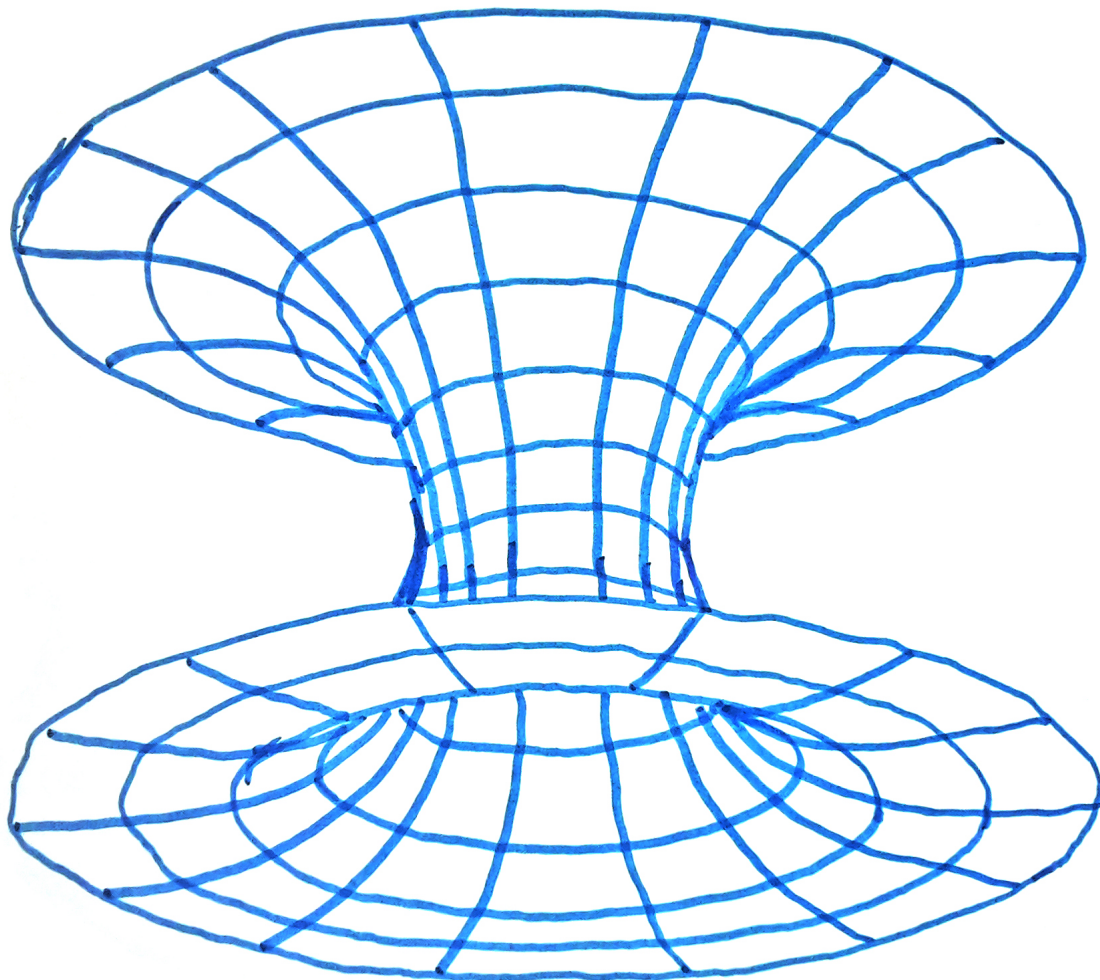


# **A FRAGMENTED SELF CONCERNED WITH TOGETHERNESS**

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## Introduction

All characters in my books, whether they are successful or not, are pushed into that place where all the definitions about themselves become suspicious.<sup>1</sup>

The text you are about to read is a kind of membrane between the personal and the political. It is a constant flipping between inside and outside, rationality and emotionality. Its underlying question is, if it is possible to find togetherness from the point of today's hyper-individuality. This question is partly triggered by experiences in discursive group situations, mostly within the context of the arts. In such situations one often encounters a lot of sincere and clever analysis of today's world and efforts to connect that information to utopian dreaming<sup>2</sup>, finding other sources of support<sup>3</sup> and inevitably the question: how to be together. But as soon as a gathering is over, usually everyone goes back to their private life, governed by the fantasy of individuality.

The contradictory character of this text lays in its suspicion towards itself: Towards its criticality and its emotionality. It wants to be personal, which would mean it was political, but that point of departure could be deceiving, as the personal could maybe just be: Private. This text would like to scream: „Privatisation is the all-devouring monster-pet of capitalism!“ Ironically, it is written in a phase of private isolation, due to the Corona virus measures during the months March - May 2020.

This text longs for a power that is not exercised hierarchically, but that is fostered on the bottom, based on shared needs and shared precariousness. A power that can embrace and carry the fragmentary state of today's reality, instead of using this state to remain in control.

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison interviewed by Mavis Nicholson, 1988. YouTube, accessed 19 March 2020, <https://youtu.be/UAqB1SgVaC4?t=865>

<sup>2</sup> «A political analysis of depression might advocate revolution and regime change over pills, but in the world of Public Feelings there are no magic bullet solutions, whether medical or political, just the slow steady work of resilient survival, *utopian dreaming*, and other affective tools for transformation.» (Cvetkovich 2012, 2)

<sup>3</sup> «Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only *source of support*. » (Lorde 1984)

## I am a person's complete powerlessness before the universe

Drawing from research about primates such as the bonobos and contemporary indigenous oral societies which she studied directly, Almudena Hernando traces the development of individuation in her book, *The Fantasy of Individuality*. She describes that in all times of human existence, bonds were the condition for survival, as they form the base for social cohesion and group cooperation. Although this still counts for today, the importance of bonds is not understood in that same way, as now it would be possible to replace them entirely with - money. The immediate experience of bonds between group members as a means of survival has disappeared. In hunter-gatherer societies, living in nature, bonds were inevitable. A person alone felt completely powerless before the world. Human life was defined by relationships because without them, human life was impossible. On that base humans understood and ordered the world. Hunter-gatherer groups attributed the only form of behaviour they knew – which was human behaviour – to the entire realm of existence: both human and nonhuman. Because of human's dependency on nonhuman nature – it provided food or took it away, it granted life and brought death – it was seen as extremely powerful and sacred. (Hernando 2017, 41-42)

As a result, these groups' self-perception operates through what I call *relational identity*. This consists in seeing oneself as a mere part of a greater unit—one's own group—to increase one's feeling of security and strength in the face of the completely uncontrollable forces of nature. This type of identity stems from these persons' inability to conceive of themselves beyond the closely knit fabric of relationships that they are part of. A fundamental nuance must be clarified here: relational identity does not only imply that the persons themselves give a great deal of importance to their relationships (as may be the case with individualized people) but that it is simply impossible for anyone to conceive of themselves outside of those relational bonds. (42)

Can you imagine existing like this? Somehow without yourself? Today, bliss means to get rid of yourself for some time. Be free from yourself. Getting lost in the moment. That is why I like it so much in places like this here. As I marvel at the trees I can just: be...

Is this wiggle of your eyebrows an expression of criticism?

Sure, it is not comparable. We cannot conceive how it must be to have so little control over the world. Hernando is a bit obsessed with the notion of control. What gets measured gets done, as they say in business. To control the world, you need technology. And she says that writing was one of the most important technologies to gain control over the world.

And women were excluded from the knowledge of writing for an extremely long time in history.

Since humans can write, they are able to establish a relationship to the world on a purely rational level. It means to have the ability to represent reality, to take on the agent position. To think of reality in abstract terms and understand its functioning. She says that writing is intrinsically associated with power over the represented reality. Here, on page 62: "This, added to the fact that knowledge is not transmitted through personal relationships as in oral cultures, but through isolation and abstraction, gradually increases the sense of individuality and power."

### Confused Authoritarianism

This connection between power and writing can create an overwhelming situation, because things are very complex. In the process of writing this text I found myself generating endless fragments and soon feeling lost and extremely powerless. My ambition seems mostly far ahead of my knowledge and skill and I felt *shattered like my text!*

My usual strategy to deal with the challenges of writing, is to make abrupt cuts and jumps, legitimated by the idea that the observers will make their own connections. This derives partly from making essayistic videos<sup>4</sup>, strongly influenced by the work of Chris Marker, who often emphasizes that the fragmentary nature of thought is precisely human and film as a medium can illustrate that. In a stream of consciousness, disparate images and sounds are combined so that the medium itself remains present and porous. Thereby, the agency of the viewer is activated. Every viewer makes their own film<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> I Will Not Imagine The Suffering of Others, 2013; Art Is Dead, 2014; The Drollinger Solution, 2016

<sup>5</sup> That is at least the hope of essayistic movie making. It might be argued that experimentally combining images, sound and narration is an even more overwhelming regime than the regime of a seemingly linear story telling. It is surely more demanding to watch such a film, because more information needs to be processed. Because of the overwhelming experience, manipulative and false information would be harder to detect. But traditionally, linear storytelling and the oversimplification of things, like stereotyping in advertisement, are the strategies for manipulation. Despite I do think that there is a danger of manipulation involved in essayistic video work – an example would be the work of Adam Curtis - it is still a more porous and open way that allows more autonomy to the viewer.

Does that also mean that every reader makes their own thesis? Would that not be beautifully poetic? And is that not how people usually converse? They tell each other little fragments that are part of bigger stories, and jump from subject to subject, sometimes triggered simply by the choice of words or by being remembered about something, having a hunch about something. Just, a text is not a conversation. Although I would like it to be so - porous and co-created like a situation. But it is a monologue that has to empathically imagine a reader. Take the reader by the hand, says my mentor (Wambacq, several times, 2020). Writing contains the desire of being understood, being accepted on the condition of being an authoritarian regime - is that not what an author is? And the disparate jumps and cuts will merely illustrate the confusions and ambitions of this regime.

### White Power

But also, almost everybody describes the process of writing as a struggle. Inner fears grow in proportion to the decline of outer ones, said Norbert Elias describing the civilization process<sup>6</sup>. It might represent more than a struggle with words, but also a struggle with power. What I want to describe and overcome, is what has been largely created and discussed by white men. The fact that Western society and its discourses have been defined and constructed to its biggest part by white men, can trigger the impulse that one should simply and quickly turn one's back to them. But that would mean to also turn my back to myself.

Patriarchy has been the dominant social system in all known history<sup>7</sup>. When being male intersects with being white, a whole new horizon of colonial and racial oppression comes forth. The term „white men“, therefore is associated with the group of people which has oppressed all other groups of people. White men are the ones who have forced their ideas onto the world without hesitating to use violence. I deny identification with the group „white men“, because of the centuries of atrocities that this group is responsible for. Nevertheless, I do not change my body, so despite my denial, I am identified as a white men. I am part of a group I do not want to be part of.

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<sup>6</sup> In «The Fantasy of Individuality», P. 58. Referring to: Elias, Norbert. 1994. *The civilizing process. The history of manners and state formation and civilization*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lacan says that “anxiety arises when the subject is confronted by the desire of the Other and does not know what object he is for that desire” In: Evans, Dylan. 1996. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, 2014, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*

In order to feel safe, I retreat into individuality. My role models, too - especially in the past - are highly individuated white men in stories and in history. Out of the group of white men stand individuals who become role models with whom I can identify, because they display good traits. They are humans with ethics and brains, and they are doers, using their hands. It might be argued that white men have to deny their belonging and see themselves only as individuals in order to deal with the atrocities that this group has fabricated in history. To not feel this historical guilt, they need to identify with their individual, good traits.

The fear of being identified by others with the group 'white men' is that of being guilty. Guilty of violence which starts from normalised utterings of everyday sexism and racism and that goes on to peaks in genocides. The outside identification 'white man' can be perceived as accusation, which can create a defence mechanism and with that, the impulse to fight. This can become a circle of confirmation of the violent nature of white men to the outside and the inside. Turned inward, it becomes part of the mechanisms of self-hatred and self-denial which fosters mistrust towards ones' own feelings and impulses. In my song "White Men with Guitars"<sup>8</sup>, I have tried to illustrate this split.

The first time I saw "American History X"<sup>9</sup> was in company of neo-Nazi Skinheads, in the youth house of a neighbouring village, where my friends and me would spend our weekends. They would cheer loudly when Edward Norton's character, Derek Vinyard says to a black man, Lawrence: "Put your fuckin' mouth on the curb", just before he kills him by stomping his head into the curb. My friends did not seem especially bothered by the presence of the Skinheads, and I was afraid to voice my discomfort with that situation. The only political discussion I remember from that time was that I said to my best friend: I am left. And he answered: I am right. When the Skinheads were there, they would play neo-Nazi punk rock and scream along the German lyrics: "Opa war Sturmführer bei der SS!"<sup>10</sup> The violent and racist atmosphere in which I found myself from time to time as a teenager still gives me a feeling of *Beklemmung* – which translates to English as "feeling of oppression".

Since then, whenever I can, I avoid being in groups of males, especially white males. And I do not want to be associated with them. To some extent this also means to leave group definition and belonging on the base of the body to people like these Skinheads or

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<sup>8</sup> Don't you ever listen to white men playing guitar. They will only comfort you and they are in the service of capitalist money-makers and bourgeois values, Roger F. «White Men With Guitars», 2016, on the album «The Rich Are the Problem (...)»

<sup>9</sup> American History X, 1998, directed by Tony Kane, written by David McKenna

<sup>10</sup> "Granddad was storm leader at the SS" This was a line from a song called "Sturmführer", by the German neo-Nazi band "Landser" on their 1997 album "Rock gegen Oben".

other groups and movements with racist and misogynist self-understandings which can be found in the “manosphere”<sup>11</sup>. For such reasons I think it would be healing to invest in an exchange with men, maybe to find out about new understandings of masculinity that embrace sensitivity. I believe that feminism offers a good ground to start this endeavour, in order to find bounds not in the narratives of “strength” or “survival of the fittest” but in the acceptance of one’s vulnerability and need for care.

### Precarious

In “State of Insecurity”, Isabell Lorey draws from Judith Butler’s “Precarious Life, Grievable Life”, using the term ‘precariousness’ to describe an existential state that constitutes life in general - whereas ‘precarity’ is designated as a relationship of inequality. Survival is dependent on social networks, sociality and the work of others. Due to their vulnerability and the impossibility of living a wholly autonomous life, humans – as well as non-humans – fundamentally depend on social structures. Hernando describes that as a persons’ powerlessness before the world. Lorey goes on to stress that without care and reproduction, life is impossible. “Precariousness relates not to life itself, but rather to the conditions of its existence; what is problematized here is not what makes everybody the same, but rather what is shared by all. (...) Sharing and separation have always already been inscribed in general and conditional precariousness: commonality and difference, conjunction and disjunction.” (Lorey 2012, 19)

Humans are mortal beings and their existence needs care. They cannot be completely protected from accidents and not from death, and in that way something like a life insurance “is nothing other than a fantasy of omnipotence”. Lorey follows Butler in describing that the knowledge of one’s own vulnerability is what constitutes the fear from others. Because each body finds itself potentially threatened by others who are precarious as well, forms of domination arise. And with them, the creation of precarity. (Lorey 2012, 20)

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<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia, accessed 8 May 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manosphere>



## #snobbery

In “The Century of the Self”, Adam Curtis narrates the rise of propaganda as a tool for the domination and control of the masses by referring to the story of Edward Bernays<sup>12</sup>. Bernays did not believe that people could make rational choices. In his book, „Propaganda“<sup>13</sup>, he lays out that there are only a few *intelligent* people who needed to “organise chaos”:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. (9)

[C]learly it is the intelligent minorities which need to make use of propaganda continuously and systematically. In the active proselytizing minorities in whom selfish interests and public interests coincide lie the progress and development of America. Only through the active energy of the intelligent few can the public at large become aware of and act upon new ideas. (31)

Bernays was hugely influenced by Walter Lippmann, who writes in “Public Opinion”<sup>14</sup> about the “manufacture of consent”:

The common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely, and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality. (310)

Such views describe the self-understanding of an elitist class. According to Noam Chomsky, they have a long history. In “Necessary Illusions”, he comments on Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>15</sup> who argued that “rationality belongs to the cool observers,” while “the proletariat” follows not reason but faith, based upon a crucial element of “necessary illusion.” This illusion would prevent the ordinary person from descending to “inertia.” So, first of all, “the stupidity of the average man” has to be recognized (Chomsky 1989, 14).

It might be interesting to reconstruct the development of such self-understanding. And ask, if it is a psychological distortion that happens with the taking on of power positions and how much it is inherent to individuality already. Hernando says that “individuality

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Curtis, *The Century of The Self*, Happiness Machines, 17 March 2002

<sup>13</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*, 1928

<sup>14</sup> Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 1922

<sup>15</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 1932

stems from the emotional distance opened up between a person and what they can control or know through reason.” (2017, 60) And how it is grounded merely in the default setting by which humans experience the world, described by David Foster Wallace:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute centre of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.<sup>16</sup>

Such a history would maybe have to include the self-designations of hunter-gatherer groups, for the names they give to themselves (Awá, Nukak, Q’eqchí’) “always mean the true human beings, the real people; the people vs the rest” (Hernando 2017, 43-44). Above I described how such groups explained the world according to their self-understanding. In so doing, they imposed their idea of the world onto the world. Part of the nature of power is, that it only wants to laugh at its own jokes (Sloterdijk 1983, 208)<sup>17</sup>. Maybe it cannot but only laugh at its own jokes, for it does not understand any other.

### The Hippie Problem

In 2012, when Tanja Schwarz and I were working on our movie “I will not imagine the suffering of others”, we were influenced especially by two white men: Chris Marker und Adam Curtis. Both masterfully operate with the power of film. Marker would narrate and portrait the defeat of the communist/socialist ideas. His films compress and radiate *left melancholy*. Not many moments in film stayed in my memory as persistent as two moments of „Le fonds de l’air est rouge“<sup>18</sup>.

The first one is the opening scene which is guided by the off voice of Simone Signoret who recalls seeing Sergei Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925). After only 36

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<sup>16</sup> David Foster Wallace, «This Is Water», commencement speech at Kenyon College, 21 May 2005

<sup>17</sup> «Zum Wesen der Macht gehört, dass sie nur über ihre eigenen Witze lachen mag.»

<sup>18</sup> «Le fonds de l’air est rouge», Engl.: «A Grin Without a Cat», referring to the cat in Lewis Carrol’s “Alice in Wonderland”, Chris Marker, 1977

seconds, the images of Eisenstein's film fall together with the voice and express the hope of communism in one word: BROTHERS! It is followed by an image of four hands raised in the air, showing the V sign, accompanied by a fanfare composed by Luciano Berio, a music that could as well be a socialist march. The edit then combines images of uprisings: the uprisings led by the mutineers in Eisenstein's film and the uprisings of the 60s and 70s student protests (Dubois 2002, 113). This combination of fictionalised and documentary images works perfectly to foster identification with the leftist struggle and create its history.

Later in the movie, Marker shows how relentless and violent these student protests were oppressed by the powers they rose up against. (State/Police) violence against (left) protest is a phenomenon that can be witnessed in many instances<sup>19</sup>. For example, the protesters of Occupy Wall Street in New York faced harsh and violent oppression in November 2011. It was just shortly before the movement, which had spread all over the world to protest against the financial market, saw a coordinated backlash. Around the same two-three days, the protest camps in several cities in the United States were evicted<sup>20</sup>. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2011, the Occupy Paradeplatz camp at Lindenhof in Zürich was also evicted. This is documented in our movie, "I will not imagine the suffering of others." Measured on the backlash that the Occupy movement faced, it is of no surprise that it was seen as the most significant uprising since the protests of 1968<sup>21</sup>. But once again in history, the powerful have forced their will onto the defiant ones. And the left - whose vision has become somehow confused by 2011, compared to the 1960s - retreated once again.

In the third part of „The Century of the Self“<sup>22</sup>, Adam Curtis thematizes the moment when the student revolts in the 60s and 70s were confronted with police oppression. Motivated by the insights<sup>23</sup>, that business manipulated individuals with the use of propaganda, and thereby brainwashed the masses into consumption, the leftist students (New Left) wanted to get rid of social control by overthrowing the state and corporations. They used the slogan: „There is a policeman inside all our heads, he must be destroyed“.

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<sup>19</sup> At this very moment, American protesters who rally against police violence and racism after the murder of George Floyd, are being hit by exactly that.

<sup>20</sup> Accessed 29 May 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/11/occupy-wall-street-faces-evictions/100189/>

<sup>21</sup> According to social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein. Found on the German Wikipedia page about Occupy Wall Street, accessed 13 May 2020, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy\\_Wall\\_Street](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street)

<sup>22</sup> Adam Curtis, The Century of The Self; There is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads: He Must Be Destroyed, 31 March 2002

<sup>23</sup> #snobbery in this text. Also put forward by Herbert Marcuse in "The One-Dimensional Man", 1964

Curtis chooses to narrate the student uprisings by focusing on the group “The Weathermen”<sup>24</sup>, which was a radical group which split from the organisation Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as a response to the Vietnam war. They began a series of bomb attacks on companies they believed were controlling people’s minds with consumer products and making the weapons that were used in Vietnam. Curtis shows a moving statement by a Weathermen member, Linda Evans. Her story is not delivered in the movie, but she was fighting against white oppression of African Americans and lesbian rights all of her life, at many points with the use of explosives, which led to her imprisonment in 1987. In 2001, Bill Clinton commuted Evan’s 40-year sentence to the 16 years already served. Since her discharge she is active for the rights of political prisoners<sup>25</sup>. In Curtis’ film, she is shown as a young radical displaying her ideas:

We want to live a life that is not based on materialistic values. And yet the whole system of government and the economy of America is based on profit. On personal greed and selfishness. So that in order to be human, in order to love each other and be equal with each other and not place each other in roles, we have to destroy the kind of government that keeps us from asserting our positive values of life.

The 60s and 70s saw a phase of ruthless oppression of the New Left in America, validated by such voices. When the left met the force of the state, Curtis says, it fell apart. Realising their powerlessness against the trained and armed forces, they changed tactics: Instead of fighting against „The policeman inside all our heads“, on the street, many of the New Left turned inside and tried to remove the policeman from their mind. Hoping that a new self would lead to a new society. „So, the personal became political“? asks Curtis from behind the camera. „Yes, the personal became political“ answers Robert Pardun who was part of the student protests. „Without changing the personal, you didn’t stand a chance of changing the political. Coming up against the state power of the United States was not an option. They crushed us“. In his book, “Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven”, social activist Jerry Rubin argues that political work and self-development has to go hand in hand. It was important, he said, that people *lived* the society they hoped to create.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The name “The Weathermen” derives from a line in Bob Dylan’s song „Subterranean Homesick Blues“: *You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows*. This is Dylan’s most cited song line in court cases. It is therefore mostly responsible for making him the most quoted songwriter by judges and lawyers. The Nobel Prize for Literature is a cute extra to this. Alex Long, a University of Texas law professor, “combed legal databases to identify lyrics in court filings and scholarly publications, finding Dylan cited 186 times, far outpacing the rest of the top 10: the Beatles, 74; Bruce Springsteen, 69; Paul Simon, 59; Woody Guthrie, 43; the Rolling Stones, 39; the Grateful Dead, 32; Simon & Garfunkel, 30; Joni Mitchell, 28; and R.E.M., 27.“, *In some courts, Dylan rules*, 9 May 2011, Article in the Los Angeles Times by Carol J. Williams, accessed 13 May 2020 <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2011-may-09-la-me-bob-dylan-law-20110509-story.html>

<sup>25</sup> Linda Evans, Wikipedia, accessed 13 May 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linda\\_Evans\\_\(radical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linda_Evans_(radical))

<sup>26</sup> Jerry Clyde Rubin, Wikipedia, accessed 31 May 2020 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerry\\_Rubin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerry_Rubin)

The counterculture's turn inside found inspiration in the humanistic psychological approaches of people like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The concept of self-actualization that Maslow developed based on his study of exceptionally successful people - like Einstein, Lincoln, Roosevelt and many others - had a particular strong influence. His ideas were picked up by psychologists and philosophers who wanted to find new ways to engage with the self, in order to develop the full potential of human beings. Out of this, The Human Potential Movement was born. It can be described as the Hippie movement of the psyche and attracted thousands of people in the 60s and 70s.

Centres like the Esalen Institute<sup>27</sup> facilitated group encounters and embraced a variety of non-traditional therapies (including Gestalt therapy, psychodrama, transactional analysis, primal scream therapy, and Morita therapy), disciplines and practices involving healing, self-improvement, self-awareness, techniques of Zen Buddhism, astrology, art, dance and various systems of body movement and manipulation<sup>28</sup>. It seemed to be a desire of the time to evoke cathartic experiences, to be able to express feelings, to scream and ramble in front of a group of people, to break through the restraints of well-tempered, controlled, societal constructed behaviour. It was thought that the world would be a better place, if people could only express themselves. In that way, the revolutionary uprising transformed from the struggle in the street to the outburst of emotion, in order to set every individual free. Then, everything would be fine. This went hand in hand with the Hippie movement, the Summer of Love and Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

Dwell in the Summer of Love here. Let the sunshine into your heart. Lay on the back under a tree and watch the leaves dance in the wind. Float. Feel the skin of the person laying next to you while someone else gently caresses your head. Soon the police will come and you will have to get dressed. You cannot lay here forever. Lay here forever, in the sun, under this marvellous tree. Take another drag before the police comes to take away the drugs. Dwell here and be sure to store the memory of this moment well. You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. Maybe the wind just changed and it is not the personal that has become political, but the political that has become personal. Oh, and did you see? Up there in the tree... A grin without a cat!

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<sup>27</sup> The Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California was founded by psychologists Dick Price and Michael Murphy and was a model for the many "growth centres" that the Human Potential movement established.

<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia, accessed 16 May 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_Potential\\_Movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Potential_Movement) and Encyclopedia, accessed 16 May 2020 <https://www.encyclopedia.com/medicine/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/human-potential-movement-0>

That just reminds me that I wanted to tell you about that second scene from „Le fond de l'air est rouge“, that stayed in my memory so persistently. Did you see it? Do you know the scene when the off voice starts to ponder about power, in an almost childlike way? And we see these images of politicians. Let me quote it. I like it so much: *“Nixon looks unwell on the steps of Notre Dame, troubled. In fact, this whole collection of chiefs of state looks pretty sickly. Power must be bad for the health: just look at them. Compare their expressions with the clear eyes of a cat. That’s the ultimate test. A cat is never on the side of power.”*

Isn't that a bliss? Do you feel it too? Maybe it is just a relieving illusion, that the poor people in power and the poor wealthy people who took so many responsibilities on themselves are too busy to ever understand the riches of a bunch of Hippies like us, laying here in the green grass. Do you think it is an anti-revolutionary phrase? Do you think it is soaked in privilege? It is not that cats never fight! But it is true that if you keep away from struggling with the big powers, you can get lost in your individual adventures, in your personal bubble. Maybe this is just a place of rest, so remember well where to find it. Everybody needs to rest sometimes, and where would it be better to rest than... Oh, here comes the police.

There are no absolute assertions made here! This is an order!

Due to the past and present authorities' abuse of power and fabrications of atrocities - and maybe in general, their unwillingness or inability to create a fair world for all humans - today, being authoritarian has a bad name. It brings along a taste of being backwards-oriented. Whereas being confused might rather be connotated with the knowledge about a confusing world. Therefore, being confused has a progressive side and it often speaks about individual orientation systems.

In 2016, during a discursive art festival in Buda, Kortrijk called “What’s the matter with cooperation?”, I was part of the group “The ArtsCommons”, which was researching about a commons economy in the field of the arts. I found it extremely hard to understand what to do in the context of that group, what kind of role I could adapt and how to deal with the questions raised. The main organizer of the group, Nicolas Galeazzi, said to me that I have to find my own way into working within that context. But I was lost, without orientation. Today I would have more tools at hand to approach this problem, but at that point I felt isolated. Being asked to think about commons but having to find individual, autonomous ways into it, gave me a strange feeling. It seemed to be paradoxical.

In such contexts, I have witnessed a certain reluctance of taking on a power position. Of making things clear. Power has a bad name, does not want to surface or is regarded as simply irrelevant. It results in the absence of rules, or at least in the absence of clear responsibility and thereby the absence of something to relate to. Confusion, annoyance and boredom can be results of this. It is then mostly relieving if a person is clear about their intentions, even if these intentions are completely selfish.

However, there is a constructive idea behind this reluctance. It can be argued that creativity finds the most interesting forms when there is autonomy in the exploration of a topic and the ability to set its own goals. But because this is said from and for the individual level, it is nothing but an assumption. For there might be people whose creativity finds the most interesting forms under pressure and with a tight scope of action. On the level of the group, power constitutes how people are together. If there is a hierarchical power position set, then this creates a different togetherness than if the power-relations are being found in the process. “We” can be hierarchically established by the boss, the mother, the leader, the initiator. While if it is a process, the ideal is to establish the “we” in a somehow basic democratic way, so that power will be evenly distributed among all people in the group. The question is, if the focus on the individual is the right strategy to aim for that. And if that focus does not speak specifically about the fixation on a leader position.

### I hate it when spectatorship excludes me

The position that initiates a group or a project, brings along the risk of being excluded from that “we”, although it is the crucial factor that creates it. Performing is the example I am thinking about here. To struggle in front of an audience against the logic of spectatorship makes little sense, because a show will remain a show, as well as film will remain a film and a text will remain a text. The relationship between these representations of reality and their observers seems to be inherently co-constituted.

Nevertheless, one can try to interact differently with these relationships. An example for me is standing on the same ground with the audience when performing music - as opposed to a classical setting where the performance happens on a stage. This might appear as trivial, but in my experience, it makes a big difference and encourages interaction on both sides. In the best case, there is a shift away from displaying the

mastery and skill of the performer towards a celebration of a moment<sup>29</sup>. Giving agency to the audience means to transform it into co-creators of a situation. By trying to activate everybody involved, tensions are relieved from the performer as the person fully in charge of the creation of the situation, as the person in power, as the person who has to deal with the paradoxical isolation that this position entails. The isolation created by the twofold *spotlight - mute mass* begins to blur.

Spectatorship is a position that wants to be overwhelmed by what is shown. As such, the spectacle has a quality of a children's game. This thought to me is as soothing as it is cynical. It is soothing because it shows the human ability to curiously trust the moment, to marvel at the world like a bunch of Hippies laying on their backs, looking at leaves moving in the wind. Spectatorship is not per se a passive, uncreative activity. It is merely a state of mind that has to do with contemplation, immersion, projection, empathy.

Nevertheless, the readiness to be overwhelmed also means being ready to be manipulated. This suspicion can turn into a distrust towards what is shown and on a larger scale, this justifies resistance.

### The Hippie Problem, continued

In the 60s and 70s, the New Left was winding up against the manipulative forces of the elites, claiming to be perfectly able to think for themselves. (A slap in the face of snobbery.) But when the protesters met the violent forces of the state, they turned inward to overcome the manipulative forces in themselves. As a consequence, corporations were afraid of losing customers, because the turn to the self, which was spreading to all parts of society in the 1970s, was unpredictable. What if these people found out that consumerism was not what they wanted, at all? But what happened was rather that their self-perception changed. They appeared to be interested in developing themselves and with that, new needs and desires arose.

To find out, how business could help people express these desires, the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) started a psychographic market segmentation program called VALS, Values and Lifestyles, in 1978. They designed a questionnaire that again, drew

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<sup>29</sup> Since mostly I am talking from the performer's perspective, the "celebration of a moment" could also just mean that the audience plays their part in "the celebration of what I am doing". In any piece of art there might lay a narcissistic blind spot. Experiences in which I was part of an audience are somehow not comparable, for then paradoxically I have felt more like an individual. The act of performing can have the effect of disappearing.



heavily from the work of Abraham Maslow<sup>30</sup>. The director of VALS in the years 1978-86, Amina Marie Spengler, says in "The Century of the Self":

People loved filling out this questionnaire. We got several questionnaires back with a note attached saying: do you have any other questionnaire I can fill out? We were asking people to think about things that they have never thought about before.

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<sup>30</sup> When it comes to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Curtis gets a bit shady in his narration and I cannot see, why. He introduces Maslow as „one of the leaders of the Human Potential Movement“, which suggests that Maslow would have been an active organizer in movements of the 60s. It is true, that his ideas had a big influence on Dick Price and Michael Murphy who founded the Esalen Institute. Striking is that Curtis states, Maslow had come up with the hierarchy of needs by „observing the work of places like Esalen“, which is quite a big bending of facts. Maslow had developed and published the idea of the hierarchy of needs already in "A Theory of Human Motivation" in 1943. It might be that there have been „places like Esalen“ in the 1940s, but Esalen surely only appeared in the 1960s. Maslow knew Esalen and it also appears in the bibliography of „Motivation and Personality“ (1954/1970). But how big the entanglement was, is unclear to this point of my research. The hierarchy of needs was not invented by observing „places like Esalen“ and it does also not describe „the different emotional stages that people went through as they liberated their feelings“ as Curtis states. Further, with the term self-actualization, Maslow may have meant to describe individuals who „became completely self directed“, but he does not, as Curtis suggests, claim that this means they are „free of society“. I have not found evidence for that.

The striking thing about Maslow's methodology to come up with his theory of self-actualization, was that he did not study mentally ill or neurotic people. "[T]he study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy. The study of self-actualizing people must be the basis for a more universal science of psychology." (Maslow 1954, 180). So he turned to specimen such as „Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Addams, William James, Schweitzer, Aldous Huxley and Spinoza“ (152), knowing that this is problematic, „since no subject was perfect“ (151). But given the prominence of his ideas, this must have had an influence on the many ways people strive to become their best self. And in consequence, it must have helped creating expectations towards the self that are probably unreachable for most. (But consumption can make up for that.)

It can happen easily when watching Curtis, that one gets mesmerized by the stream of information, narrated by the authority of his eloquent voice, the mastery of his choosing and editing of images and the almost satirical use of sounds. I wonder, where else Curtis bends „facts“, to serve the narration in his movies. And is it only to serve the story or rather to create suspicion in the viewer? Since a suspicious mindset is what he might want to foster. In an interview with the New York Times he says: „I will often in the editing deliberately make a discordant edit. It just makes you aware of what it is you are watching.“ (Accessed 14 May 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/30/magazine/adam-curtis-documentaries.html>)

This attitude can be found in many essayistic and art videos, most prominently in Chris Marker's 1983 movie, Sans Soleil, where images of war are being manipulated by use of contrast and saturation, so that they become what they are: Images. In that way, the viewer is hoped to reflect on the medium and thereby understands the manipulative potential and make-believe nature of movies (and other media using these techniques). Today, in times of fake news, it seems to be a common understanding that the media is a manipulative force. The first thing to be asked about a piece of information is whether or not it is trustworthy. That creates confusion as nobody knows what to believe anymore. And it is another one of Curtis's theories (Adam Curtis, Oh Dear, YouTube, accessed 15 May 2020: <https://youtu.be/wcy8uLjRHPM>) that fostering confusion in that way became yet another tool of control. The confusion that is created by contradictory information leaves people powerless to act. It furthers the alienation from one another, it individuates and separates: it isolates.

The SRI found out that the values of people can be categorised based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. VALS<sup>31</sup> is still used as a market research tool to determine the motivations behind consumer purchasing decisions. People are segmented into lifestyle types<sup>32</sup>. Needs and desires are analysed, segmented and made commodities and services and sold to serve people's self-expression.<sup>33</sup> Curtis' off voice summons it up in the end of part three of "The Century Of The Self":

The original idea had been that the liberation of the self would create new kinds of people, free of social constraint. That radical change had happened. But while the new beings felt liberated, they have become increasingly dependent for their identity on business. The corporations have realised that it was in their interest to encourage people to feel that they were unique individuals. And then offer them ways to express that individuality. The world in which people felt they were rebelling against conformity was not a threat to business, but its greatest opportunity.

### Neoliberalized and loving it<sup>34</sup>

In the past I have called this phenomenon „The Hippie Problem“. Calling it a paradox instead of a problem<sup>35</sup>, would maybe enable more of an opening and suggest that it has a more organic and shifting character. It is paradoxical how the counterculture of the 60s has become part of Capitalism and thereby advanced its tactics. As if Capitalism had made a commodity out of the revolution, it took the demands of the counterculture to break free, and turned them into a new narrative: You want freedom? You shall have it! The counterculture has contributed to the notion that neoliberalism is not just an economic or political choice taken by those in government but is, rather, "a whole way of

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<sup>31</sup> Online appearance of VALS, accessed 15 May 2020, <https://www.sri.com/hoi/vals-market-research>

<sup>32</sup> From the first survey, people in the United States were categorised as: survivors (4%), sustainers (7%), *belongers* (35%), emulators (9%), *achievers* (22%), I-am-me (5%), experiential (7%), societally conscious (9%), and integrated (2%)

<sup>33</sup> "The problem is that the central ideology of our age is the idea of self-expression," Curtis says in an interview with the New York Times. "That the self, being expressive, is the good thing. It's what I trace in 'The Century of the Self.' Expressing yourself through consumerism is central. So, the dilemma for artists is that however radical in content their paintings, their performance art, their video works, the mode in which they're doing it — self-expression — feeds the strength of the very thing they're trying to overthrow, which is modern consumer capitalism." Accessed 15 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/30/magazine/adam-curtis-documentaries.html>

<sup>34</sup> Title derives from a walk and talk with Joan Somers Donnelly. Thank you!

<sup>35</sup> «Any attempt to resist will sooner or later become an extension of the problem. » Off-voice, «I will not imagine the suffering of others. »

being and thinking” (Taylor 2016, 5 / Foucault 2008, 218). The question is, if this way of being and thinking still has a paradoxical character that would allow an opening to other possibilities. Or if we really find ourselves in a situation without alternative, as Thatcher famously claimed.<sup>36</sup>

In an article of Schirn Mag, Han Byung-Chul states that Neoliberal Capitalism is so hard to oppose because it appears as if it would not repress freedom anymore<sup>37</sup>. There cannot be a struggle for freedom in a system that at the level of its “strong discourse” (Taylor 2016, 5), uses freedom as its validation.

There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no governments can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours.<sup>38</sup>

In Thatcher’s rhetoric, words such as “community” and “society” are replaced by words like “duty” and “responsibility”.<sup>39</sup> And these words are shifted either onto the government or the individual. Life is your choice and your freedom on the condition that it is also your responsibility. Society has nothing to do with it. There is no such thing as society. What is left are individuals, guided by their own interest and regulated by the free market. Today, Byung-Chul argues, everybody is a self-exploiting worker of their own corporation. Thereby, the class struggle becomes an inner struggle, a paradoxical protest against oneself. Against one’s self-interest.

“The overarching assumption in Neoliberal thinking is that, when all actors act self-interestedly in the exchange of private property, the collective interest is also secured” What O’Neill and Weller describe in “The Handbook of Neoliberalism” (87), is no different from “the oldest ideas of the oldest capitalists”. Neoliberalism therefore is rather a “very smart and very modern repacking” of these ideas (Taylor 2016, 4). Neoliberal thinking has successfully atomized Capitalism’s idea of self-interest. Giving more purchasing power to more individuals and creating ever more commodities on all levels

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<sup>36</sup> TINA: There Is No Alternative. Opponents advert for TAMARA: There Are Many And Real Alternatives, sometimes: There Are Many And Rich Alternatives

<sup>37</sup> Han Byung-Chul, “Warum heute keine Revolution möglich ist” (Why a revolution is not possible today), 2 December 2015, Schirn Mag, online magazine of the Kunsthalle Frankfurt, accessed 26 May 2020 [https://www.schirn.de/magazin/kontext/warum\\_heute\\_keine\\_revolution\\_moeglich\\_ist/](https://www.schirn.de/magazin/kontext/warum_heute_keine_revolution_moeglich_ist/)

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Interview for Women’s Own, 23 September 1987, accessed 25 May 2020, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>

<sup>39</sup> Also: “We have a duty to make sure that every penny piece we raise in taxation is spent wisely and well. For it is our party which is dedicated to good housekeeping”. Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 14 October 1983, accessed 28 May 2020, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105454>

of being. Your freedom is the freedom of choice. *Do you prefer the roast from Costa Rica or Ethiopia for your latte macchiato?* When every person first and foremost acts for their own interests, in accordance with their own values, it becomes very hard to find ways into togetherness. In a world in which selfishness is the rule, becoming selfish seems the only way to protect oneself from the exploitation of others. This is the prisoner's dilemma of our time.

Masha Gessen quotes Hannah Arendt in recent article<sup>40</sup> for The New Yorker: "Isolation is the inability to act together with others, which, according to Arendt, is the source of a person's political power."

### Narcissism

If it can be stated, as Erich Fromm does in his lecture "psychology of nationalism"<sup>41</sup>, that the best example of narcissism was a new-born child, because a new-born child cannot perceive that there is an outside and it is only concerned with hunger, thirst, coldness and the satisfaction of these needs, then it might be said that this is a condition, humans can (re-)connect with. In instances when needs like hunger or thirst are not met for a long time, they become so strong that the organism cannot act on anything else than satisfying them. In such instances, the perception of the world decreases to a minimum<sup>42</sup>.

The new-born, of course, is an example and not a pathological phenomenon. It illustrates, how a person with a severe narcissistic disorder might perceive reality, how disconnected such a person must be from the rest of the world, to an extent that the world might almost not exist because of the overwhelming presence of their own needs and desires (Fromm). I find this imagination helpful, to picture separation from the world constituted by extreme self-centredness.

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<sup>40</sup> Accessed 6 May 2020, Gessen quotes Hannah Arendt's The Origins Of Totalitarianism from 1955, [https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-political-consequences-of-loneliness-and-isolation-during-the-pandemic?utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social&mbid=social\\_facebook&utm\\_social-type=owned](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-political-consequences-of-loneliness-and-isolation-during-the-pandemic?utm_brand=tny&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&mbid=social_facebook&utm_social-type=owned)

<sup>41</sup> Erich Fromm, «Psychology of Nationalism», lecture 1962, YouTube, accessed 16 May 2020 <https://youtu.be/pcX53MuX0ZI>

<sup>42</sup> I am talking here about a privileged life with access to food, not about a life that knows the experience of hunger that leads to starvation.

People with a narcissistic disorder often behave abusive in relationships, because they regard other people merely as a supply system to their own needs and desires. In recent time, it has become popular to “spot”<sup>43</sup> narcissists. Videos on YouTube explain the differences between narcissistic personality disorder and narcissism, in order to not end up in abusive relationships.

It might be argued, that the way Western society is constructed today, fosters narcissistic behaviour and disorders. An example is that narcissists try to impress others with what they do and say, because they have been conditioned to only be loved for their performance and not for their being. The narratives present in our society emphasize this: living a humanness live is based on having waged work. It means to perform and to be rewarded for this performance. “People have got their entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There is no such thing as an entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.”<sup>44</sup> One does not have a right to live by simply existing. One has to earn a living.

This idea is deeply embedded in traditional work values and goes hand in hand with a suspicion against laziness. But countering these values by celebrating laziness might not be fruitful. As Kathi Weeks puts it, to criticise traditional work values does not mean to negate the necessity of productive activity “or to dismiss the likelihood that, as William Morris describes it, there might be for all living things ‘a pleasure in the exercise of their energies’” (Weeks 2011, 12).

### Naturalise Twice

An important factor for the naturalisation of the capitalist system was the naturalisation of work. It functions in deep compliance with the satisfaction of human needs. In “The Problem with Work”, Kathi Weeks writes that „it is not the police or the threat of violence that force us to work, but rather a social system that ensures that working is the only way that most of us can meet our basic needs.” The specific mechanism by which goods and services are distributed in a capitalist society appears to be grounded not in social convention and political power but in human need (Weeks 2011, 7).

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<sup>43</sup> Examples for the trend in “spotting narcissists” can be found on YouTube. Videos of “MedCircle” featuring psychologist Dr. Ramani Durvasula who wrote the self-help books «Should I Stay or Should I Go – Surviving A Relationship with a Narcissist», 2015, and «Don’t You Know Who I Am? – How to Stay Sane in an Era of Narcissism, Entitlement, and Incivility», 2019, are loud proponents of this.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Interview for Women’s Own, 23 September 1987, accessed 13 April 2020, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>

This goes further than the distribution of income in order to meet the basic material needs such as food and shelter. Waged work is also the very means by which status is allocated, and by which most people gain access to healthcare and retirement. Crucially important is to note that after family and friends, waged work is often the most important, if not sole, source of sociality for millions (Weeks 2011, 6). It might be argued, that there is a transformation happening in what it means to live a humanness life, a life worth living: away from *having work* to *being a consumer* (Bhattacharyya 2018, 36). The discussion about a universal basic income probably points in that direction. Otherwise few discourses are challenging that status quo: The naturalised unwritten law of finding, having and keeping waged work, forms the existential individual struggle that keeps Capitalism safe from social upheaval.

It is the „the central goal of schooling, a criterion of successful medical and psychiatric treatment, and an ostensible goal of most welfare policies and unemployment compensation programs“, to make people capable of working (Weeks 2011, 7<sup>45</sup>). Being unfit for productive work means by implication being unfit for full humanness (Bhattacharyya 2018, 32).

Capitalism rates human activity according to its logic. As described by Marx, there is productive and reproductive work. Productive work means the work that is paid, that creates surplus value within the capitalist system. Whereas reproductive work is often underpaid or not paid at all. In the 1970s, second-wave feminism highlighted this separation<sup>46</sup>. One concern was the role of housework in the capitalist mode of production. Under the slogan „Wages for housework“, it was argued that women were doing unpaid, reproductive work which is central for the functioning of the economy, because it enabled the productive worker, which in most cases were men, to function every day.

Silvia Federici describes this as a process of ongoing Primitive Accumulation. Whereas Marx defined Primitive Accumulation as a one-time thing, necessary to set up the capitalist economy, put into place by the use of violence. His example is the robbery and enclosing of communally used farmland. The land becomes part of the capitalist economy by privatisation. Proudhon has called it „Property is theft!“ (1840). The expropriated agricultural population who used the common land before, turn into surplus

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<sup>45</sup> Here, Weeks quotes Nona Glazer, page 33 of “Women's Paid and Unpaid Labor: The Work Transfer in Health Care and Retailing”, 1993

<sup>46</sup> Accessed 21 April 2020 <https://www.leftvoice.org/on-reproductive-labor-wage-slavery-and-the-new-working-class>

population. Seeking a new life, they flee into the city and there, being picked up by the same logic that excluded them from their land, become cheap labour force.<sup>47</sup>

Federici states that Primitive Accumulation is a phenomenon constitutive of capitalist relations at all times, eternally. „The constitution of reproduction work –that is the work of reproducing individuals and labor-power– as ‘women’s labor’ and as a separate social sphere, seemingly located outside the sphere of economic relations and, as such, de-valued from a capitalist viewpoint, a development coeval with the separation of the peasantry from the land and the formation of a commodity market” (Federici 2017). This constitutes the ongoing process of Primitive Accumulation. “Housewifization means the externalisation, or ex-territorialization of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalists. This means women's labour is considered a natural resource, freely available like air and water.” (Mies 1986, 110)

There are two sorts of naturalisations going on here. Bourdieu, Foucault, and many others have written about how neoliberalism has become seen as an inevitability, naturalised. As a cultural, ideological system it is deeply embedded in whatever culture it finds itself. It shapes culture as it is shaped by culture (Taylor 2016, 5). It is omnipresent and invisible at the same time – famously formulated as “it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism”<sup>48</sup>. The other naturalisation is that of reproductive work, which describes capitalism’s taking-without-giving policy. The irony of these two naturalisations is that they cover up that reproductive work is essential for survival, whereas productive work is not.

### Left Melancholy

In the years’ time that has gone by since I try to write this piece of text, I have struggled with depression. Therefore, I have been looking what could be constructed from there. Reading Ann Cvetkovich’s “Depression – a public feeling”, helped me to understand depression as a state of impasse. As being stuck, in a “dead end”, with “no exit”. This reflects well the recurring thought patterns and feelings, which kept me in this place. Depression is characterised by the disability to connect to the outside. It means to get lost in oneself, to not see how things could move forward due to circumstances – “not that they can’t, but that the world is not designed to make it happen or there has been a failure of imagination” (Cvetkovich 2012, 20).

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<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx, Capital, Volume 1, Chapter 27, published in German 1867

<sup>48</sup> According to Mark Fisher (in Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?, 2009) this quote is attributed to both, Slavoj Žižek and Frederik Jameson.

“I will not imagine the suffering of others” can be seen as a chain of formulations of such impasses. It peaks with the line: “It would be better to do nothing than to contribute to the stabilization of the existing.”

The political dimension of this is obvious. Due to the many defeats that the leftist struggle had to endure, the left turned melancholic<sup>49</sup>. It describes “a misguided sense of nostalgia for a past socialism that prevents action in the present. Left melancholy points the way toward political depression and, more generally, to ways of linking emotional and political life.” (106)

Wendy Brown describes the depressed left in “Resisting Left Melancholy” as “a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.”

There is a “certain narcissism” involved in being depressed. “The irony of melancholia, of course, is that attachment to the object of one's sorrowful loss supersedes any desire to recover from this loss, to live free of it in the present, to be unburdened by it.” (Brown 1999, 20) From here we do not even have to turn our gaze to find that we bathe in cynicism. It is ...

### Time for a cheap poem

Why should you change  
The system that feeds you  
It doesn't matter  
What you do  
just go on,

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<sup>49</sup> In 1931, Walter Benjamin coined the term “Left Melancholy” in an article of the same title, criticising the German writer Erich Kästner, saying that he turned the political struggle into an object of pleasure - oriented only towards the upper middle class. “From the beginning, it is to this stratum and to this stratum alone that the poet, has something to say, this stratum that he flatters, insofar as from dawn to dusk he holds up a mirror to them, or rather holds it against them.” Being attributed to the social class one criticizes is what creates an impasse, is what makes one feel powerless and therefore, melancholic. (Walter Benjamin, *Linke Melancholie*, Zu Erich Kästners neuem Gedichtbuch, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, Herausgegeben von Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, Suhrkamp, 1991).



drool into the pool  
your who  
your what  
your why  
your suspicion!  
The water won't change  
It's just some spit floating around you  
Your why  
Your what  
Your who  
Your point of orientation  
Did your hate turn into love?  
The sneaking suspicion that whether art  
nor philosophy<sup>50</sup> will help  
Your fight  
is a windmill  
a windmill  
Kill  
Kill

### Creativity and suffering

I need art. So much that I believe I cannot survive without it.<sup>51</sup> This need for art is not solely located in the realm of „self-actualisation“, as a common sense understanding of Maslow's scheme<sup>52</sup> would suggest. It rather intersects with all other needs and becomes deeply embedded in the gaps left by unmet needs. Just like one can smoke a cigarette instead of eating, to transform one's hunger need in part and for a period of time (Maslow 1943, 5), art transforms voids, makes life endurable, gives comfort, opens possibilities for expressions that have no place in everyday life.

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<sup>50</sup> “Philosophy is at once the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power, and as such it has never been able to emancipate itself from theology.” Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, §20

<sup>51</sup> *All of my songs are about you, or capitalism. Sometimes I link these things, as well as I link capitalism to suicide. When the system is gone, I'll just stop making music, must be easy then, cuz there's a lot of other things to do. When you are gone, some kind of void will suck me in and stretch me all the way through a black hole and my flesh will be ripped into pieces.* – first verse of “Black Hole”, song by Roger F.

<sup>52</sup> I find Maslow's hierarchical thinking helpful to order my thoughts. But one must bear in mind that this is only a scheme to order one's thoughts, to locate needs and get an overview. Life is much messier than a scheme.

About that, there need be as little discussion as there needs to be about the urge to eat when one is hungry. Art is not primarily about „finding your voice“. It is not primarily about „claiming your position“. As I understand it, art is first of all a means of surviving. Described like this, in Foucauldian terms it falls into the domain of “the care for the self”.

The „pure“ need of self-actualisation is not necessarily the main motor for art production, but rather the gaps, the void, the unmet needs within the net of needs. In my case, this thought brings me to the somewhat insecure and dark realisation that my art must have been a compensation for the loneliness I experienced in my life. Art was there in the absence of love, in the absence of intimacy, in the absence of friendship. In the presence of heartbreak, overwhelm and pain. On the other hand, this could speak of an abusive relationship between art and me. About art’s dependency on my pain. And if my needs would be met, maybe art would not disappear from my life. Maybe there is a deluding mechanism that keeps me suffering, so that I am able to create art. (Notice how the political turns personal here and then somehow disappears in a black hole that is labelled as “private”. We have to go through it.)

This drama integrates itself well in the long-standing tradition of the tormented artist. It is made and fed by the Western, white, male drama. Bad decisions make good stories. And the good, interesting story about artists in the West have most often been dramas of tortured geniuses. In her TED Talk<sup>53</sup>, author Elizabeth Gilbert says that „other professions haven’t really earned a reputation over the centuries for being alcoholic manic-depressives. We writers have that reputation. And creatives all over the genres it seems, have this reputation for being enormously mentally unstable.“ Artist like me have gladly taken on these reputations and re-enacted them as dramatic life narratives. Gilbert goes on saying that there is a collective internalisation and acceptance of the notion that creativity and suffering are inherently linked. It is a social convention. If you are an artist, you will have to deal with also being depressed. It’s hard, but artistry will ultimately lead to anguish.<sup>54</sup>

Gilbert, who gave this speech just after her big success „Eat Pray Love“, was looking for other ways of thinking about creativity, in order not to crumble under the pressure of writing after her bestseller. Assuming that her biggest success might lie behind her, she

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<sup>53</sup> YouTube, accessed 8 May 2020, <https://youtu.be/86x-u-tz0MA>

<sup>54</sup> One could think about that story from its flip side, too: that anguish and pain will lead to artistry, because it has no other place to go. I am thinking about blues music that seems to contain and transmit the heaviness and pains of slavery. And I am thinking about Miko, a friend of mine who sent me a song she recorded just before the lockdown due to the Corona virus, when the refugees on the borders of Europe faced a violent state force and were not allowed to enter. It sounds very much like a song by Brecht and Weill, with an urgency that cannot be expressed without knowledge of pain.

had to find a trick to start a new creative process. She found that in ancient Rome, people did not believe that creativity came from human beings but to human beings from a distant and unknowable source for distant and unknowable reasons. They believed that creativity was a disembodied spirit that spoke to the artist and they called this spirit „genius“. It would for example, live in the walls of an artist's studio. In that way, the ancient artist was protected from, for example, too much narcissism because the artist could not take all the credit for a brilliant nor all the responsibility for a failed work.

With the beginning of rational humanism, people started to believe that creativity comes completely from the individual. Gilbert says:

And for the first time in history you start to hear people referring to this or that artist as being a genius, rather than having a genius. And I gotta tell you I think that was a huge error. You know, I think that allowing somebody -one mere person- to believe that he or she is the vessel and the font, the essence and the source of all divine, creative, unknowable eternal mystery, is just a smidge too much responsibility to put on one fragile, human psyche. It is like asking somebody to swallow the sun. It warps and distorts egos, and it creates all these unmanageable expectations about performance. And I think the pressure of that has been killing off our artists for the last 500 years.

### Separation is alpha and omega of the spectacle<sup>55</sup>

Maybe it was an unconscious attempt to bounce some of these pressures back to where they came from<sup>56</sup>, that while working on our movie, Tanja Schwarz and I decided there should not be a distinction between art and life. It was of course mainly the influence of the Situationists that brought us there. However, if taken consequently, we would have stopped making a movie immediately, because to claim that there is no distinction between art and life would mean, that our practice would have a serious problem with representation and thus, the concepts of *product* and *spectatorship* which frame how a piece of art is perceived and consumed.

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<sup>55</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, §25

<sup>56</sup> I am balancing on a thin line here and it might be just a blatant rhetorical trick to proceed to the next paragraph. There is a connection between the paragraphs in the concept of separation. The genius artists “had to” carry responsibilities that were too big for them. If they (art) would not have been disconnected from society (life), then maybe these responsibilities could have been shared. No distinctions between art and life would signify this sharing and creating together.

Making music has made the problem of spectatorship more tangible to me than working with film. Music is a medium that appears in very different places and frames, be it in different performance settings (a bar, a museum, a concert space, a street, a living room, a camp fire) or in different playback settings. That allows another reading than the one framed by art standards. „When art appears outside of the authorised performative framework, there is no reason that it should occur to those engaging with it to constitute themselves as spectators.“ (Wright 2013, 60)

As soon as there is a framework, what is shown will be perceived as art, a representation. A famous example for what labelling can do is Christoph Schlingensief's action "Foreigners out!", 2000, which took place just shortly after elections that gave rise to the right-wing party FPÖ in Austria<sup>57</sup>. Using the concept of the then popular TV-show "Big Brother", Schlingensief hosted twelve real asylum seekers in a container in the centre of Vienna during the Wiener Festspielwochen. Every day, the Austrian people could vote via calling who of the asylum seekers should be kicked out of the show, meaning to be deported from Austria. In the role of the agitator, Schlingensief made use of the right-wing party's slogans and speeches.

Early in the process, the Wiener Festspielwochen, afraid of the controversies and clashes between right-wing and left-wing supporters, put signs all around the area of the container, saying "This Is Art". Schlingensief had them removed as soon as he found out that the festival had labelled his action, because it would soften the effect. If this is art, then this is a representation, then this is a play. Then it is not real. To put such a sign dehumanises the asylum seekers even more: These are not humans who are going to be deported. They just pretend, they just play being humans who are going to be deported.

There is the obvious parallel to the Nazi concentration camps of the second World War in Schlingensief's container. But also, one could think further to the Colonial period when the Spaniards asked themselves, whether or not the natives they found in Hispaniola actually had a soul.<sup>58</sup> And arguably, the seed of this dehumanising thought is to be found again, transformed from the religious to the rational mindset, in Nibuhr, Lippmann and Bernays, where the mass of ordinary people is stupid and needs to be controlled for their own good (Chomsky 1989).

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<sup>57</sup> The project was also documented in the film "Ausländer raus! Schlingensiefs Container." directed by Paul Poet. (2002). Accessed 18 May 2020, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ausländer\\_raus!\\_Schlingensiefs\\_Container](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ausländer_raus!_Schlingensiefs_Container)

<sup>58</sup> Bartolomé De Las Casas, A Short Account of The Destruction of The Indies, first published in 1992

## The de-centralisation of the Self

Before modernity, there was the worship of something transcendent at the centre of society: A god, a spirit, a natural force. Today, humans worship themselves<sup>59</sup>. With the use of rationality, they have been able to put themselves at the centre of society. To say it with Nietzsche, humans have killed God. In that process, humans started to carry responsibilities that were given to Gods and spirits before. „How shall we comfort ourselves (...)? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?“ The rise of rationality has left humans with a vacuum, a gap. There is an unmet need for a divine entity left. „Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?“ (Nietzsche 1882, The Gay Science, Book three, Section 125<sup>60</sup>)

*Here something changes, because we cannot remain rational at this point. We are in a dark room, maybe in a hut, but the darkness is so thick, it is hard to tell. Do you hear the beat of the drum? It is played quite steady and fast, about two hundred beats per minute. And there is a voice with it:*

Finding back a sense of orientation means to work on the notion of self-centredness. Individuality has become your private safe haven from society. Humans sunk very deep into that quicksand. Because there is a need for security, a need for a home. Trying to get out of that quicksand at the place you got in, makes no sense. You cannot turn back. The pull is too strong. You have to go through it totally and come out in another place. That quicksand must become a worm hole. It must flip you. If you have the power to shift God out of the centre and onto your shoulder, you have the power to shift the Self out of the centre and onto your shoulder. As you have wept about the death of God when you shifted her, this will feel like the death of the Self. Rest assured that this is rather the death of illusions. This will liberate you from liberating ideas. There is no difference

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<sup>59</sup> Alain De Botton, A kinder, gentler philosophy of success, 2009, YouTube, Accessed 9 January 2020  
<https://youtu.be/MtSE4rglxbY>

<sup>60</sup> Oh! Nietzsche! You were my first love! You always wanted the full and the true! Unconditional and pure! As I read you back now, I see how much you are still there, in my words and thoughts, in this dream-like state that you have taught me was – philosophy. Footnotes would have been so detestable for you, wouldn't they? There was no need for proof of your sometimes completely subjective statements – just think what you wrote about *w o m e n* – saying more about your disgust for the body and your time's conceptions of masculinity. And soon, hop on to the next sharp and poetic observation that could also just be - an illusion?

between illusions. They are as necessary as they are unnecessary. You have to be concerned not so much about the illusions but about their effects. You need porous illusions, so that you have air to breathe. Illusions with many faces. So that you hear the breathing of others. Illusions that do not impose themselves but that enable togetherness.

Although it can be easily used as yet another private coping mechanism for individuals, particularly for artists under pressure, the method that Gilbert suggests – creating a belief in a spiritual entity that has certain power and influence over one's life – should not immediately be dismissed. It is a starting point.

„The freedom to believe oneself to be the sole author of one's individuality“ (Taylor 2016, 46) is an irrational belief that fosters the self-centredness of our time. I would suggest to de-centralise the self into multitudes. As a schematic example: Demon XYZ is the author of my inspiration. Capitalism is the author of my existential anxieties. The notion of romantic love is the author of my heartbreaks. This is a first cognitive step for a process that needs to be externalized. Because Capitalism is probably not only the author of my existential anxieties but also the ones of others. In such a way, it might be possible to think that the fragmented self looks at concepts and problems with other fragmented selves, to find togetherness. The self splits into many centres. This de-centralisation of the self can go hand in hand with a spirit of de-privatisation. If I contain multitudes, then multitudes contain me.

#### Afterword by Silvia Federici

Political work should change our relations with people, strengthen our connectedness, give us courage in the knowledge that we are not confronting the world alone.

Elien Ronse, with whom I had many nourishing talks about some of the topics that appear in this text, recommended I should read the afterword „On Joyful Militancy“ of Silvia Federici's "Beyond the Periphery of the Skin" when I was telling about my difficulties finding a conclusion.

„Sad politics often come from an exaggerated sense of what we can do by ourselves, individually, which leads to the habit of overburdening ourselves.“ Federici says that militant activists can seem like beasts of burden, „always loaded with huge amounts of

work, because they think that the destiny of the world depends upon them“ (Federici 2020, 125). As very hard workers who take pride in their toil, they are always sad because they try to do so much that they are never fully present to what they are doing. Depression is also about „caring too much“ (Cvetkovich 2012, 111). A depressed and burned out activist is not a very useful one.

Having much on one's mind, being ambitious, seeking for perfection and as a result, being stressed, are traits that keep people from being present. Hence, they appear quite unattractive to others as they are sucked into their doings. Their individual endeavours appear by default immediate and important to them, but silly and unworthy to others.

I have witnessed two reactions to being a beast of burden. Both speak of separation. The first reaction is to neglect the work one wants to do. „Ah, never mind, tomorrow is another day, don't worry.“ In the worst case, this is accompanied by a suggestion such as: „Come and have a beer with us.“ Which is crushing, because it makes what one cares about so much, appear ridiculous. The flipside of it is that the rest of life becomes ridiculous, to an extent that drinking a beer with friends would only increase the stress level, because it is time that is lost.

The other reaction comes from individuals who have more empathy for that kind of struggle. But as they are usually beasts of burden themselves, they have to protect themselves from engaging. „Keep up the good work.“ Or „I understand that you don't have time now.“ The responsibility is all yours, the stress is all yours, leave me alone with it. From the first reaction, being together can be learned, from the second, being ambitious can be learned. The question is, how to combine the two when the exercise of ones' energies finds joy in ambition?

Maybe taking ambition piece by piece, fragment by fragment. Federici suggests the construction of something as opposed to fighting against something. In other words, setting goals that can be achieved in part in the present, with a broader horizon in mind, obviously. „A joyful politics is constructive already in the present.“

Art might not be a means of social change, but it can surely be a means for creating atmosphere, mood<sup>61</sup>, a means of gathering and thereby a means to help creating the reproductive side of political work. „I believe that the radical Left has often failed to attract people because it does not pay attention to the reproductive side of political work-

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<sup>61</sup> Heidegger says that it is constitutive to human existence that humans are *mooded* beings. (Andreas Elpidorou and Lauren Freeman, *Affectivity in Heidegger I: Moods and Emotions in Being and Time*, 2015, In: *Philosophy Comapss*)

the dinners together, the songs that strengthen our sense of being a collective subject, the affective relations we develop among each other.“ (Federici 2020, 126)

*In the process of writing this, I often thought about some precious people with whom I shared experiences and talks which felt in instances at least as influential to this text as the books in the bibliography. Thank you!*

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