.” Embodied and plural, these struggles *performatively enact* “what it might mean to live a good life in the sense of a livable life” today. Beyond their symbolic force, such movements can themselves concretely help “produce the conditions under which vulnerability and interdependency become livable.” Butler fills in one of Adorno’s biggest blind spots by upholding a mode of political praxis that is also reflexive and self-critical.

Invoking Adorno, Martin Shuster exhorted in the days after the election, “Understand that the thing that will be most under threat—in addition to just raw, suffering bodies—is the imagination. Our powers for imagining things differently will be greatly compromised. It is up to us to maintain them, to train them, and to consistently work them. Start now.”⁶⁹ Upholding the imagination against despair and capitulation to the status quo seems to me the single most important responsibility of intellectual life today, for it is the precondition that makes all other forms of solidarity and resistance conceivable. The rest follows from Adorno’s insight that “what is must be changeable if it is not to be all.”⁷⁰ It is in this spirit that Said wrote that “real intellectuals constitute a clerisy, very rare creatures indeed, since what they uphold are eternal standards of truth and justice that are precisely *not* of this world.”⁷¹ Truth-telling against truth’s declared enemies, keeping those in power responsible for their words, bracing one’s mind in solitude to tackle complexity of life in common, employing all levers available, resisting false divisions and enacting new forms of life through proactive, performative solidarity—this is the tall order of intellectual responsibility called for in the era of Trump.

69. Martin Shuster, “Eleven Theses on Trump(ism),” public Facebook post (Nov. 9, 2016).

70. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 398.

71. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 5.