Requiem for Reality:

An Intellectual History of the Left-Wing Response to Neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s

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I, Elliot Askew, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This dissertation is an intellectual history of how left-wing public intellectuals responded to neoliberalism within the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. The focus is placed upon a disparate array of figures that includes Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, Ellen Willis, Thomas Frank, Bret Easton Ellis, and Octavia Butler. Each intellectual perceived there to be a divergence between the dominant understanding of reality and what was actually occurring during the period and argued that this process consistently fostered a mood and tone of 'obfuscation.' This identification of obfuscation mirrored and critiqued neoliberalism's market logic. Within this dissertation neoliberalism is positioned as a wider historical force that encouraged all actions and interactions to be processed through an economic lens, which in turn led to conceptions of reality being treated as devices to be bought, sold, and invested in through a 'marketplace of narratives.' The dissertation's central finding is that during the 1980s and 1990s left thinkers outlined and scrutinised neoliberalism's discursive impact and found that its market logic facilitated the diminishment of reality, as a commitment towards the truth was not prioritised and was instead replaced by a focus on boosting or supplanting competing narratives. The consistent identification of this process led to an 'age of obfuscation.' Consequently, this dissertation explores neoliberalism's affective resonance and deploys Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling' concept to map the historical sensorium of the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so, it details the wholesale rightward shift that was occurring across economics and culture at the end of the twentieth century, as a market logic came to dominate, and the left was placed in a position of weakness as it first had to overcome the veneer of obfuscation before it could advance a new form of politics.

Impact Statement

In recent years discussions around 'post-truth' have been frequent. This dissertation intervenes in these debates and offers a historical context that demonstrates the longer intellectual and ideational roots of this disconnection from reality. It outlines the consistent presence of a mood and tone of 'obfuscation' during American discourse in the 1980s and 1990s and argues that this state was encouraged and intensified by neoliberalism's market logics, with these patterns still being seen today.

This argument is pursued via an analysis of left-wing public intellectuals and how they responded to the changes occurring around them, a process that draws together a range of thinkers who have previously been unconnected, and in doing so contributes a reframed understanding of their work. Moreover, this exercise illuminates the full responsibilities of a "public intellectual," positioning it as a role that could outline and query the affective foundation sustaining the dominant ideas and values within society and to challenge them where necessary. Each intellectual under discussion had the opportunity to ruminate on the broader implications of the changes and direction society was shifting through, and, vitally, were motivated by a sense that these points needed to be clarified for the wider public good. This approach reinforces the necessity of intellectuals in the political and social arena, as they can be agents who give people without a direct material stake in the changes that are occurring around them a moral, psychological, and intellectual one. Subsequently, this view can be used to rebuff a hostility towards 'experts' without falling into elitist fawning, as it calls for a recalibration of what is expected from the intellectual class. Additionally, such a call is bolstered by this project's expansion of the notion of who is considered a public

intellectual, as the contributions of journalists and novelists are taken as operating on the same level as established academics, thus weakening the 'barrier' between intellectual life and daily life, whilst stressing that the nature and understanding of the latter is crucial for both historical analysis and political existence.

Contents

Introduction
<u>The Funeral March for Reality: Neoliberalism and Obfuscation</u>

Reality held little weight in 1980s and 1990s America. The mood and tone of politics and culture meant that accurate, fact-based understandings of the world were increasingly difficult to sustain in the public realm. The period was, in short, an age of obfuscation. This climate produced a heightened sense of detachment, ennui, enervation, obscurantism, misdirection, myopia, and hypocrisy. For many Americans, reality became more distant, whether they knew it or not.

This dissertation grapples with the recent intellectual history of this feeling of obfuscation. To do so, it places the phenomenon alongside the entrenchment of neoliberalism. On a discursive level, neoliberalism's logic of competition and markets pushed Americans to treat conceptions of reality as tools to be bought, sold, and invested in to facilitate individual optimisation. This was a process that increased the intensity of obfuscation amongst both political elites and the wider public. In response, a gap opened up between mainstream understandings of reality, the values and logics encouraged and promoted by neoliberal politics and culture, and reality as it was experienced in everyday life.

The chapters that follow observe and explore this process by examining the ideas and methods of a broad and disparate group of left-wing public intellectuals. Their work both reflected and critiqued the market logics of neoliberalism, which, they all argued, fostered a detachment from reality. These intellectuals 'sensed' the climate of obfuscation, and their

analysis, no matter how varied in subject-matter, consistently orientated around it. This indirectness meant that in their work, obfuscation operated predominantly at the level of feeling and emotion. The purpose of analysing such a group of thinkers during the 1980s and 1990s is that their identification of neoliberal market logic and obfuscation elucidated the wholesale rightward shift that was occurring across American politics, economics, and culture, and demonstrated the weakness of the left at the time. These thinkers and writers were, essentially, losers. Their critiques were not adopted, and, if anything, society moved in the opposite direction to what they would have preferred. However, the value of what we might call their 'loserdom' is that it furthered a degree of alienation and dissatisfaction that they leveraged to offer illuminating and critical analyses of the dominant understandings of reality, as they were consistently forced to pierce the film of obfuscation before they could try to offer alternative forms of politics.

The seven public intellectuals under discussion are: Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, Ellen Willis, Thomas Frank, Bret Easton Ellis, and Octavia Butler. They each investigated the discrepancy between mainstream narratives of reality and their perception of what was truly occurring. Essentially, their work reflected the fact that truth was being determined by an economic logic — what was true was what sold — and that this process, and the resulting obfuscation, was consistent with neoliberalism's discursive logic. Not all of these figures were as radical as each other — Chomsky and Willis pushed for a far larger scale of change than Didion and Ellis. Nevertheless, they were all critical of the mainstream and wanted their work to inform a wider public audience about an aspect of injustice or excess within late twentieth century US society. This combination of public communication and

critique is ultimately why these thinkers can all be categorised as left-wing public intellectuals. Chomsky tackled imperialism and media practice from an anarchist perspective. Didion and Vidal used their connections to the establishment to critique the political class. Willis and Frank were cultural critics who both challenged the limitations of popular forms of dissent. Ellis and Butler wrote novels that used the conventions of their respective genres to query the accepted standards of success and security. It would be an overstatement to claim that they were all equally committed to overthrowing capitalism, imperialism, and social inequality. However, despite their differences in focus and approach they were unified by a desire to focus on reality and to limit the exploitation that was occurring within it, as they all ultimately strove for a more equal and authentic society. Through this, they each channelled and embodied, to varying degrees, aspects of the various denominations that formed the broad church of American leftism at the end of the twentieth century and demonstrated the challenges that alternative political and cultural thought was facing at the time.

We begin with the work of linguist and anarchist Noam Chomsky, who is the subject of Chapter 1. Of all the writers examined, his engagement with obfuscation was the most explicit. Much of Chomsky's political work focused on American foreign policy and media practice, and the distancing of reality played a significant part in his analysis of how these systems and institutions operated. Chomsky outlined his sense of obfuscation by arguing that American foreign policy was 'brutal' rather than virtuous, and that the media were

'obsequious' rather than informative, placing these discrepancies as part of the wider climate of obfuscation.

In Chapter 2, the writers Gore Vidal and Joan Didion are considered alongside each other to offer an insight into how political and cultural elites both enhanced and were impacted by obfuscation. Vidal and Didion argued that politicians and journalists were 'self-serving' and benefitted from a climate in which the focus had shifted away from reality itself. Vidal pursued this line in his unsuccessful 1982 election campaign in the Democratic Party's Californian Senatorial primary, where he combined his intellectual and patrician persona with a version of populist politics. Didion published multiple essays across the 1980s and 1990s that detailed the relationship between the media and politicians and included coverage of the vacuousness of the 1984 presidential election reporting, the parochial and chaotic Reagan administration, and the distorted coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

In Chapter 3, the countercultural critics and journalists Ellen Willis and Thomas Frank are partnered. Both tracked the ebbs and flows of the culture wars, and their analysis was unified through their positioning of obfuscation as a product of 'inauthentic dissent.' Willis and Frank provide the opportunity to grapple with the extent to which obfuscation permeated across wider society. In different ways they both argued that its prevalence induced a state of myopia that inhibited people's ability to understand and challenge power. Willis was a radical feminist who saw substantial political value in pleasure and suggested that guilt was used to suppress radical thought and action. Frank, and his publication *The*

Baffler, embarked on a series of tirades that struck out at corporatized popular culture, which he perceived as legitimised by academic cultural studies.

Finally, Chapter 4 places the novelists Bret Easton Ellis and Octavia Butler in tandem. Their fiction challenged readers to question society's expectations of what was worth aspiring towards and how spiritual salvation could be achieved. Indeed, both writers argued that these assumptions prevented the acknowledgement of 'grim reality.' Their efforts enable an analysis of neoliberal selfhood and its relationship to obfuscation, along with the impact this had on questions of societal cohesion. While Ellis satirised the lifestyles of the rich and famous, depicting them as decadent and debauched, Butler wrote science-fiction, and the novels under discussion here engaged with dystopia and utopia to craft cautionary tales that urged the reader to consider how societal collapse could arise through climate change and how this could be averted.

The work of all these figures attempted to pierce the film of obfuscation that they felt was layered over society during the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so, they tried to find and nurture a new sense of reality. This dissertation is a work of intellectual history, but it is one that uses the ideas and methods of its chosen thinkers to demonstrate and dissect a consistent underlying feeling within their ideational developments. As well as offering new perspectives on each of these thinkers, this approach also aims to highlight how neoliberal

logics have proliferated, and, consequently, warped American societal bonds and ideas about selfhood.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a complicated but valuable term. As the historian Daniel Rodgers has stressed, it has been used to describe a range of historical processes: the late capitalist economy, an intellectual movement based around restabilising and evolving the ideas behind laissez-faire capitalism, a set of policies that have been enacted on a global level and have often been connected with fostering an overtly pro-business climate, and a cultural force that refracts our understandings of reality through an economic filter.[1] In the chapters that follow, it is the latter definition that is predominately engaged with, as neoliberalism installed and intensified a logic of competition and marketisation that consistently influenced cultural and political life in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to a wholesale rightward shift across US society. The purpose of adopting this approach is that it enables an analysis that encapsulates the relationship between culture and economics, the left and right, fear and optimism. By examining obfuscation, then, I seek to elucidate some of the mechanics of political and cultural division — namely the relentless logic of competition and the resulting preoccupation with driving or responding to certain narratives rather than reality.

Neoliberal rationality encouraged Americans to treat all action and interaction through an

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[1] Daniel Rodgers, 'The Uses and Abuses of "Neoliberalism"', *Dissent*, accessed June 2021.
https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/uses-and-abuses-neoliberalism-debate.

economic lens. In doing so, it extolled and enshrined markets and market logic, competition, and the entitlement of societal winners and the diminishment of losers. A central aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate the significant influence of neoliberal logic on patterns of political and cultural thought, as the varied intellectuals under discussion all consistently identified and critiqued discourse that was being organised through a market logic. This neoliberalisation of discourse was perceived to distort conceptions of reality, as they became analytic tools to be bought, sold, and speculated upon in an individual's pursuit of optimisation. This increased the intensity of obfuscation. Naturally, as a feeling, obfuscation was not a historically unique phenomenon, but during the 1980s and 1990s it was operating at a significant intensity and became a consistent theme that a variety of left-wing thinkers were all drawn to — as the competitive logic of neoliberalism facilitated its production and enabled its elevation. Their thought and ideas attempted to pierce this film and remove the weight that obfuscation was holding over society, a point demonstrated by how their critiques were focused on identifying ennui, detachment, and dissonance, rather than launching their own alternative political silos that contained their particular logic, vision, and affective undercurrents. Resultingly, the intellectuals discussed here expressed a degree of frustration or even outright anger, their writings rarely reflected an aura of optimism for a new future. They were arguing from the back foot, as they were continuously trying to untangle reality from the myriad of narratives that they felt were distorting it.

Furthermore, this marketisation of discourse and the affect of obfuscation is present within, to varying degrees, the existing scholarship on neoliberalism, be they Foucauldian framings, Marxist analyses, or intellectual histories. This dissertation tentatively synthesises these

approaches and develops them by drawing out the role of obfuscation within neoliberalism, as the intellectuals under investigation found and reacted to discourse that was moderated by competition rather than rational critique. Consequently, they consistently perceived a discrepancy between the winning conceptions of reality and actual reality, a difference that facilitated their feeling of obfuscation.

The Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism explores its logic and operating practices and how they extend beyond the economic sphere and ultimately influenced conceptions of reality. In other words, it engages with neoliberalism as a force, portraying it as a framework that exerts pressure and influence via institutions, the culture at large, and individual subjectivity. In his 1978-1979 lectures on 'The Birth of Biopolitics' Michel Foucault approached neoliberalism as a "governmentality", referring towards an "art of government" that applies to both how the state itself is governed and how individuals govern themselves.[2] Government and governing therefore adopted a 'style' of practice, which consequently contained an underlying logic, with Foucault pursuing an understanding "of this new type of rationality in the art of government".[3] Foucault portrayed neoliberal governmentality as the proliferation of market-based logics across social, cultural, and political spheres — a concept referred to as homo oeconomicus — which fostered a climate of hyper-individualism. Competition became the dominant mode of exchange and interaction, with the state and the judicial systems providing and enforcing the rules of the

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[2] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* ed. Michel Snellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1-22.
[3] *Ibid*., 20.

economic game that organised society.[4]

In clarifying the nature of homo oeconomicus, Mitchell Dean stresses that, "whether we approach them as producers or consumers, economic subjects should be regarded as their own capital, which is the source of both their own income and satisfaction."[5] Homo oeconomicus and human capital, where individuals are encouraged to invest in themselves, thus lays a foundation for obfuscation as it encourages engagement with conceptions of reality as a means through which to facilitate individual optimisation, as well as treating the self and others as entirely responsible for their own circumstances.

However, as Philip Mirowski notes, Foucault's account underemphasised how exactly homo oeconomicus, and neoliberalism more generally, manifested themselves.[6] Nevertheless, others have expounded upon Foucault's framework and detailed the influence and impact of neoliberalism as a force and as a subjectivity, and crucially they gesture towards obfuscation within this. Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval, and Wendy Brown have all advanced the Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism. In their joint work, Dardot and Laval have explored how the neoliberal governing rationality emerged in Western society.[7] They argue that neoliberal society is historically unique and came into effect in the 1980s and 1990s, asserting that it is distinct from liberalism, as neoliberal rationality is not primarily

[4] *Ibid.*, 173-175.
[5] Mitchell Dean, 'Foucault and the Neoliberalism Controversy' in *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism* ed. Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konigs, and David Primrose (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), 6.
[6] Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2014), 79.
[7] Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2017), 17-18.

concerned with the limits to government, but rather asks "how is the market to be made

the principle of the government of human being and self-government alike?"[8] The impact

that neoliberalism has "is the construction of a new subjectivity" that leads to perceiving

oneself as a form of human capital that needs to be invested in.[9] Dardot and Laval view the

implementation of neoliberalism and the enshrinement of competition as the product of

"strategy."[10] They are careful to stress that by strategy they do not predominately mean

that neoliberalism arose through a "well-thought-out project" or a "conspiracy", but rather

that it began "under the pressure of certain conditions" and was "formed in the course of

the confrontation itself" as the desire to implement market logics offered "a rallying-point

for hitherto relatively scattered forces."[11]

In this reading, three forces were drawn to the banner of neoliberalism. First, there was the

synergistic relationship between the shifts in capitalism and neoliberal policy, such as the

rising wages and stagflation and the development of monetarist policy in the 1970s.[12]

Second, the ideological conflict over the welfare state by politicians and intellectuals, such

as by Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, who pushed the idea of the market as

efficient and self-regulating.[13] Third, a system of economic and social "discipline" emerged

that encouraged commitment towards competition and optimisation.[14] This leads Dardot

and Laval to note that neoliberal strategy attempts to get individuals "to accept the market

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[8] *Ibid.*, 17-18.
[9] *Ibid.*, 15.
[10] *Ibid.*, 148.
[11] *Ibid.*, 148-149.
[12] *Ibid.*, 152.
[13] *Ibid.*, 159-160.
[14] *Ibid.*, 177.

situation imposed on them as 'reality' — i.e. as the only 'rules of the game'" and that an

individual needs to take stock and prioritise their own score "if they do not want to lose out

in the 'game'" as they have to work to "enhance their personal capital in a universe where

accumulation seems to be the general law of existence."[15] In viewing neoliberalism as a

form of discipline that encouraged conformity with market logics, and which therefore

encouraged a diversion from actual reality via the pressure to win and avoid loss, Dardot

and Laval indicated that obfuscation was layered within the foundations of human capital

and the implementation of neoliberalism. This dissertation aims to draw this third layer

further out.

The political scientist Wendy Brown views neoliberal rationality as a threat to societal

cohesion, because of the way it has undermined liberal democracy. For Brown,

neoliberalism pushed for action, interaction, and reality to be processed on economic terms,

at the expense of liberal democracy's capacity to value and pursue popular participation,

freedom, and equality.[16] She went on to outline that in the Foucauldian comprehension of

neoliberalism, rational actors accept the truth the market dictates and "accept 'reality';

conversely, those who act according to other principles are not simply irrational, but refuse

'reality.'"[17] The implication of this crucial aspect of neoliberalism for this dissertation is that

it suggests that those who lose, and are thus unable to achieve the truths that neoliberal

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[15] *Ibid.*, 169-170.

[16] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York, New York: Zone Books, 2015), 17.

[17] *Ibid.*, 67.

rationality sets out, are disconnected from that reality.

Moreover, Brown's analysis of how neoliberalism interacts with the pursuit of truth advances the "marketplace of ideas" as the means through which conceptions of reality were compared to establish a dominant understanding. If the market is the medium to decide how much value is given to conceptions of reality, then these conceptions are in competition with each other, and neoliberalism, on a discursive level, is the marketplace of ideas writ large. Brown herself further advances the marketplace of ideas as a component of neoliberalism in her analysis of the 2010 US Supreme Court decision *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*. Here, she examines the majority opinion by Justice Kennedy and argues that, in the political marketplace, speech is the equivalent to capital, with government intervention positioned as limiting speech and utterly free speech as an unequivocal good.[18] Moreover, Brown finds that the implications of speech being analogous to capital were that it was seen as capable of appreciating through investment, and that the "associations of political speech with freedom, conscience, deliberation, and persuasion are nowhere in sight."[19] In summation, Brown's analysis positions the marketplace of ideas as a fundamental component of neoliberalism. Over the following chapters I will expand on this identification and outline how left-wing intellectuals grappled with it during the 1980s and

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[18] *Ibid*., 157.
[19] *Ibid*., 158.

1990s with obfuscation being both a sign and result of discourse being filtered through a market logic.

While Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism focus on its operating practices, Marxist approaches detail its material impact. This is represented best in the work of political geographer David Harvey, who views neoliberalism as a rehabilitation of capitalism following the Keynesian period of the mid-twentieth century.[20] Harvey frames the rise of neoliberalism as stemming from the "crisis of capital accumulation" that occurred in the 1970s, helped along by upper-class neoliberal reform, which redistributed wealth upwards and widened inequality, as a way to protect elites from "political and economic annihilation."[21] Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practice" that posits that human flourishing is best achieved through the proliferation of markets, free trade, and private property, with the state existing merely to facilitate and create markets.[22]

From this, Harvey outlines the material reality of neoliberalism, which lay beneath the film of obfuscation. For example, he notes that the share of the US national income that the top 0.1 per cent of income earners held went from 2 per cent in 1978 to over 6 per cent in 1999, and the ratio of median compensation of workers to CEOs went from 30:1 in 1970 to 500:1 by 2000.[23] Along with this, Harvey argued that President Ronald Reagan's administration

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[20] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Additionally, see: Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[21] Harvey, *A Brief History*, 15-16.
[22] *Ibid*., 2.
[23] *Ibid*., 16.

"provided the requisite political backing" to enable tax and budget cuts, the weakening of trade unions, deregulation in areas such as telecommunications and airlines, and the decline of real wages for the lowest earners.[24] These are, according to Harvey, part of the shifts within American society that neoliberalism obscured, muddied, and made more remote, which in turn heightened the state of obfuscation.

Beyond the actual acceleration of financial inequality by neoliberalism, Harvey notes that, in the US context, the upper classes prevented their annihilation by raising the principle of individual freedom to the standard of common sense.[25] This was achieved as the ideas of neoliberal intellectuals were adopted by political institutions and by mass appeals having an element of "disguise" to them to push elitist economic policy.[26] However, it is worth noting that Harvey later rejects the notion that the culture wars were mere distraction.[27] Nevertheless, he does advocate for analytic focus to remain on the "material grounding for the construction of consent."[28]

Furthermore, Harvey argues that common sense can be "obfuscating" and "can be mobilized to mask other realities" that could be obtained under a different common sense. [29] This framing partially informs the use of obfuscation within this dissertation, in that the term is applied to analyse the process of how realities are 'masked.' However, I also expand

[24] *Ibid.*, 25-26.
[25] *Ibid.*, 39.
[26] *Ibid.*, 40.
[27] *Ibid.*, 205.
[28] *Ibid.*, 41.
[29] *Ibid.*, 39.

upon it by detailing how obfuscation related to a neoliberal logic and the consistent role that it played within left thought during the 1980s and 1990s, as it was positioned as a feeling, tone, and mood as much as an exact set of socio-economic processes.

Whilst the Marxist approach articulates the material impact of neoliberalism, it does not suggest that obfuscation is a component of neoliberalism in and of itself. Instead, the role that obfuscation plays for Harvey is nearer to that of false consciousness, as 'acceptance' of neoliberalism is positioned as a dominant form of ideology. In the subsequent chapters, the disconnection from reality that neoliberalism caused is framed as a form of affect rather than of false consciousness, as the aim here is not to demonstrate what warped conceptions of reality were being advanced by the establishment. Instead, the goal is to outline how a disparate range of intellectuals all identified a similar sensation of obfuscation to be in circulation, was operating at a high intensity, and to demonstrate how their analysis found a connection between this sensation and a neoliberal market logic. Another reason the Marxist conception of "false consciousness" is not a useful label is that it suggests that there was little or no departure from the establishment's desired conceptions of reality. Instead, by focusing on obfuscation — a feeling — it allows for an insight into the ennui, dissatisfaction, anger, and even apathy that neoliberalism prompted whilst still engaging with the ideas and situations that enabled a disconnection from reality.

Recent intellectual histories of neoliberalism provide an overlapping set of insights into the history of the concept and the value of analysing it through the prism of left-wing thought. Sören Brandes notes that intellectual historians, in an attempt to make neoliberalism more

digestible as a concept, have pushed towards "replacing a discussion of 'neoliberalism with one of 'neoliberals'" and have thus aligned with the "actor-centred terms that currently prevail in the broader discipline of history" — a point made possible by intellectual history's "stark" commitment towards individual agency.[30] Brandes ultimately advocates for a definition of neoliberalism as a broad, conceptual term, an approach this dissertation also adopts. However, this is still a work of intellectual history, and it contains an array of intellectual actors. Consequently, the public intellectuals and their ideas that I focus upon are treated more as conduits that channelled and outlined, whilst still challenging, obfuscation's increased prominence and how neoliberalism's market logic encouraged it.

Nevertheless, the selection of actors I engage with over the following four chapters marks a significant deviation from previous intellectual histories of neoliberalism, which have tended to focus on right-wing thinkers, such as Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek, and Gary Becker. A focus on left-wing intellectuals therefore affords the opportunity to expand the intellectual histories of neoliberalism.[31] Second, American leftism is a broad church and each intellectual discussed here varied in their level of commitment and area of focus. However, this disparate collective was unified by a shared critique of capitalistic excess and social injustice via a hostility towards market logic. By examining this loose array of figures, I aim to demonstrate both the high intensity that obfuscation was operating at, as it was creating waves in a myriad of spheres, and the shifts that took place within left thought

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[30] Sören Brandes, 'In the Thick of It: History and the Crisis of Neoliberalism', *Journal of Modern European History*, vol 17, no.4 (2019), 409.

[31] These intellectual histories have often focused on works such as: Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Friedrich Von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1944), and Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

after the decline of the New Left.

Intellectual histories of neoliberalism explore its development and acceptance. It is described as a political project, although not one that was inevitable, despite forming a reaction to the decline of laissez faire economics, that its intellectual proponents were not monolithic, and that they were swayed by the events and structures around them but were consistent enough in their vision to take short term losses for long term gains. The likes of Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, Angus Burgin, Quinn Slobodian, Andrew Stedman Jones, Kim Phillips-Fein, Nancy MacLean, and Melinda Cooper all analyse the ideas and actions of the neoliberal intellectuals, such as Friedman, and the groups they were associated with, such as the Mont Pelerin Society, with Mirowski and Plehwe framing these intellectuals as part of a "neoliberal thought collective."[32] This is not to suggest that Prime Minister Margret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan's policies exactly mirrored the ideas of neoliberal intellectuals, a point that Slobodian and Stedman Jones stress in particular.[33] This dissertation is strongly informed by this point, as its focus lies on the intellectual reaction towards what has been termed, "actually existing neoliberalism" rather than the specific

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[32] Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe ed., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), Andrew Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (London: Scribe, 2018), Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books, 2017). For a specific discussion of neoliberal thought collectives see: Dieter Plehwe, 'Introduction', *The Road from Mont Pèlerin*. 1-42.
[33] Slobodian, *Globalists*, 19-20, and Stedman Jones, *Masters*, 9-10.

ideas the 'neoliberals' developed.[34] However, even Mirowski in his work on neoliberal

intellectuals notes that they and their logic encouraged a mood and climate of obfuscation

as their standard for truth did not arise through evidence, facts, and rationality, but rather:

"Neoliberals have great faith in the marketplace of ideas; and for them, the truth is

validated as what sells."[35] Ultimately, across the intellectual histories of neoliberalism there

is the notion that there is a line between ideational neoliberalism and the neoliberalism that

has played out in reality.

Despite this division, the existing intellectual histories do make tangible the level of

influence that neoliberal intellectuals had, as well as the ways in which their ideas were

nurtured. Phillips-Fein and MacLean explore the relationship between thinkers and funders,

contextualising the ideas that were produced, as they argue the support they received from

wealthy backers resulted in these neoliberal intellectuals becoming legitimising agents of

capital.[36] In this process of the development and implementation of neoliberal policy, these

histories observe a sense of subversion and interplay between economics and culture, with

Stedman Jones arguing: "In the American context, neoliberal ideas usually crept in under the

radar" and that "economic neoliberal policy prescriptions combined with forms of social and

cultural conservatism reacting strongly to 1960s liberal permissiveness."[37] Additionally,

MacLean echoes this relationship between economics and culture when she argues that the

neoliberal movement identified that popular support would be necessary, and that it could

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[34] Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner, Nik Theodore, 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism', in *The Sage Handbook of Neoliberalism*, 3-15.
[35] Mirowski, 'Postface Defining Neoliberalism', *The Road from Mont Pèlerin*, 424.
[36] Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, xi, and MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, xx.
[37] Stedman Jones, *Masters*, 9.

come through the Republican Party, the religious right, and conservatives. While they all

aligned with the neoliberal aim of a limited government, these cultural and social groups

were essentially subordinated to an economic platform.[38]

Stedman Jones and MacLean ultimately view the realms of politics, economics, and culture

as distinct, which moves against the Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism that

portrays it as overarching and unitary. However, whilst still operating within the mode of

intellectual history, Melinda Cooper challenges the primacy of the economic over the

sociocultural, finding them to be interconnected, as she argues that neoliberal intellectuals

reacted to the upheavals of the 1960s and positioned the family as the centre around which

the economic order should be built.[39] Cooper's portrayal of the interdependencies of

economics and culture to neoliberal thought further justifies a broad understanding of it. In

summation, these intellectual histories of neoliberalism view it as a political project and

focus on individuals and groups who had a degree of access to formal institutions of power.

Neoliberalism has too often been viewed from the 'top down', which means that its full

intellectual impact has been missed. Focusing on the reaction of left intellectuals towards

neoliberalism affords this dissertation an opportunity to outline the discursive barriers

neoliberalism developed, as well as to examine how left intellectuals attempted to

overcome them and how these efforts elucidated the operating practices of marketized

discourse. Neoliberalism, during the 1980s and 1990s, was an overarching force that

sprawled across society — no longer just the preserve of economists and politicians but a

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[38] MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, xxvi-xxvii.
[39] Cooper, *Family Values*, 8-9.

logic that shifted the national tone and influenced its intellectual critics as they identified

and challenged the heightened mood of obfuscation.

Methodology and Key Terms

Reality, in regard to this dissertation and its intellectuals, is not approached in a definite

sense. It is not a subject that I will now, or over the course of the following chapters, define.

Instead, reality is broached in the negative, in that the seven intellectuals that will be

surveyed all consistently felt, argued against, and criticised what was not reality — in this

dissertation this 'not reality' is actively engaged with by referring towards it as obfuscation,

finding that it was a sensation that rippled across US society and was intensified by the

market logics of neoliberalism. Consequently, for leftist thinkers during the 1980s and 1990s

reality was a plane that was reachable, had been reached at times, but towards the end of

the twentieth century was rarely reached by the broad swirls of political and cultural

discourse, and instead America's thinkers and writers had largely settled upon a film of

obfuscation that shifted and morphed but only ever allowed for a limited contact with

reality.

By adopting this approach, I frame the ideas and analysis of my intellectual protagonists as a

series of historical snapshots which reflected, embodied, and resisted this ontological

paradigm of unreality and the ways in which a neoliberal market logic facilitated its

intensification. Ultimately, this dissertation is an ideational centric form of intellectual

history. The focus is placed upon the ideas the intellectuals developed and the connections

between them, rather than focusing on the actual intellectuals themselves and the networks they shaped and operated within. Ideas are grappled with in a broad sense here, they are broached as a general cognitive process that attempts to comprehend and connect with reality and the people within it, and, crucially, that this process contains an affective component that can be drawn out to elucidate the psychic experience of a time and place. This is not a comparative exercise that deconstructs the similarities and differences between highly detailed and specific ideas. Consequently, the terms 'narrative' and the 'marketplace of narratives' are deployed, as they reflect both the lack of specificity such a broad approach engenders whilst also allowing for an analysis of the underlying connections that sustain and direct cultural and political thought across a plethora of areas. It is these connections, their affective component, and the influence and presence of neoliberal logic within them that drives this dissertation, rather than it being a philosophical discussion about humanity's ability to comprehend reality, or it being a discussion on literary theory and the nature of narratives. The following chapters are an exercise in historical assessment, with each intellectual providing a series of vignettes that detail the relationship between neoliberalism and obfuscation — the affective component of the idea of unreality. An ideational form of intellectual history is, methodologically, uniquely able to straddle this combination of feeling, ideas, intellectuals, cultural and political discourse, and the structures organising a time and place in order to outline some of the subtler mechanics and foundations of existence during the end of the twentieth century.

Neoliberalism enshrined market logics across society. John Patrick Leary notes that markets and marketplaces are widespread analytic devices as they are treated as: "A synonym for

exchange, whether intellectual or economic, an ontological feature of human social life, an implacable natural force, or a cybernetic network reliant on a strong state: a market can be whatever you need it to be."[40] Leftist intellectuals during the 1980s and 1990s engaged with and outlined the effects of ideas being filtered through a market logic, finding that the market, as a discursive process, led to conceptions of reality being treated as frameworks to be bought, sold, and invested in.

Essentially, left thought found that under neoliberalism discourse was modulated by a 'marketplace of narratives' model. If the marketplace of *ideas* is supposedly based around ideas being able to freely circulate and compete so that the best may win out, the marketplace of *narratives* differs in that whilst the narratives do compete amongst each other for prominence, they do not necessarily interact as singular ideas may — there is a distinctiveness and lack of overlap between competing narratives that is not necessarily resolved through debate and critique, and discourse resultingly becomes centred around amplifying desired narratives and drowning out undesired ones. The marketplace of narratives thus offers a purer and more aggressive framing of neoliberal discursive competition and is consequently a model that is better able to clarify neoliberalism's full reach. This approach, according to the intellectuals analysed here, hinged upon the production and maintenance of obfuscation — meaning that conceptions of reality were only deemed valuable if they aligned with the interests of the powerful or could be

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[40] John Patrick Leary, *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2018), 135.

associated with a prior conception of success, rather than any potential truthfulness or accuracy.

The marketplace of narratives facilitated the climate of obfuscation that leftist intellectuals felt. They were losers in this marketplace, their narratives gained little traction and the narratives that were popular or readily bought were not just ones that they opposed on ideological grounds but rather they felt those narratives circumvented or did not encourage an engagement with reality. Consequently, the marketplace of narratives and its neoliberal logic of competition enforced a winner/loser dichotomy, and this dissertation uses this framing to analyse series of public intellectuals and political discourse more generally in order to elucidate the workings of, and to draw out the reaction towards, neoliberal discourse, finding that it resulted in an intensification of obfuscation that was sustained by it subtly and consistently spreading across US political and cultural life during the 1980s and 1990s. Leftist thinkers are source base that synergise with this framing and were well positioned to demonstrate it, they were not uniquely able to access reality but their lack of influence and investment, and therefore loserdom, did afford them a distance that encouraged them to locate and focus on the increasing intensity of obfuscation as they grappled with the dissonance between those winning narratives and the direction that the US was shifting politically and culturally.

Narrative is used here to refer to a particular understanding of an event, process, or subject with its own set of values and logic that influence an understanding of reality. Narratives are essentially trends of explanation and understanding across society. In relation to

neoliberalism, and in terms of how left intellectuals analysed the movements within the marketplace of narratives, people were framed as psychically committed to understandings of events or conceptions of reality. Consequently, I treat narratives as tools of explanation, which can therefore be used as analytical devices that illustrate the competition between conceptions of reality as they were the 'discursive stock' that was traded across the marketplace and which, if adopted or rejected by individuals or institutions with the power, influence, and resources to shift the material dynamics of reality created the impression of societal winners and losers. In this sense, the focus on narratives and marketplace is an effort to ground this dissertation's analysis within neoliberalism's own logic in order to demonstrate its own operating practices and the impact they had on the wider historical shifts of the 1980s and 1990s.

The historical framework deployed within this dissertation highlights the process by which narratives were bought and sold by employing the key terms 'establishment narrative' and 'paradigms of thought.' I have developed these terms as a means to hold together the varied approaches taken by the intellectuals I examine, and to elucidate how they identified a discrepancy between the 'winning' narratives of neoliberalism and reality. The establishment narrative is largely a synonym for the hegemonic conception of reality. Its purpose is to encapsulate the narratives that are used to ensure that hierarchies of power are maintained. It thus contains within it a multitude of individual narratives that each operated within different spheres to ensure a consistent advancement of logics and values that enable the continued victory of society's winners. In general, it is this conception of reality that has won out in the marketplace of narratives. The intellectuals examined in this

dissertation framed those holding power as being both elevated above the establishment narrative and as subscribers to it who succumb to obfuscation themselves. However, a consistent thread is the suggestion that societal 'winners' view their position as legitimate.

This notion of a dominant 'winning' narrative is similar to, yet distinct from, Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemonic common sense. Gramsci viewed each stratum of society as possessing its own group of intellectuals, which develop understandings of reality whilst being influenced by wider societal trends.[41] Gramsci does not discount traditional intellectuals such as academics, arguing these figures can legitimise the dominant class if that class works to ideologically "assimilate and conquer" them, leading to a hegemonic conception of reality that is entrenched as a form of common sense, or the patterns of thought and standards that reach the status of implicit assumption.[42] Furthermore, Gramsci stressed that a sense of time and place is "nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality."[43] Gramsci simultaneously managed to develop a critique that observed the elitist elements to intellectualism, whilst also observing that intellectuals are not insular, and that conceptions of reality are political. Nevertheless, the benefit of focusing on an 'establishment narrative' rather than 'common sense' is its flexibility, which allows us to draw a connection between

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[41] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, 9.
[42] *Ibid.*, 10, 325-327.
[43] *Ibid.*, 345.

the different winning narratives each intellectual identified, along with their unsuccessful competitors.

As it is used throughout this dissertation, 'paradigms of thought' is a term that refers to the combination of narratives that an individual holds, and as a collective unit that places individuals who each subscribe to a similar conception and method of understanding reality into a group. Narratives contain both values and a system of logic, and, therefore, if a narrative about a different event or process uses a similar system of logic and aligns with the same values a person already holds, they are presupposed to receive this new narrative. The implications of this bundling together of narratives for the historical framework of this dissertation is that, under neoliberalism, people and groups are understood as 'buying into' paradigms of thought, and their perception of reality and the nature of their political imagination is constrained by narratives within their paradigm.

Due to each intellectual I explore engaging with a different aspect of the establishment narrative and that they often indirectly approached obfuscation — it was a point they felt — it is necessary to treat them and the marketplace of narratives as operating at a fundamentally affective level. Sara Ahmed pithily summarises affect as "sticky": it is essentially the undercurrent of sensations a person feels, which "sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects."[44] Lauren Berlant's work on "cruel optimism" is also useful here, which they frame as an affective force in circulation

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[44] Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', *Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), ed. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 29.

since the 1980s, and which they define as "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[45] Berlant is concerned with fantasy and the historical significance of conceptions of a 'good life' and approaches this through "conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment", and launches the claim that "the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else".[46]

Two points can be adopted from Berlant. Methodologically, this dissertation accepts that the present is experienced on an affective level, and from this, narratives, as tools to comprehend reality, have an affective resonance and that left-wing intellectuals' analysis of narratives therefore had an affective component. The second is that if cruel optimism is accepted as an affective force that was in operation during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a process of desire and unfulfillment in action, a process that would have to be mediated in some way for it to be sustained. This dissertation argues that obfuscation mediated between cruelty and optimism, enabling the adoption of suboptimal fantasies. However, Berlant's periodization is somewhat slippery. Their sources were "linked in relation to the retraction, during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe" and consequently, as they were tackling "the historical sensorium" that emerged under cruel optimism, it becomes framed as markedly distinct from the one that existed prior to it.[47] However, by focusing on obfuscation, a feeling that is not historically unique but one that intensified in prominence

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[45] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
[46] *Ibid*., 4.
[47] *Ibid*., 3.

during the 1980s and 1990s, this dissertation is able to offer an insight into how the 'new' historical sensorium emerged. The use of the 'establishment narrative' as a device is central here as it can reflect the discrepancy between aspiration and reality that produced a cruel optimism and is able to engage with the competition that is central to a neoliberal market logic.

This combination of narratives and affect, where the former embodies and carries within it the latter, can be further drawn together so that they can be used to analyse both the mood and tone of neoliberal discourse during the 1980s and 1990s. Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling" concept offers a means to do this. The structure of feeling aims to frame how a present moment is experienced, hence its usefulness for drawing together narratives and affect. Williams argues that no matter how well historical analysis manages to comprehend the material circumstances, the social design, and hegemonic ideas of a time period, a gap in understanding remains as the felt experience of existing in relation to particular material, social, and ideational circumstances is missed.[48] The structure of feeling is thus a structure in that "you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren't otherwise connected", and that it arises from identifying a repeated "feeling much more than thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones" which are found in cultural sources.[49] I therefore use the concept as a means to unify all of the seven intellectuals and to situate obfuscation as a feeling and tone that they each felt and identified as consistently present across the course of the 1980s and 1990s and which was enhanced by neoliberalism

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[48] Raymond Williams, *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 33.
[49] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso, 2015), 159.

— ultimately positioning these two decades as an age of obfuscation.

Left-wing thought during the 1980s and 1990s interlinked obfuscation with the discursive marketplace, elucidating the depth and impact of neoliberal logic. Broadly, the marketplace of narratives was found to foster obfuscation by enabling inaccurate narratives, suboptimal values, and flawed logics to be sold. The framework of narratives and paradigms of thought used to pursue this analysis complies with neoliberal logic by focusing on the perceived winning narratives — with each victorious narrative representing an aspect of the establishment narrative — and their discrepancies with reality. By focusing on this gap, leftist intellectuals demonstrated the high level of obfuscation during the 1980s and 1990s.

The Histories of the 1980s and 1990s

It is now necessary to review how historians have understood the political and social changes that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, as they contextualise neoliberalism and the marketplace of narratives. Throughout the literature, historians have argued that these changes were driven by conflict and that this produced a rightward shift economically and politically, but a leftward movement culturally. A focus on neoliberalism challenges this framing by demonstrating the unification between the supposedly separate spheres of politics, economics, and culture and consequently that there was a wholesale rightward shift during the period, with cultural practice and discourse being substantially moderated by a right-wing economic logic comprised of competition and markets. Furthermore, with historians characterising the period as one of conflict and schism the subsequent chapters

will demonstrate that this state was sustained by the neoliberal marketplace of narratives and that this encouraged the rightward shift across economics, politics, and culture. This means that obfuscation was a fundamental component of neoliberalism itself, and not just a factor in its implementation.

To fully comprehend the rightward movement that did occur, an insight into the shifting nature of post-war American conservatism itself is necessary. George Nash offers the foundational text on American conservatism, but Corey Robin provides a necessary expansion. They each explore how conservatism operated, and in doing so they identify connections between its economic and cultural components that synergised with neoliberalism. Nash is hesitant to define conservatism, but he positions Reagan as a figure who drew together the various strands of this protean political ideology, such as the anti-communist right, social conservatives, and libertarians.[50] That this moment of unification occurred in the 1980s opens the potential for neoliberalism to be viewed as a unifying force between economics and culture. Robin offers an insight into what made the unification between libertarians and moral traditionalists tenable by exploring the foundations of conservatism, demonstrating the connection between neoliberalism and conservatism more broadly. Robin's definition of conservatism focuses on the role of backlash, as he defines conservatism as an ideology that stems from the "the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back."[51] Robin argues that conservatism is an ideology that encourages domination and the maintenance of the power structures that

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[50] George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2017), 362.
[51] Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

allow it, echoing Harvey's notion of capitalists embracing neoliberalism to reassert

themselves. This exceptionally broad approach risks becoming analytically unstable, but

Robin at least makes efforts to pare it down, and in doing so suggests a connection between

conservatism and neoliberalism. He notes that the market became a proving ground to

establish societal winners and that part of what sustained conservatism was encouragement

for the public to "locate themselves symbolically in the ruling class", a point that offers a

sense of the longer roots of obfuscation which late twentieth century neoliberalism

enhanced.[52] Consequently, the left intellectuals that are discussed in the subsequent

chapters are read as attempting to unpack the discursive friction that conservatism

encouraged, as its unification through fusionism and it being motivated by backlashes were

processes that flourished or were provided increased oxygen through the market logic of

neoliberalism.

Political histories of the 1980s offer further insight into America's rightward shift. There is

consensus that the 1980s was a transformative period in America, but debate and

disagreement exists over the causes and impact of this change. Both Sean Wilentz and Philip

Jenkins note that the transformation that occurred in the 1980s had begun prior to the

decade. Wilentz notes that America pivoted towards conservatism in the 1970s and that

Reagan managed to harness this movement, and Jenkins argues that the rightward turn had

its roots in the upheavals of the 1960s.[53] Gil Troy and Robert Collins specifically argue that

the overall effect of the 1980s transformation was a positive one that restored a sense of

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[52] *Ibid.*, 30.
[53] Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974-2008* (New York, New York: Harper, 2008), 1-11, and, Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

optimism.[54] Furthermore, both dispute the notion of a wholesale rightward shift, arguing

that culturally America moved leftward, or at least embraced certain forms of

progressivism, despite moving rightward economically and politically.[55] Collins and Troy

thus provide histories of the decade that place more emphasis on those who benefited than

those who were marginalised. Doug Rossinow challenges this interpretation, arguing that

the 1980s were predominately a conservative decade despite "substantial resistance".[56]

Moreover, Rossinow concludes that America shifted rightward due to "a triumph of ideas"

as Reagan undermined the idea of government being a force to help the less fortunate,

toleration of inequality was reinforced, and government became a tool for the elite.[57] These

approaches all identified a state of division, and this dissertation will use a focus on

neoliberal market logics and obfuscation to contain both sides of the split whilst examining

the tissue that interlinked them.

The literature on the resistance to the transformation occurring in the 1980s provides a

deeper understanding of the rightward shift, and a range of historians have all argued that

progressive forces were in fundamental decline during the period. From the top-down,

David Greenberg outlines the shifts within the Democratic Party, and across his analysis is

the consistent theme of moderation and the gradual acquiescence to right-wing economic

standards.[58] Away from party politics Michael Stewart Foley and Bradford Martin focus on

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[54] Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture during the Reagan Years* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 5, and Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 20.

[55] Collins, *Transforming America*, 237, and Troy, *Morning in America*, 19.

[56] Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4.

[57] Ibid., 297.

[58] David Greenberg, 'The Reorientation of Liberalism in the 1980s', *Living in the Eighties* ed. Gil Troy and Vincent J. Cannato (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51-69.

activism during the 1980s and both note that the challenges to power by protest

movements suffered more defeats than victories.[59] The state of decline that these

historians identified forms much of the backdrop to the intellectuals discussed here,

influencing both their sense of isolation and their compulsion to reimagine an alternative

reality and how it could be achieved.

This decline led to a situation in the 1990s that was characterised by schism and disparity.

Gil Troy, in his history of the 1990s, argues that during the decade the optimism that had

characterised the 1980s faded, and that the US entered an "Era of Mixed Feelings" despite

the "unambiguous miracles" that were achieved.[60] Again, by making such a point, Troy

demonstrates his propensity to focus on those who benefitted — winners — rather than on

those who suffered — losers. Miracles aside, Troy does also note the rightward shift

through the "Reaganizing of liberalism" and that inequality had created "two, vastly

different, Americas."[61]

The literature that directly engages with the culture of the 1980s and 1990s continues the

theme of the rightward shift, but it is more readily able to accept the interlinkage between

culture and economics. However, intellectual historian James Livingston challenges the

notion of a rightward shift, arguing that the "Reagan Revolution was not only, or even

mainly, a conservative event", and that by 2000 America had become less conservative than

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[59] Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), and Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan 1980s* (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).
[60] Gil Troy, *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s* (New York, New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015), 7.
[61] *Ibid*, 170-171.

it had been in 1975.[62] Whilst Livingston does engage with the left's role in the culture wars, particularly in regard to the state of higher education and the differences between liberals and leftists, he is ultimately happy to accept the contradictions between culture and economics, and does not advance a history of the 1980s and 1990s which deploys a framework that is broad enough to capture these 'incongruities.'[63] Nevertheless, both Graham Thompson and Collin Harrison lean towards advocating for a broader framework as they engage with how culture is manufactured. Thompson's history of 1980s culture recognises the connectivity between culture and economics, as culture affects not just how "economic conditions are represented but also in terms of how culture is produced and consumed."[64] Harrison directly identifies neoliberalism as a central force that "impacted upon cultural production itself" and that its competition-based logic caused a cultural homogenisation whilst prompting a "preoccupation" with finding alternative and independent culture.[65] These notions of cultural production and consumption are directly engaged with in Chapter 3, on Ellen Willis and Thomas Frank, as they elucidate neoliberalism's influence over economics and culture.

Whilst this rightward shift theme is present in the literature on the 1980s and 1990s to various degrees, historians have also explicitly engaged with it. William Berman and David Courtright focus on politics and culture respectively, whilst Russell Jacoby and Jason Stahl

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[62] James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), xv.
[63] *Ibid*, 50-54.
[64] Graham Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 6.
[65] Collin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 33-34.

approach the topic by focusing on intellectuals.[66] Berman views the turn towards

conservatism as being fuelled by Republican hypocrisy around financial 'responsibility'

which entrapped Democrats, pushing them rightward where they had to acquiesce with

conservative economics to avoid being branded as economically naïve.[67] Courtright argues

that Americans managed to develop a state of mind where they could be "morally left and

economically right, or vice versa."[68] However, Courtright challenges the notion of a

successful rightward turn, arguing that neither those who were economically or morally to

the right were able to fully achieve their goals, despite the success of one contradicting the

other, but their alliance still reshaped America.[69]

Nevertheless, it is within this ambivalence and contradiction that neoliberalism and

obfuscation flourished, and by examining left thought during this period points of

consistency and coherence can be uncovered — including the influence of conservatism. In

1987, Russell Jacoby argued that a new generation of public intellectuals had not managed

to establish themselves, and again in 1999 he bemoaned the lack of utopian thinking from

the left, indicating the triumph of the right and the decline of the left.[70] This dissertation

partially revises Jacoby's thesis whilst still accepting his overall notion of leftward decline, as

it finds that there were public intellectuals offering substantial critique in the arts, such as

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[66] William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton Second Edition* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), David T. Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in Liberal America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), Russel Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of the Academe* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1987), Russel Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1999), and Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina Press: The University of North Carolina Pres, 2016.
[67] Berman, *America's Right Turn*, 4.
[68] Courtwright, *No Right Turn*, 5.
[69] *Ibid*., 14.
[70] Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*, 8-9, and Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*, xi-xii.

Bret Easton Ellis and Octavia Butler, and in journalism, such as Ellen Willis and Thomas Frank, two areas that Jacoby acknowledges that he does not sufficiently explore.[71] Stahl focuses on development of right-wing think tanks and how they deliberately adopted and pushed for the proliferation of a marketplace of ideas-based framework for how to organise mainstream discourse in order to enhance a rightward turn.[72] He argues this occurred as debate was based around balance — conservative versus liberal — and therefore the centre could be magnetised to the right if more extreme right-wing views were contrasted against moderate left-wing ones.[73] Stahl creates a precedent to examine intellectuals and their ideas through a prism of the marketplace, with this dissertation shifting from the collective nature of think tanks to the individual nature of public intellectuals and shifting from a marketplace of ideas framing to a marketplace of narratives framing. The rightward turn itself is a subtext for this dissertation, as it contextualises the forces that left intellectuals faced. It is also a point that will be expanded upon, as the subsequent chapters will demonstrate just how far spread the rightward shift was.

This state of schism is directly addressed by the intellectual histories of the period, with Daniel Rodgers and Andrew Hartman offering works that tap into the division around political belief during the last third of the twentieth century. Rodgers argues that the influence of the ideas that bound society together weakened during this period, and it can be characterised as an "age of fracture."[74] In this age Rodgers finds that the collective conceptions of society fractured, and more individualised and fluid ones emerged —

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[71] Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*, x and 13.
[72] Stahl, *Right Moves*, 134—135.
[73] *Ibid*, 47-48.
[74] Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

essentially a state of disaggregation formed in regards to how politics, economics, identity, and culture were understood and ultimately how "social reality itself would be imagined."[75] Consequently, this dissertation positions obfuscation as the sensation and mood that existed within, emerged from, and sustained the fracture within American intellectual, cultural, and political life. Rodgers undermines the notion of a rightward shift, as to characterise the period from 1975-2000 as a "conservative age" is only "half the truth."[76] Additionally, Rodgers rejects neoliberalism as an explanation for this fracture, as he views it as an economic structure and argues that ideas were not solely governed by one stimuli in this period, economic or otherwise.[77] However, by engaging with neoliberalism's own logic it becomes possible to observe neoliberalism, through obfuscation, as underlying a notable proportion of America's intellectual movements and as more than just an economic system. In this sense, this dissertation departs from Rodger's rejection of neoliberalism as a point of causation for the fracture, arguing instead that the relationship between obfuscation and neoliberalism characterised the age of fracture and its development.

Rodgers's identification of fracture provides a background for Hartman's exploration of the culture wars. Hartman argues for the prominence of the culture wars in shaping American discourse during the 1980s and 1990s and traces their roots to the 1960s.[78] Therefore, he reinforces the idea of America entering a transformative period after the 1960s but argues that the emerging order was culturally liberal but economically conservative.[79] However, by

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[75] *Ibid.*, 2-3.

[76] *Ibid.*, 8.

[77] *Ibid.*, 10.

[78] Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-7.

[79] *Ibid.*, 6.

his conclusion he noted that the culture wars metaphor had expired and that this was due to the primacy of economics, as "capitalism, more than the federal government – Mammon more than Leviathan – had rendered traditional family values passé."[80] What Rodgers and Hartman both demonstrate is the role that ideas played in the transformation America experienced coming out of the 1960s, framing ideas in a state of conflict. This dissertation argues that obfuscation existed within the fracture, sustaining and widening it as it became a weapon within the conflict itself.

In the extant political and cultural historiography, then, the 1980s and 1990s have been portrayed as a time of conflict. This dissertation does not refute this, but it does maintain that this conflict facilitated a wholesale rightward shift. Moreover, it argues that obfuscation was both a product and tool in this conflict, as it was a consistent presence across politics and culture, and that its production and maintenance were facilitated by a wider neoliberal force.

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Ultimately, this dissertation explores the reach of neoliberalism's market logic during the 1980s and 1990s to demonstrate just how destabilising it was. From this, neoliberalism can be read as a force that operated on a cultural and economic level, unifying these spheres through its logic of competition and individualism, as winning, in any permutation, was what mattered — even if it came at the expense of staying in touch with reality. Neoliberalism is

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[80] *Ibid*., 285, and 290.

more than just an economic system or set of ideas that arose as Keynesianism faltered in the 1970s — and recognising this requires understanding its affective impact. Affect is part of how the present is experienced, and that a group of loosely connected public intellectuals all expressed a similar sentiment — outlining the structure of feeling during the 1980s and 1990s — elucidated aspects of the period's dominant logic. This project tracks the identification of obfuscation within a series of left intellectuals' work during the 1980s and 1990s as they challenged a multifaceted establishment narrative that they portrayed as serving the interests of the powerful through the sale of inaccurate conceptions of reality, suboptimal values, and modes of logic that did not deliver the supposed result. This advances the intellectual histories of neoliberalism that often view it solely in the economic sense or which focus on its intellectual proponents. By adopting neoliberalism's own logic and by viewing discourse through narratives and paradigms of thought, the rightward shift and its accompanying market logic is demonstrated. From this, neoliberalism's relentless focus on competition and the priority of the winner over the loser becomes clear, and that the prize for the former and the forfeit for the latter was a disconnection from reality.

Chapter One
Identifying Obfuscation:
 Noam Chomsky's Foreign Policy and Media Analysis

Noam Chomsky was born in 1928 and was a writer of immense intellectual output,

straddling both politics and linguistics. A proponent of anarchism since he wrote his first

essay at age ten on the collapse of Barcelona in the Spanish Civil War, by thirty he was

revolutionising the field of linguistics, and his impact on the discipline has been compared to

that of Einstein's or Freud's on their respective fields.[1] Now into his nineties, Chomsky's

output has slowed but he has led a career where he has constantly campaigned, written,

and advocated for progressive causes after his first real emergence as a political public

intellectual during the 1960s. The 1980s and 1990s were not a period that saw Chomsky

fundamentally break with his previous commitments, but they were a time when he offered

broad comprehensions and analysis of the relationship between neoliberalism and the US's

role in global affairs. In doing so he outlined his own important version of the intensification

of obfuscation and the marketplace of narratives. Chomsky offered a relatively full and

coherent set of ideas and views on American politics and individual political existence and

development, and he consistently positioned his approach against obfuscation in order to

encourage his audience to focus upon reality itself. It is due to this belligerent commitment

towards reality, and that it ran across the breadth of Chomsky's political work, that he forms

the sole focus of this chapter. Moreover, his approach highlighted the significant role that

obfuscation was having, allowing him to act as a primer to some of the more particular

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[1] Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck, 13 (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), and Howard Zinn, foreword to Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York, New York: The New Press, 2002), v.

aspects and mechanics of neoliberal discourse, such as the myopia induced by its market logic, that I zero in on in later chapters.

Chomsky challenged the facets of the establishment narrative that contain positive perceptions of the US's role in the world and the role of the media within domestic US society. Essentially, Chomsky resisted the idea that US foreign policy was predominately benevolent or virtuous, or that the media predominately pursued the truth or tried to hold power to account. The narratives that suggested otherwise facilitated a mood of obfuscation for Chomsky, and in tackling them he framed them as aspects of an establishment narrative that he subsequently challenged, as he saw US foreign policy as brutal and the media as obsequious. Of the intellectuals analysed in this dissertation, it is Chomsky who is the most direct in identifying a film of obfuscation, a point reflected in his methodology. Chomsky's process involved an unrelenting focus on the empirical record that he used to enter into paradigms of thought containing narratives that advanced these positive perceptions, twisting their own logic and values against them, often through examinations of how their proponent's actions contrasted their supposed intentions. This was all in an effort to demonstrate how narrative did not match reality. By holding an unwavering commitment to the knowability of reality, Chomsky's epistemological stance influenced his political work as he ultimately formed a narrative based around hope that contrasted the apathy that he associated with neoliberal obfuscation.

Chomsky's political development started early: he has referred to himself as a "child of the Depression" and one who was raised in the comparatively "alien culture" of the Jewish-

Zionist tradition that contrasted the "bitterly anti-Semitic" neighbourhood in Philadelphia, that reflected the rise of Nazism, where he grew up.[2] However, it was as a witness to the anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1960s whilst teaching at Massachusetts Institute of Technology that he became an overtly political figure.[3] Over time, Chomsky felt that he was of more use writing about politics rather than holding his activist line, and published his first book-length political work, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, in 1969.[4]

In 1987, when reflecting on the legacy of the 1960s, the civil rights movements, and the anti-war movement, Chomsky expressed a degree of ambivalence. He viewed the perception of the New Left and the sixties as one that was filtered through and "reflects the needs of privileged groups who, in this case, felt threatened by the rise of popular movements", but, despite this, the actual change wrought in the sixties managed to raise the "moral and cultural level" of the US, and that this elevation generally managed to survive the "intense efforts undertaken in the 1970s to reverse this general cultural progress and enlightenment".[5] On a personal level, Chomsky claims that he cannot say that his "beliefs or attitudes have changed in any significant ways" due to the legacy of the sixties or his involvement in protest movements.[6] However, in 1991, Chomsky noted that activists and dissident culture had made strides and that in "the 1980s there was an even greater

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[2] Chomsky, *Chomsky Reader*, 13.
[3] *Ibid*., 49.
[4] 'An Exchange on Manufacturing Consent', accessed 1.8.19, https://chomsky.info/power02/.
[5] Chomsky, *Chomsky Reader*, ed. by Peck, 51-52.
[6] *Ibid*., 55.

expansion to the solidarity movements" as:

> Organization has its effects. It means that you discover that you're not alone. Others have the same thoughts that you do. You can reinforce your thoughts and learn more about what you think and believe. These are very informal movements, not like a membership organization, just a mood that involves interactions among people. It has a very noticeable effect.[7]

This "mood" and its "noticeable effect" are the impact of narratives weaving through society, reinforcing and shaping paradigms of thought. Chomsky's political oeuvre operated in resistance and was an effort to challenge narratives that aimed to obfuscate reality and to dampen the 'mood' that solidarity can breed.

Chomsky's reputation balances between hagiography and disdain. He is not an obscure intellectual whose weighty thinking was totally neglected: videos of his speeches and interviews attract millions of views online and he has been the subject of multiple documentaries.[8] At the other end of the spectrum, the journalist Benjamin Kerstein ran an 'anti-Chomsky blog' from 2004-2007 that characterised aspects of Chomsky's fanbase as "boot licking cultists who consider the man the sole arbitrator of justice, truth and reality".[9] However, whilst these poles exist, Chomsky is also regularly spoken of as a marginalised figure. Writing in 1995 for the *Boston Globe*, Anthony Flint theorised how Chomsky's legacy

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[7] Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* (New York, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997).

[8] 'Chomsky's Philosophy', accessed 1.8.19, https://www.youtube.com/user/chomskysphilosophy/videos?view=0&sort=p&flow=grid.
Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick dir., *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992) and Will Pascoe dir., *Noam Chomsky: Rebel Without a Pause* (2003).

[9] 'Why This Blog', accessed 1.8.19, http://antichomsky.blogspot.com/2004/05/why-this-blog.html.

would be perceived and how he was currently treated, noting that for his political work, "mainstream outlets shunned him" and that he is "isolated from the broad intellectual conversation on American life."[10] Chomsky managed to rise as a figure of prominence within communities that were sceptical and hostile to the establishment narrative, which of course includes the American left, but unsurprisingly the left do not universally praise Chomsky.[11] Naturally, the right rejects Chomsky, although there have been instances of him being published by libertarians sympathetic to his anarchist beliefs, even if Chomsky himself notes they soon came to fundamental disagreements.[12] Essentially, Chomsky was a path away from the establishment understandings, yet he is too extreme and esoteric for the mainstream. Nevertheless, there is a relatability to his writing, as he easily creates the perception of unwavering morality and is not overtly filtered through layers of theory. He even notes that other leftist writers struggle to make an impact because their work is "just too far off the received doctrinal position that's associated with real power."[13] In attempting to explain and critique the mainstream "doctrinal position," Chomsky's writing acts as a conduit for political thinking that resists the establishment myopia.

Unsurprisingly, considering Chomsky's reputation and intellectual impact, he and his work have attracted a range of scholarly attention. The focus has fallen on how Chomsky himself operated and his significance, the intellectual traditions he has existed within, and where he

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[10] Anthony Flint, 'Divided legacy Noam Chomsky's Theory of Linguistics Revolutionized the Field, but his Radical Political Analysis is what gave him a Cult Following. When People Mention his Name a Century from now, which Chomsky will they mean?', *Boston Globe*, 19.11.95.
[11] Michael Parenti, 'Another View of Chomsky', *Nature, Science, and Thought*, 12, no. 2 (April 1999), 203-206.
[12] 'Question Period: Noam Chomsky on being censored, CHRC censorship, Ayn Rand, Robert Nozick and libertarianism', accessed 1.8.19, https://westernstandard.blogs.com/shotgun/2008/12/question-period.html.
[13] Noam Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1992), 88.

sits within the history of the American left. This chapter will fully engage with Chomsky's

sense of obfuscation, a point that has previously been only tentatively broached.

The view of Chomsky as a historical figure is mixed. When he is judged as an individual he is

frequently praised for his morality and intellectual heft, although Chris Knight does break

this pattern.[14] Carlos Otero attaches significant praise to Chomsky and situates him in

relation to the Jewish intellectual tradition, the enlightenment, the development of

cognitive studies, whilst also examining how his anarchism intersects with this.[15] Wolfgang

Sperlich and Robert Barsky both provide biographies of Chomsky that are positive and aim

to use wider society to explain his career and thought.[16] This chapter attempts the inverse

and uses Chomsky's ideas to elucidate the emergence and development of the neoliberal

force, as Chomsky identified a sense of obfuscation within the wider population and

connected this to the operating practices of American foreign policy and the media.

Chomsky is included in histories of the American left at the end of the twentieth century,

and it is here that a sense of unfulfilled potential emerges. For example, Russell Jacoby has

some praise for Chomsky, by noting that he was "an unusual and somewhat isolated figure"

in the American left in the 1980s due to his scepticism of intellectuals and his commitment

to the wider public, with Jacoby arguing most intellectuals at the time were embracing the

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[14] Chris Knight, *Decoding Chomsky: Science and Revolutionary Politics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2016).

[15] Carlos Otero, 'Introduction: The Third Emancipatory Phase of History', in Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics* (London: Black Rose Books, 1999), 22-81.

[16] Wolfgang Sperlich, *Noam Chomsky* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), and Robert Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Toronto, Canada: ECW Press, 1996).

seclusion of the university.[17] However, Michael Kazin is particularly harsh, portraying Chomsky as uncommitted to "grassroots radicalism" and arguing that the "simultaneous rise of Chomsky and the weakness of the left were not coincidental."[18] However, classifying Chomsky as uncommitted to grassroots radicalism is somewhat unfair, as it discounts his work in cofounding the anti-Vietnam War protest group, 'Resist', and his sense of aggrievement for not doing enough when he began to focus more on writing.[19] Both Jacoby and Kazin see Chomsky in relation to issues within the left — Jacoby positively and Kazin negatively. This chapter takes a different tack, by focussing less on the strengths and weaknesses of Chomsky's contributions and instead hones in on what exactly they were, how they were received, and what that in turn reveals about the environment that Chomsky was developing them within.

Regarding his methodology, Chomsky himself considers his political and linguistic work as separate. However, there have been efforts to demonstrate their relationship. Neil Smith and Nicholas Allot, and Michael Haley and Ronald Lunsford both perceive a connection between Chomsky's technical work and his political work.[20] They do this through exploring methodological similarities that demonstrate that Chomsky's approach to politics and linguistics are informed by analogous intellectual lenses. For example, Smith and Allot focus on Chomsky's use of rationality, creativity, and modularity.[21] These categories are used to

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[17] Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*, 183.

[18] Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 264.

[19] Barksy, *Life of Dissent*, 127, and 'When Chomsky Wept', accessed 1.8.19, https://www.salon.com/2012/06/17/when_chomsky_wept/.

[20] Neil Smith and Nicholas Allott, *Chomsky: Ideas and Ideals*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 262-332, and Michael C. Haley and Ronald Lunsford, *Noam Chomsky* (New York, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 172-200.

[21] Smith and Allott, *Chomsky Ideas*, 267.

clarify that Chomsky was guided by consistent understandings of how the mind operates,

human nature, and a person's capacity for morality. Haley and Lunsford push a stronger

connection between Chomsky's political and linguistic work, although still based around his

comprehension of the mind, focusing on Chomsky's understanding of the philosopher

Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of abduction. Abduction in Chomsky's comprehension,

according to Haley and Lunsford, concerns how the mind "rapidly constructs theoretical

interpretations from only minimal or scattered data" and so is based around "instinctive

hunches".[22] Haley and Lunsford view Chomsky's conception of the mind having a capacity

for language as stemming from its abductive capabilities, and that these were also

applicable "for the ways humans deal with each other politically."[23] By viewing Chomsky's

methodology as built upon abduction theory, and his own analysis itself as attempting to

engage with the impact of abduction based thinking across society, we can see Chomsky as

being so strongly committed to philosophical realism, as Haley and Lunsford observe, that

he is compelled to engage with the systems of thought and feeling that structure society.[24]

Abduction-based thinking is a framework that is drawn from limited data and therefore

shares a connection to devices like narratives and paradigms of thought, as they are

processes that aim to capture how abductive reasoning can translate into an understanding

of reality. Consequently, Haley and Lunsford's argument that Chomsky engaged with the

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[22] Haley and Lunsford, *Noam Chomsky*, 181-183.
[23] *Ibid.*, 183.
[24] *Ibid.*, 186.

process of abductive reasoning and its manipulation bolsters this chapter's approach to his thought and his response to neoliberalism.

Regarding the understanding of Chomsky's methodology, Alison Edgely's work on Chomsky is crucial as she outlines that he is guided by a theory, and that there is a common logic running through his political work as it remains consistent with his rationalist approach to epistemology and positive view of human nature.[25] Edgley's arguments rest upon positioning Chomsky as bridging the structure-agency dichotomy in terms of political analysis.[26] Edgley finds that Chomsky's analysis develops a view of intention that judges the action of agents against their purported purposes, and therefore leans towards agency, but Chomsky additionally viewed society's elite as perpetuating the structures that shape society whilst also having greater manoeuvrability within them.[27] As a consequence, Edgely can be read as viewing Chomsky as positioning the elites as responsible for obfuscation as they hold a "hidden agenda", and "elites have a different view of human need from the one they profess to hold."[28]

In terms of how Chomsky's methodology advances this view of society's elites, Milan Rai analyses Chomsky's writing style, noting that "the density of information, the horrifying nature of much of that information, the recurrent use of irony and Chomsky's 'unsettling' perspective fuse to create an intellectually and morally challenging atmosphere."[29] The

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[25] Alison Edgley, *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky* (London: Routledge, 2000), 180-188.
[26] *Ibid*., 6
[27] *Ibid*., 35-38 and 159-160.
[28] *Ibid*., 28.
[29] Milan Rai, *Chomsky's Politics* (London: Verso, 1996), 17.

implication of this approach is that it allows Chomsky to engage with the "assumptions and beliefs that are so deeply held that they have become as invisible as the air we breathe."[30] Consequently, Rai allows even Chomsky's writing style to be viewed as a challenge to a sense of obfuscation and as designed to unpick the invisible assumptions actually guiding politics. This chapter will build upon Rai's approach and will place Chomsky's methodology in relation to a wider political and cultural context by drawing forth the ways in which he challenged neoliberalism's discursive logic.

Chomsky's public reception has been explored by Andrew Barksky and Tabe Bergman.[31] Barsky analyses the impact and reception that Chomsky has had on various debates and disciplines, summarising it as the "the Chomsky effect".[32] Barsky's approach is distinctly qualitative, whilst Bergman leans towards a quantitative analysis that captures how the mainstream press has received Chomsky and how much attention they have given him. In discussing Chomsky's media critique, Barsky alludes towards a sense of obfuscation arising from an establishment narrative, arguing propaganda has reached the point "where hegemonic discourse can block our perception and our understanding of reality."[33] Moreover, Barsky notes that Chomsky's work can prompt "a kind of intellectual realization" in its readers, but that this "awakening" does not necessarily lead to action, with Barsky suggesting this is due to the "powerlessness" people feel against the elite class.[34] Therefore,

[30] *Ibid.*, 16.
[31] Robert F. Barsky, *The Chomsky Effect: A Radical Works Beyond the Ivory Tower* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), and Tabe Bergman 'Prophet, Gadfly, Polemicist, Conscience of America?' *Journalism Studies*, 18, no. 11 (2017), 1453-1469.
[32] Barsky, *The Chomsky Effect*, xiv.
[33] *Ibid.*, 231.
[34] *Ibid.*, 234.

with Barsky providing an insight into how Chomsky is received from below, Bergman

observes how Chomsky has been received from the top down. Bergman surveyed how much

attention *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The*

Washington Post each gave to Chomsky, and what type of attention it was, from 1969 to

2014. The interest in Chomsky fluctuated, with high points being the early 1970s, coinciding

with the Vietnam War and Watergate, and from 2001-2008 in the aftermath of 9/11. The

amount of attention steadily decreased from the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, and in "the

neoliberal 1990s, when liberal intellectuals joined in celebrating the Washington Consensus"

the amount of reviews Chomsky received dropped dramatically.[35] Bergman found that the

type of attention was mixed. For example, reviewers frequently argued that Chomsky

exaggerated and was one sided, too simple or lacking in theory, too dense and too angry,

but also that he has an unwavering sense of morality, and ultimately "the paucity of the

criticism is compelling, the amount of praise surprising and revealing."[36] Therefore, for both

the public and the media class, Chomsky received a positive reception. Chomsky's attacks on

the media nevertheless prompted a backlash according to Bergman, offering mixed praise

blended with marginalisation, whilst the wider public were more prone, according to Barsky,

to accepting Chomsky.

In summation, scholars have connected Chomsky's technical and political work, and from

this they have viewed the latter as guided by a theory, despite Chomsky himself claiming

otherwise. Chomsky has been portrayed as an impactful intellectual but also as one who has

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[35] Bergman, ''Prophet, Gadfly, Polemicist' 1455-1456 and 1463.
[36] *Ibid*., 1463.

been marginalised. Chomsky's sense of obfuscation has been observed by scholars but has yet to be connected to the wider structures influencing a time and place, which this chapter achieves by analysing how Chomsky's critique elucidated the workings of neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s. Chomsky made significant strides in his analysis of obfuscation during the 1980s and 1990s — particularly in his media critique — thus suggesting that he was an early observer of the trend as it increased in intensity during the period and ultimately became a core part of the cultural and political mood.

Chomsky's political writings focus on three areas: US foreign policy and power, the media and thought control, and cognition, human nature, and anarchism. First, this chapter deconstructs Chomsky's foreign policy work to analyse how he understands US power in the world, and how its presentation in the domestic sphere intensifies the mood of obfuscation. Next, the chapter analyses his work on the media and its concerns with how people have become able to tolerate and misunderstand the operation of US power. Finally, Chomsky's understanding of the mind and anarchism demonstrate the foundations of his political analysis and his capacity for political imagination, and with this how he differentiates himself from the establishment.

Overall, this chapter argues that Chomsky's analysis of US foreign policy, the operating practices of the media, and his own political beliefs are interconnected and are based around him making deliberate efforts to engage with the marketplace of narratives. Chomsky's political work argued, both explicitly and implicitly, that reality was frequently detached from political discourse, a process he challenged by dissecting the distinction

between narrative and reality and the hypocrisy involved in perpetuating this mood of obfuscation. Therefore, Chomsky's work does not just identify narratives that distorted the population's understanding of reality, but also that he interpreted this distortion as being used to undermine democracy and maximise US power on the global stage, that the media worked to facilitate a state of apathy within the domestic population, and that a solution to this would be to pivot society towards focusing on equality, liberty, and legitimate forms of authority. Chomsky's work is so well positioned to draw out the influence of obfuscation as he deliberately and relentlessly targets the discrepancies between narrative and reality, finding the resultant obfuscation to be widespread and serving society's winners. In foreign policy Chomsky argued that the US's brutality was replaced with a narrative of it being benevolent, and in relation to the media's practice Chomsky argued that their obsequious nature was replaced with a narrative of it working to pursue truth and question authority. To resist this, Chomsky advocates for grounding oneself in reality and never denying the necessity of hope.

Foreign Policy

Chomsky, due to his role as an activist intellectual, often approached foreign policy in regard to specific debates and events, such as those around the Vietnam War or US support for Israel.[37] However, he did ultimately draw these individual points together into an overarching framework and interpretation of US foreign policy and the principles that guided it over the course of the Cold War, and it is in establishing this framework that

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[37] For examples of these more specific approaches see: Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1993), Noam Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1983).

Chomsky outlined his sense of obfuscation. Essentially, Chomsky's efforts to historicise obfuscation and the high amount of attention he paid to it reflected the increased intensity of obfuscation in the neoliberal age. Accordingly, this section focuses on work produced during the 1980s and 1990s, although where appropriate earlier and later work is gestured towards, particularly to demonstrate Chomsky's consistency. Chomsky's foreign policy analysis functioned through a process of engagement and deconstruction, as he consciously outlined the establishment narrative and then worked to challenge it. This process is exemplified by three concepts that Chomsky invoked: the "Grand Arena", the "Fifth Freedom", and the "Rotten Apple Theory". The "Grand Arena" is used to explain how those who influenced US foreign policy viewed the global stage and its rules, the "Fifth Freedom" clarifies the actual motivations for US foreign policy, and the "Rotten Apple Theory" taps into the fears of those who influenced US foreign policy. Chomsky demonstrated his sense of obfuscation by consistently arguing that US foreign policy was brutal rather than benevolent in its efforts to maximise and maintain power, and that this was not the dominant portrayal of the US in the marketplace of narratives.

To sufficiently understand Chomsky's foreign policy analysis, it is first necessary to understand how he broached the relationship between the wider public and society's elites. This is best exemplified by his view on how the relationship between language and politics affects perceptions of reality. Chomsky noted, in October 1986, that the manipulation of language decreases the possibility of independent thought by "eliminating even the tools that you can use to engage in it", and that if you "debase the language, you debase the

thought."[38] Speaking more exactly, this logic led Chomsky to find that the "Reagan

administration is largely a figment of the public relations industry" and that the "public

relations aspects of it, including control over language, are very striking".[39] Chomsky

highlighted that language is a tool to connect to reality and that during the 1980s this tool

was "consciously manipulated", in part, due to a corporate capitalist force in the public

relations industry which facilitated a state that went against its citizens' interests.[40]

Moreover, Chomsky reinforced the notion of a neoliberal marketplace of narratives where

truth became what sold, as he claimed that there is an effort to "prevent people from

perceiving reality, because if they perceived it they might not like it and might act to change

it. That would harm privileged people who control these things."[41] For Chomsky, what most

people connect to is not reality: instead, they find a version packaged for them by the

privileged, and consequently discourse and narrative becomes weaponised to maximise

domination.

Chomsky's method of foreign policy critique itself revolves around a sense of obfuscation,

focusing on US power and its maintenance in the post-World War II era. During the mid-

1980s he noted that in the aftermath of World War II the US had achieved a level of

unprecedented security and control, and that "American planners" — Chomsky's term for

those who had a level of influence over US foreign policy, such as members of the State

Department — "agreed that the dominance of the United States had to be maintained."[42]

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[38] Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent*, 49.
[39] *Ibid*., 47-48.
[40] *Ibid*., 48.
[41] *Ibid*., 48.
[42] Noam Chomsky, *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (Tucson, Arizona: Odonian Press, 1996), 7-8.

Chomsky's analysis of the planners was possible because, as he himself noted, "relatively speaking, the United States is a free and open society" and this enabled the public "to learn a good deal about the government, its plans and its practices."[43] Chomsky's methodology explores the discrepancies between the public record and what he deemed as the "internal" or "secret" documents which reveal the "principles and geopolitical analyses" that guide the planners' actions, and it is in this discrepancy where obfuscation flourishes.[44]

Chomsky observed the impact of this discrepancy in the written record. For example, in a speech given in the mid-1990s on the ideologies of institutional education, he noted: "We are supposed to know about the terrible crimes of others. But with regard to ourselves we are supposed to have faith in what our leader tells us" and that the purported mission, in other words the establishment narrative, of the US is to export and maintain democracy globally "but no one is allowed to ask whether that really is the vision that guides our leaders."[45] Therefore, he did not just portray the establishment as pushing a narrative that obfuscated US foreign policy, but that this process maligned a sense of personal responsibility and actual resistance as the establishment discouraged challenging authority

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[43] Noam Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 148. *On Power and Ideology* first published by South End Press in 1987.

[44] *Ibid*., 1.

[45] 'Notes on Talks Ideologies of Institutional Education Undated', Massachusetts Institute of Technology Distinctive Collection, Noam Chomsky Papers MC-0600, Series 1, Box 3 (hereafter NCP). Likely from the mid-1990s due to the references to the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) which was first implemented in 1995.

or finding an alternative logic to process reality.

In 1986 Chomsky gave a series of lectures in Managua, Nicaragua, half of which were on linguistics and the other half on politics and international relations. In these latter lectures Chomsky used the concept of the "Grand Arena" to explain how the US's planners approached the Cold War.[46] In the planner's vision, Chomsky perceived a consensus towards the necessity of violence and brutality by the US, and that this consensus was not reflected within mainstream portrayals of the US's actions, indicating a discrepancy between narrative and reality. This process of discrepancy that Chomsky operated through is summarised by Kenneth Hacker who noted that Chomsky frames the government of operating on a different level, with the public accepting narratives and "rhetoric" and then engaging with reality.[47] The "Grand Arena" referred to a sphere of US influence that included the Far East, the former British empire, and the Western Hemisphere that at a minimum would be "subordinated to the needs of the American economy".[48] Chomsky's evidence for this imperialistic approach is Paul Nitze's 1950 National Security Council Paper 68, which Chomsky notes became state policy and refers to as "the hard-line extreme" perspective, as he quotes it as calling for US efforts to "'hasten the decay of the Soviet system'" through a "'roll-back strategy'" that would allow for the US to "'negotiate a settlement with the Soviet Union (or a successor state or states).'" And, in Chomsky's interpretation, this would be achieved through "sending supplies and agents to armies

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[46] Chomsky, *On Power*, 18. Chomsky had used the phrase Grand Arena prior to the Managua Lectures, such in Noam Chomsky, *Radical Priorities* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1981).

[47] Kenneth L. Hacker, 'Noam Chomsky's Rationalist View of Political Discourse', *Discourse & Society*, 4, no.3, (July, 1993), 395.

[48] Chomsky, *On Power*, 18.

fighting with the USSR and Eastern Europe that had been encouraged by Hitler" and by

disrupting "anti-fascist resistance".[49]

In contrast, the "doves", as Chomsky refers to them, were represented by George Kennan's

1948 Policy Planning Statement 23.[50] Chomsky quotes Kennan's statement that the US's

wealth made it a target of "envy and resentment" and that the national strategy should be

to "devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of

disparity without positive detriment to our national security" and that the "less we are then

hampered by idealistic slogans, the better."[51] In Chomsky's perception, no matter whether

policy-makers perceived of themselves as hard-line or more dovish, violence was always

permissible. This identification of imperialistic sentiment guiding US foreign policy was,

according to Chomsky, "excluded from sanitized history" and provided a cogent conception

of how US foreign policy operated.[52] Therefore, Chomsky contrasted the narrative

expressed by the "sanitized history" that excluded the US's brutal imperialism against what

he felt was actual reality, and consequently his sense of obfuscation arises, and he portrays

it as a mood and tone operating in the interest of the establishment.

The "fifth freedom" concept elaborated on the nature of the sanitized history and is used to

explain the US's imperial motivations, to connect domestic and foreign policy, and to

challenge the idea of US benevolence. The "fifth freedom" refers to the four freedoms that

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[49] *Ibid.*, 14.
[50] *Ibid.*, 15.
[51] *Ibid.*,15.
[52] *Ibid.*,18-19.

President Franklin Roosevelt laid out in preparation for America's involvement in World War II and established a set of humanist values that the US should facilitate. Chomsky defines the fifth freedom as the "primary concern of U.S. foreign policy," which can be expressed as the aim "to guarantee the freedom to rob and to exploit."[53] The other four freedoms (the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear) have been a veneer for Chomsky that have been used "as a means to gain public support for crusades in defense of the Fifth Freedom, the one that really counts."[54] By building on the four freedoms, Chomsky subverted the establishment humanist conception of the US foreign policy and in doing so demonstrated his own sense of how the goals and practices of US politics had been obscured and made remote.

Moreover, Chomsky did not just highlight the underlying motivations of US policy, but also emphasised that in its execution "the major enemy…is always the indigenous population, which has an unfortunate tendency to succumb to strange and unacceptable ideas about using their resources for their own purposes. They must therefore be taught regular lessons in obedience to thwart any such evil designs."[55] Irony aside, speaking more sincerely about Central and South America, Chomsky claimed that in the view of the planners: "The region must remain open to US economic penetration, with adequate profits and US political and ideological control, essentially by force. Democratic tendencies must be blocked, by terror if necessary."[56] Benevolence did not motivate US foreign policy for Chomsky. Instead,

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[53] *Ibid.*, 3.
[54] *Ibid.*, 4.
[55] *Ibid.*, 7.
[56] 'Notes on Talks Persistence and Continuity in US Foreign Policy 1987-1988', Massachusetts Institute of Technology Distinctive Collection, NCP, MC-0600, Series 1, Box 4.

American policymakers wanted to dominate the world, by ensuring that US forms of organisation were followed, and the state would work violently to ensure this.

These arguments were not always well received, even by those on the left. For example, Saul Landau, a Senior Fellow at the progressive think tank the Institute for Policy Studies, reviewed Chomsky's 1988 book *The Culture of Terrorism*, in which Chomsky again evoked the "fifth freedom".[57] Landau's review is largely sympathetic, and reinforced the notion of Chomsky working to offer an alternative narrative as he noted that Chomsky's works are "eye-openers" for the growing audience of "those groping for a method to make sense of 'national security' policy".[58] However, Landau criticises Chomsky for being "too rigid to grasp the banal but nonetheless important levels of modern politics" as Chomsky does not consider the "foundations of the post-World War II state that perpetuate a 'national security' mentality".[59]

This critique of Chomsky 'missing' the fundamental norms of US politics has precedent. In his 1969 review of Chomsky's *American Power and the New Mandarins* Arthur Schlesinger Jr. positioned Chomsky as a popular figurehead of the New Left and one who reduced politics to "facile moral judgements."[60] Schlesinger continued this critique of Chomsky as an

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[57] Noam Chomsky, *Culture of Terrorism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1989), and Saul Landau, 'Noam Chomsky and the Tyranny of the Privileged', *The Washington Post*, 21.2.1988, accessed 1.8.19, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1988/02/21/noam-chomsky-and-the-tyranny-of-the-privileged/203c9dbb-6116-4c5e-ba0b-fdd15ed30500/?utm_term=.d0847ebf8bc5.

[58] Saul Landau, 'Noam Chomsky and the Tyranny of the Privileged', *The Washington Post*, 21.2.1988, accessed 1.8.19, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1988/02/21/noam-chomsky-and-the-tyranny-of-the-privileged/203c9dbb-6116-4c5e-ba0b-fdd15ed30500/?utm_term=.d0847ebf8bc5.

[59] *Ibid*.

[60] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 'Three Cheers for Professor Chomsky', *Chicago Tribune*, 23.3.1969.

intellectual who did not follow the expected rules of critique by claiming: "Political analysis requires a belief in the application of reason to *all* questions. Chomsky rejects this belief. It also requires a capacity to make distinctions. This too Chomsky lacks."[61] It is of course facile to suggest that Schlesinger and other analysts do not have a moral component interwoven within their analysis, as political analysis always does. By levelling these charges at Chomsky, it demonstrated how far he was from the orthodox liberal position, as attempts to directly engage with morality, as Chomsky did, are marked out as unacceptable, indicating that it was not to be overtly engaged with and to remain implicit. Both Landau and Schlesinger demonstrated that Chomsky's dissent earned ire, suggesting that his approach and conclusions violated accepted norms of analysis as he failed to pay deference to the "banal" and dared to overtly moralise, a violation that allowed Chomsky to clarify what he considers to be at the core of US foreign policy, an effort "to ensure a favourable global environment for U.S.-based industry, commerce, agribusiness and finance" that aims to defend the Fifth Freedom in the Third World.[62]

Chomsky further compounded his view that there was a discrepancy between narrative and reality and that this worked in favour of the establishment when he tackled the differences between the publics and the planner's fears. For Chomsky, the public's fears were driven by their subscription to the domino theory, whilst the planner's fears were driven by their following of the "rotten apple" theory, and this was, in contrast to the domino theory, the "rational" alternative that was "rarely questioned and had considerable plausibility" in

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[61] *Ibid.*
[62] Noam Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 8.

terms of explaining what was actually guiding US foreign policy.[63] Both theories relied on

fear of a chain reaction. For Chomsky, the domino theory encouraged a fear of the spread of

communism that would threaten US safety and was based upon "jingoist rhetoric appealing

to deep-seated fears." [64] This fear had depth as, "the public plainly cannot be informed of

the true motives of policy" and that the educated and leadership classes, "at least the less

intelligent among them", buy their own myth as "it is extremely easy to deceive oneself

about the motives for one's actions, placing a favourable construction on actions taken for

quite different ends."[65] In explaining the domino theory in this manner Chomsky outlined

his sense of obfuscation and positioned it as highly pervasive, to the extent that the elites

were susceptible to it, whilst again finding that it was a sensation that arose through a

discrepancy between the winning narrative and reality.

If the domino theory was an inaccurate narrative sold and bought throughout society, then

the "rotten apple" theory was the reality beneath the film of obfuscation. Chomsky ascribed

this "internal variant" to the planner Dean Acheson who "concocted a remarkable series of

fabrications" regarding the "alleged" increase of Soviet pressure on Greece, Turkey and Iran

in 1947 and how this viewed these nations as 'Like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten

one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east'" and which led Chomsky

to then ask is that if the Soviet pressure was just a "fabrication" then what exactly is the

infection.[66] The virus for Chomsky is that the planners were concerned with "the threat of a

[63] Noam Chomsky, *The Essential Chomsky* edited by Anthony Arnove (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), 227.
First published in *Turning the Tide: US Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Cambridge,
Massachusetts: South End Press, 1985).
[64] Chomsky, *On Power*, 41-42.
[65] *Ibid*., 48.
[66] Chomsky, *The Essential Chomsky*, 227.

successful social and economic development outside the framework of U.S. control", and that this may encourage others to emulate the success they observe. To prevent this and protect the "grand arena" and the "fifth freedom" the planners believed the threat "requires serious measures, violence if necessary, always presented as the defense of the highest values, in the classical manner."[67] Through the "rotten apple" theory Chomsky twisted the accepted narrative around foreign policy that was contained within the domino theory, and argued that the distance between the two theories enabled obfuscation and made US imperialism permissible.

The "grand arena", the "fifth freedom", and the "rotten apple theory" synergised — they were all used to communicate a discrepancy between narrative and reality — as Chomsky positioned them as core tenets of US foreign policy. They were concepts that are drawn out of the fallout of World War Two and the emergence of the Cold War, but that Chomsky continued to use them in his work into the 1980s is indicative of an effort to historicise US global order and to demonstrate a consistent approach that was guided by principles of brutality and power maximisation that related to the mood of obfuscation in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, as Chomsky was speaking with a public audience, this effort at

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[67] Chomsky, *On Power*, 32.

historicization can be read as an attempt to resonate with the then contemporary political and affective environment.

In summation, Chomsky's foreign policy analysis towards the end of the twentieth century was committed to outlining what he considered as the realities of US foreign policy, an action that was necessary as the establishment narrative that was winning in the marketplace was inaccurate and allowing a brutal foreign policy to flourish — an approach that was indicative of Chomsky's sense and identification of a climate of obfuscation. Chomsky's analysis was based on realist grounds that perceived reality as being warped from the top down to maximise US wealth and power, with the role of wider society to be passive or marginalised. This was a dynamic that Chomsky elaborated upon through his analysis of the media.

Media

If Chomsky's international relations analysis outlined his methodology and the aims of US foreign policy, his media analysis explains, in part, how US foreign policy, and domestic US power structures, had come to be tolerated by the American population. A sense of obfuscation engendered by the media facilitated this toleration for Chomsky, and he outlined how the interests of the powerful constrain the media and how the media fails to challenge these interests. Chomsky's understanding of the media is synthesised and explained best by his 1988 *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, co-authored with media scholar Edward Herman, and his 1989 work, *Necessary*

Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies. Chomsky's understanding of the media arrived through his explanation of its constraints, which he and Herman term the "five filters", the identification of a narrow but vigorous spectrum of debate which ultimately limited political imagination, the notion of legitimate and illegitimate critique and how the reaction to disturbing this balance promoted conformity, the roles and responsibilities of intellectuals, and how intellectuals act as a class that legitimises the interests of the powerful. For Chomsky, the media did not just push an inaccurate version of reality, they actively encouraged apathy.

Manufacturing Consent was a work that was mainly written by Herman.[68] Despite this, it is still driven by the same motivation as all of Chomsky's media analysis: an attempt to understand how control is achieved by the powerful in a free and democratic society such as the United States.[69] *Manufacturing Consent* outlines the relationship between media institutions and that of state or financial power, arguing that the media had largely become a tool for preserving or enhancing the interest of the powerful and that this worked against the perception that the media were a force to hold power to account. This wider context that Chomsky engages with regarding how control is achieved and maintained, is reflected in a speech he gave in 1984 where he claimed that "propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism" and that "it should be noted that ideological control (Agitprop) is far more important in the democracies than in states that rule by violence, and is therefore more refined, and more effective."[70] Herman and Chomsky developed a

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[68] 'An Exchange on *Manufacturing Consent*', accessed 1.8.19, https://chomsky.info/power02/.
[69] Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent*, 62-63.
[70] Noam Chomsky, Notes on Talks "Manufacture of Consent" 1984-1985, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Distinctive Collection, NCP, MC-0600, Series 1, Box 3.

"propaganda model" which they applied to the "performance of the mass media" through a

market-based analysis, finding that this challenged the narrative that the media are

"independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth." Whilst not being their

sole purpose, the media's "propaganda function" is an "important aspect of their overall

service" and one that ultimately leads to the "manufacture of consent".[71]

Manufacturing consent is a phrase that stems from Walter Lippmann, a journalist and

commentator, who in his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, stated that democracy and public

opinion should be "managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach

beyond the locality."[72] Chomsky and Herman were not alone in disparaging Lippmann:

Alexander Cockburn, a journalist and friend of Chomsky's, characterised Lippmann as a

deeply elitist pundit who was hostile to the public's wider interests.[73] Chomsky and Herman

in *Manufacturing Consent* ultimately viewed the media as obsequious due to "a reliance on

market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, without significant overt

coercion."[74]

Manufacturing Consent was a popular book, although one that received the typical appraisal

for a Chomsky work — praise by his allies, rejection by his critics. Matt Taibbi, writing in

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[71] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage, 1994), xi.
[72] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, New York: The Free Press 1966), 195. Also see: Tom Arnold-Forster, 'Democracy and Expertise in the Lippmann–Terman controversy', *Modern Intellectual History*, 16, 2 (2019), 562.
[73] For Alexander Cockburn on Chomsky see the introduction to *Chronicles of Dissent* (1992), and for Cockburn on Lippmann see: Alexander Cockburn, *Corruptions of Empire* (London: Verso 1989), 193-198.
[74] Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 306.

2017 for Herman's obituary in *Rolling Stone*, characterised it as a "kind of bible of media

criticism for a generation of dissident thinkers" and one that outlined how the media

"cooperates with state power to generate propaganda."[75] However, the historian Walter

LaFeber reviewed the book for *The New York Times* in 1988, and, whilst he did not dismiss it

outright, he did argue that the work suffered from "overstatement" as the "anomalies" that

challenged Herman and Chomsky, such as the resistance to Reagan's attempts to arm the

Contras, had been insufficiently dealt with.[76] In *Thought Control*, Chomsky responded to this

critique, and the subsequent exchange that had played out in the *New York Times* between

Herman and LaFeber.[77] Chomsky praised LaFeber as an "outstanding and independent-

minded historian" but regarding the "anomalies" that might contradict the propaganda

model's assertions, Chomsky stresses: "The model argues, from its foundations, that the

media will protect the interests of the powerful, not that it will protect state managers from

their criticisms."[78] Therefore, there is space for dissent as long as the interests of power are

not disturbed, a view which requires an understanding of the nature of power that

appreciates the government is not the sole source of it, and so criticism of the state is

permissible. Furthermore, with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model containing a

wider view of power where the state as not the definitive source of it, they reflected a

neoliberal status quo where the state worked to facilitate the interests of business.

LaFeber's issues with the propaganda model arose as he held a narrow conception of where

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[75] 'RIP Edward Herman, Who Co-Wrote a Book That's Now More Important Than Ever', accessed 1.8.19, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/rip-edward-herman-who-co-wrote-a-book-thats-now-more-important-than-ever-123411/.
[76] 'Whose News', accessed 1.8.19,
 https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/06/books/whose-news.html.
[77] Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989) 148-151, and 'News and Propaganda', accessed 1.8.19, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/11/books/l-news-and-propaganda-307488.html?scp=2&sq=Manufacturing+consent&st=nyt.
[78] Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, 148-149.

power lay within society, as he considered attacking Reagan's policy towards Central

America as a legitimate and sufficient challenge. This narrowness has also been observed by

Nick Witham, who characterized LaFeber as a historian who was directed towards anti-

interventionism rather than anti-imperialism and that his moderation differentiated him

from other US left intellectuals who were commenting on Central America during the

1980s.[79] Chomsky disagreed with LaFeber's challenge as he argued that the corporate class

had also rejected Reagan's approach as they considered it financially inefficient and even

noted that this kind of misinterpretation was indicative of a strain of naivety and, ultimately

contributed to a mood of obfuscation, as "the persistent failure to see this point may reflect

more general illusions about our democratic systems."[80] Part of the difference between

Herman and Chomsky and LaFeber was that the latter did not feel the climate of

obfuscation that the former pair did, and that this produced friction as the former felt the

obfuscation and the marketplace of narratives was a barrier that needed to be overcome for

reality to be accessed.

A central component of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model involved the

identification of "five filters" that influenced media production, and which can consequently

be read as an effort to explain how the media became obsequious and how they

consequently generated obfuscation. The filters were: 1) "size, ownership, and profit

orientation of the mass media", 2) "advertising being the primary income source of the

mass media", 3) "the reliance of the media on information provided by government,

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[79] Nick Witham, *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: US Protest and Central American Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 21-42.
[80] Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, 149.

business, and experts funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power",

4) "'flak' as a means of disciplining the media" — by "flak" what is meant is the potential for

pushback against the media if a position is adopted that is disliked, and 5) is

"'anticommunism' as a national religion and control mechanism."[81] By focusing on these

constraints, Chomsky and Herman's positioned obfuscation as arising from how members of

the media were "able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news

'objectively'" and not just the result of deliberately inaccurate narratives being pushed.[82]

Therefore, in their effort to elucidate the climate of obfuscation, Herman and Chomsky

perceived it as a process that was seamless and able to be internalised, as those within its

thrall were able to 'ignore' reality.

The first three filters outline how the production of the media influences it, but the fourth

and fifth filters differ as they outline how discourse itself effects the media. In these

instances, Herman and Chomsky probed at the existence of marketplace of narratives, as

they positioned the actual individuals within the media as having bought into and then

selling obfuscating narratives. The fourth filter — flak — demonstrated this through

suggesting there was a potential for backlash for selling undesirable narratives, and in the

case of the fifth filter — anticommunism — that a particular perception could impinge upon

the media's ability to report reality. The fifth filter was the most salient example of Chomsky

and Herman tackling how neoliberalism impacts upon mainstream discourse itself, as they

framed it as a significant aspect of the establishment narrative. They note that communism,

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[81] Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 2.
[82] *Ibid.*, 2.

as understood and portrayed by the mass media, was "fuzzy" and that "anticommunism is the dominant religion" within the "cultural milieu", with most liberals having "fully internalized the religion" and the result of this being that "charlatans can thrive as evidential sources."[83] Essentially, Chomsky and Herman explored the notions of paradigms of thought and narratives by outlining that anticommunism was a guiding narrative, a synecdoche for understanding America's enemies that was divorced from reality. It was guided by standards of faith and therefore feeling.

Moreover, apart from suggesting that anticommunism was a narrative that placed the media within a particular paradigm of thought, Chomsky and Herman tapped into the notion that these paradigms of thought and their narratives compete within a marketplace. For example, they stated that "issues tend to be framed in terms of a dichotomized world of Communist and anti-Communist powers, with gains and losses allocated to contesting sides, and rooting for 'our side' considered an entirely legitimate news practice."[84] Furthermore, Chomsky and Herman indicated that the neoliberal framing of discourse through competition had actual ramifications. The losers in the marketplace of narratives, in this case the left due to it being ideologically nearer communism, were caused to "fragment" and that this process of narrative competition served as a "political-control mechanism."[85] Through the fourth and fifth filters Herman and Chomsky demonstrated that they were probing at how paradigms of thought were shaped by narratives that win in the

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[83] *Ibid.*, 29-30.
[84] *Ibid.*, 30-31.
[85] *Ibid.*, 29.

marketplace, and that this commitment towards discursive competition resulted in obfuscation which effected both those who sold and bought inaccurate narratives.

If the five filters outlined the wider forces impacting upon the media, Chomsky's focus and analysis of the limited spectrum debate across mainstream discourse illustrated how the media narrowed the scope of political imagination. At his pithiest, Chomsky explains the limiting spectrum of debate and its potential for control by stating that: "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum".[86] The purpose of allowing the "lively debate" was to create the impression of disagreement when in fact a consensus had already been achieved as certain ideas or views were excluded. Chomsky explored this phenomenon by examining the 85 opinion columns published during the first quarter of 1986 by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* over the issue of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and of giving aid to their opposition, the Contras. Chomsky found that there was debate over giving aid to the Contras, but all the columns published during this period were negative in their view of the Sandinistas.[87] By highlighting the degree of consensus within these opinions, Chomsky demonstrated that the idea of opposing the wholesale approach of US foreign policy towards Nicaragua was not an opinion included within the mainstream discourse.

Chomsky is not alone in observing a limited spectrum of debate. Writing in *Harper's* in 1982, Alexander Cockburn savaged the structure of the Public Broadcasting Service's news

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[86] Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (Tucson, Arizona: Odonian Press, 1998), 43.
[87] Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, 61-62.

programme the 'MacNeil/Lehrer Report', where he critiqued the programme's focus upon,

and use of, supposed balanced debate to create the appearance of conflict where there is

none and to ultimately show that politics should be about congeniality.[88] Cockburn argued

that the limited spectrum of debate arose by "careful selection of the show's participants,

the show tries to make sure that the viewer will not be perturbed by any views overly

critical of the political and business establishment", and that the show tries to convey that

"while opinions may differ, all are united in general decency of purpose."[89] This focus on

the narrowness of the spectrum of opinion reflected Chomsky's sense of obfuscation, as he

argued that the narratives sold in the media were not necessarily accurate and ones that

were potentially more accurate were deemed not for sale. Naturally, for Chomsky, the

purpose of limiting the spectrum of debate is to allow "power to set the agenda."[90]

Therefore, Chomsky portrayed the media as obsequious rather than a dissenting force.

Essentially, Chomsky was gesturing towards the idea of the media enforcing the perimeters

of paradigms of thought by marginalising information and views that contravened the

establishment narrative. This argument became more explicit when Chomsky argued that

the powerful managed to undermine "any independent culture that fosters values other

than greed, personal gain, and subordination to authority, and any popular structures that

sustain independent thought and action."[91] The impact of this enforcement was that the

"general public must be reduced to its traditional state of apathy and obedience, and driven

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[88] Cockburn, *Corruptions of Empire*, 199-206.
[89] Cockburn, *Corruptions of Empire*, 202-203.
[90] Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, 48.
[91] *Ibid*., 131.

from political debate and action" as certain values were encouraged or discouraged.[92] Chomsky's argument around the limiting of the spectrum of debate engaged with how the media effected discourse, and that the narratives they sold were tools of control and that the result of this effort was obfuscation as inaccuracy became a desirable result. For Chomsky, discourse operated through a neoliberal logic of competition where winners attempted to consolidate their position and did so through the production of obfuscation. Within this identification of a marketplace of narratives was a framing of the media as obsequious, as subversion was discouraged and buying the supposed winning narrative was encouraged.

How the narrowing of the spectrum occurs and how it induces conformity and reduces dissent was demonstrated by Chomsky's discussion of "official enemies" and the reception to dissent and conformity. At the core of these examples is Chomsky's perception that obfuscation was facilitated, in part, through the powerful selling hypocritical narratives as they were incongruous to reality. Regarding the potential for dissent, and therefore the capacity to challenge these hypocritical narratives, Chomsky noted that for the media to dissent it

> is costly and difficult; high standards of evidence and argument are imposed,
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> and critical analysis is naturally not welcomed by those who are in a position
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> to react vigorously and to determine the array of rewards and punishments.[93]

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[92] *Ibid.*, 3.
[93] *Ibid.*, 8-9.

In contrast, Chomsky viewed the ease of conformity as resulting in a situation where "charges against official enemies barely require substantiation" and that such charges are "protected from correction".[94] This freedom to critique acceptable targets was compounded by the US itself being seen as an unacceptable target, meaning that to critique the "underlying patriotic assumption is virtually unthinkable."[95] Dissent became so difficult and conformity became so easy as the latter leads to "privilege and prestige", whilst the former carries "personal costs" and meant challenging the structures of the media that discouraged producing the nuanced explanations that were necessary to challenge the establishment narrative. Chomsky reinforced this point when he argued that the format of a three-minute broadcast between adverts or a sub-one thousand word article left little room to shift whole perceptions of reality.[96]

The hypocrisy — the discrepancy between narrative and reality — for Chomsky was that the narrative around the US media was that they was "independent and objective" and in possession of an "openness to all reasonable views".[97] The media's conformity to the establishment narrative arose due to journalists being unaware of their own underlying assumptions, reflected in their "choice of topics" and the "range of opinion permitted expression."[98] Chomsky noted that it is only critiques of the US and the "exposure of fabrications about official enemies that [are] subject to general opprobrium."[99] The result of critique only being able to focus on "official enemies" exemplified the state of conformity

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[94] *Ibid.*, 9.
[95] *Ibid.*, 9.
[96] *Ibid.*, 10.
[97] *Ibid.*, 13.
[98] *Ibid.*, 12.
[99] *Ibid.*, 158.

and resulted in a situation, for Chomsky, where the "the citizen is a consumer, an observer but not a participant."[100] Again, obfuscation was framed as a top-down process and was facilitated by an establishment advancing narratives that narrowed the aspects of reality that could be engaged with. Moreover, Chomsky related media consumption to neoliberal homo economicus, as in the situation he outlined the citizen was framed as a consumer who bought and invested in narratives, rather than as a reader who critically evaluated them.

In summary, by focusing on the narrowness of the spectrum of debate, the costs and rewards of conformity or dissent, and the use of "official enemies," Chomsky deconstructed a narrative that the media were objective, independent, and should be thought as challengers to power. He identified a strain of apathy resulting from the establishment's direction of the media, as it ceased to work for the public interest and instead shored up corporate and state power, limiting the space and opportunities for those who try to challenge that orthodoxy. For Chomsky the media failed to fulfil their responsibility of accurately reporting reality and this allowed the elite to flourish and the public to become apathetic as the narratives that won in the neoliberal marketplace failed to resonate with the reality around them, and in turn they were immersed within a climate of obfuscation.

Just how and why this responsibility was disregarded is elaborated upon by Chomsky's discussion of intellectuals. In his writing on the media, Chomsky paid attention to the relationship between intellectuals and power, and ultimately, how intellectuals legitimised

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[100] *Ibid*., 14.

and enhanced narratives that maintained the status quo. Chomsky framed intellectuals as a class with the potential to be the arbiters of truth, to exist as a bridge between the elite within society and the wider public, and which could reinforce a comprehension of reality that served either group. Chomsky laboured with the term intellectual and on multiple occasions noted its imprecision. However, he settled on remarking that intellectual is "generally used for [a] category of people who are supposed to be guardians of intellectual [and] moral values of society, to uphold [and] articulate these values."[101] This conception of intellectuals stems back to Chomsky's high-profile 1967 essay 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', and his 1969 book *American Power and the New Mandarins*, which discussed liberalism and objective scholarship, again highlighting the longer roots of Chomsky's feeling of obfuscation.[102] These trends that Chomsky connected to obfuscation were not necessarily new, but that much of his work during the 1980s and 1990s orientated around its role reflected the significant intensity of obfuscation during the period as he attempted to explain part of the national mood.

The most salient example of this is Chomsky's exploration of how intellectuals can succumb to "indoctrination", as he phrased it, and therefore obfuscation. Chomsky noted that the "educated classes are the most indoctrinated" as they are exposed to the most "propaganda" due to them needing "to be more controlled," and that the purpose of intellectuals in "society is to promulgate and develop the ideological principles."[103] This

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[101] 'Notes on talks: Writers and Intellectual Responsibility Undated', Massachusetts Institute of Technology Distinctive Collection, NCP, MC-0600, Series 1, Box 15, and 'Notes on Talks: St Catherine's (Responsibility of Intellectuals) 1997 April', Massachusetts Institute of Technology Distinctive Collection, NCP, MC-0600, Series 1, Box 15.
[102] Chomsky, *American Power*.
[103] Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent*., 146.

understanding of intellectuals fits within Chomsky's wider media analysis and how the top-down production of obfuscation produced apathy within the general population — a point he elaborated upon when he noted that those who were less educated and who were less indoctrinated did not necessarily develop "some sort or revolutionary spirit or progressive impulse or whatever" and that the less educated aspect of the population can be directed anywhere and "can lead to almost anything", including fascism.[104] For Chomsky, the apathy which was indicative of a state of obfuscation operated on two levels: first, the wider population became apathetic as they were sold narratives that marginalised them, and second, the intellectual class became apathetic as they succumbed to indoctrination and consequently failed to fulfil their actual responsibility.

Chomsky's explanation of the exact nature of this responsibility and how the intellectual class should relate to the wider public further demonstrated his sense of obfuscation and the necessity of accurate narratives to overcome it. The depth of indoctrination was outlined by Chomsky when he characterised the intellectual class as a "secular priesthood", with intellectuals having to believe their own propaganda as "they are the guardians of the faith."[105] However, whilst the intellectual class was deeply indoctrinated, for the wider public to understand reality it is in fact simple to "take apart the system of illusion" as it requires a level of "normal scepticism" that people possess but misapply due to apathy and distraction.[106] This distinction between an intellectual class and the wider population that

[104] *Ibid*., 146.
[105] Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader*, 35.
[106] *Ibid*., 35.

Chomsky observed demonstrated how he understood political change to occur, and with it just how solidified power was. Furthermore, he noted:

> To speak truth to power is not a particularly honourable vocation. One should seek out an audience that matters—and furthermore (another important qualification), it should not be seen as an audience, but as a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively. We should not be speaking TO, but WITH.[107]

Essentially, intellectuals should aim to speak to, integrate with, and serve the wider public. They were where the power to create significant change actually lay. In making this argument Chomsky again bridged the structure-agency dichotomy — where the powerful have greater movement within society's structures — a point he elaborated upon by noting that in terms of how the powerful actually operated: "there's nothing particularly conspiratorial about it" as the "values are shared, often articulated, often unspoken" and that within the institutions that influence society and form its upper echelons, "there's a natural interpenetration due to shared interest, shared privilege, and simply the desire to wield power effectively in the interest of the institutions one represents."[108]

This need for Chomsky to explain the 'awareness' of the powerful arose from his work moving against the standard conception of reality, people then engaging with his explanations, and then needing to understand how this obfuscated version of reality has emerged and is maintained. Writing in 1988 for *The Spectator*, Charles Glass argued that

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[107] Noam Chomsky, *Power and Prospects* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 61.
[108] Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent*, 140-141.

Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, and Gore Vidal all stood "outside the American political spectrum" and were evidence that America's intellectual climate "had not been rendered wholly sterile by the soporific years of Reagan", and that Chomsky could find an audience due to his "intellect and integrity".[109] Therefore, Chomsky was an intellectual who was perceived to be one who was closer to fulfilling his own responsibilities, and was "attempting to enlarge the discussion beyond the ditches dug by authorities" as the *New Internationalist* characterised Chomsky in 1995.[110]

Chomsky's analysis of the role and responsibility of an intellectual within society was indicative of, and a challenge towards, neoliberalism's capacity to fracture society. Chomsky viewed intellectuals as a class, not as separated individuals. This allowed him to connect intellectuals to systems of power and to critique this relationship whilst simultaneously observing how intellectuals could resist this relationship by forging an alternative engagement with the wider population. This approach moved against the neoliberal focus on the individual by advocating for intellectuals to join the interests of the demos, and that to neglect this responsibility deepened the climate of obfuscation and the apathy of the wider population and of the intellectual class itself.

In summation, Chomsky's media analysis further outlined the existence of a system of obfuscation. It was a form of analysis that aggressively committed to reality being knowable

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[109] Charles Glass, 'Beat The Devil', *The Spectator*, 261, no.8363 (October 22, 1988), 31-33.
[110] 'The Chomsky Reader', *New Internationalist*, 265 (March 1995), 33.

and that there were structures, institutions, and groups whose work perpetuated this obfuscation and its resultant apathy. This was either apathy within the wider population as the mechanisms of power became distant and immutable by the media and intellectuals distorting them, or it was the apathy of the media and the intellectuals themselves as they failed to fulfil their responsibilities and became obsequious. This stood in contrast to what Chomsky himself considered to be the establishment narrative's perception of the media — that they are a force of dissent who pursue the truth.

Philosophy, Cognition, Anarchism, and Neoliberalism

An understanding of Chomsky's personal politics, philosophy, and comprehension of the mind is necessary to fully understand the obfuscation, brutality, and the obsequiousness that he outlined in his foreign policy and media analysis. His politics, philosophy, and understanding of cognition synergised, offering an alternative narrative that underwrote the logic he used within his foreign policy and media critique. Much of the work where Chomsky outlines his views on anarchism, philosophy, and the human mind predate the 1980s and intersects with his linguistic work. In attempting to understand the foundations of Chomsky's thought and advocacy two themes emerge. The first is his views on philosophy and cognition and the second is his views on anarchism and the nature of its resistance. In this section, his views on philosophy and cognition are explored through focusing on Chomsky's views on hope, human nature, and his position on theory within the social sciences and the humanities. His views on anarchism and resistance are explored through his understanding of democracy, authority, the enlightenment tradition. Finally, both sections are bridged by Chomsky's specific analysis of neoliberalism. Enabling this

connection is Chomsky's sense of hope, an act he positions as a component of resistance in itself, as it is used to imagine an alternative society, destabilising the establishment narrative, and countering neoliberalism's capacity to generate apathy.

Chomsky frequently ends his work with a hopeful sign off, as despite the myriad of atrocities being committed, all is not lost. This hope runs throughout Chomsky's political and philosophical work, and he frames this process as similar to Pascal's Wager. Pascal's Wager is a mode of thinking that outlines that even though humanity cannot be certain of God's existence, it makes sense to act as if he does on the chance that God does exist. In terms of hope, Chomsky frames it as:

> On this issue of human freedom, if you assume that there's no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, there are opportunities to change things, etc., there's a chance you may contribute to making a better world. That's your choice.[111]

Therefore, with Chomsky's political analysis aiming to acknowledge the actual state of reality, that he maintains a sense of hope indicated that his analysis was informed by the potential for society to change. Moreover, that Chomsky remained hopeful demonstrates his sense of, and the necessity of, political imagination in resistance. Consequently, he implied that forces that limit that imagination, such as obfuscation, need to be overcome for change to occur. Chomsky's hopefulness was pragmatic, not naïve. Therefore, within a neoliberal context, to make hope a foundational point of where your resistance is drawn

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[111] Chomsky, *Chronicles of Dissent*, 355.

from is significant. It was an attempt to overcome obfuscation and apathy as Chomsky felt compelled to focus on their inverse as he deliberately attempted to overcome a climate of disengagement and melancholy.

With hope forming the baseline of Chomsky's political imagination, it intertwined and synergised with his views on human nature, although it did not define it. However, his views are positioned to establish the legitimacy of hope, and resultingly strengthen his resistance to a neoliberal individualistic claim towards human nature and therefore challenges the obfuscation this ultimately instils. Despite Chomsky frequently arguing that his views on linguistics and politics are separate, he has occasionally connected them, notably in a 1970 lecture at Loyola University. It is in this connection that Chomsky shapes his understanding of human nature that feeds into his politics, and ultimately undermines the neoliberal notion of markets and competition maximising human flourishing. Chomsky begins the Loyola lecture by remarking that he does not usually deal with language and freedom being connected but that linguistics

> reveals something of the nature of man in a negative way: it underscores, with great clarity, the limits of our understanding of those qualities of mind that are apparently unique to man and that must enter into his cultural achievements in an intimate, if still quite obscure manner.[112]

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[112] Noam Chomsky, 'Language and Freedom', *Chomsky on Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), 101. Originally published in Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (New York, New York: Pantheon, 1970).

Chomsky simultaneously acknowledged the limitations of understanding human nature in relation to cognition but maintained that reflecting on language can still yield knowledge of human nature and the inherent capacities of the mind. He elaborated, ultimately claiming

> social action must be animated by a vision of a future society, and by explicit judgments of value concerning the character of this future society. These judgements must derive from some concept of the nature of man, and one may seek empirical foundations by investigating man's nature as it is revealed by his behaviour and his creations, material, intellectual and social.[113]

Therefore, social change is influenced by political imagination for Chomsky, and that this imagination must involve a sense of human nature, which can be explored through studying language. When Chomsky's views on language, political imagination, social change — including his own sense of hope — are taken in combination it demonstrates that he ultimately held a positive view of human nature. Elaborating, Chomsky claimed:

> the study of language can provide some glimmerings of understanding of rule-governed behaviour and the possibilities for free and creative action within the framework of a system of rules that in part, at least, reflect intrinsic properties of human mental organisation.[114]

For Chomsky, there was a connection between the capacity for language and human nature, and that the study of language can elucidate the drive for freedom and creativity that is part of "human mental organisation." This connection between linguistic study, human nature, and liberty echoes the work of the anarchist thinker Paul Goodman, as Clarissa Honeywell

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[113] *Ibid.*, 113-114.
[114] *Ibid.*, 114-115.

argues.[115] Consequently, by Chomsky's logic, any attempts at social organisation that do not facilitate liberty or creativity are working against human nature, a charge that could be levelled against neoliberalism due to its emphasis on competition inherently creating more losers than winners, stifling the space for action and thought that people are afforded.

With Chomsky holding a connection between linguistics and human nature, he elaborates and discusses the implications of this for morality and social organisation. In a 1998 interview, he expanded on this theme, arguing against what he viewed as the postmodern position of there being no intrinsic quality to human nature and that it is entirely dependent on the social structures at play.[116] Whilst Chomsky acknowledged that these structures have an influence, he believes that, regardless of the environment, a child still has an innate capacity for language and therefore,

> We can begin to see human nature in terms of certain capacities to develop
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> certain mental traits. I think we can go further than this and begin to discover
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> universal aspects of these mental traits which are determined by human
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> nature. I think we can find this in the area of morality.[117]

Essentially, Chomsky leant towards there being an innate conception of morality across humanity. To account for the diversity of moral justifications, Chomsky compares our innate moral capacity to that of a biological trait, such as height, as it can be impacted upon by external structures, similar to how height is effected by diet, but not to the extent that

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[115] Clarissa Honeywell, 'Paul Goodman: Finding an Audience for Anarchism in Twentieth-Century America', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 5, no. 2 (Fall, 2011), 16.
[116] 'On Human Nature', accessed 1.8.19, https://chomsky.info/199808___-2/.
[117] *Ibid*.

these external factors remove any intrinsic component.[118] Crucially, and somewhat

tenuously, Chomsky claimed he does not commit to what he considers an essentialist

position by arguing that his views on human nature outline the conditions for an objectively

optimal society, just that "enlightenment thinking", which in Chomsky's instance particularly

focused on figures such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and scientific

and philosophical investigations into our "hopes, intuition, and experience" and actual

"history and cultural variety" demonstrate "there are needs for conditions which allow the

flourishing of human capacities."[119] These were conditions that would allow

> people…to exist in free association with others — not in isolation, and not in
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> relations of domination. There is a need to replace social fetters with social
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> bonds.[120]

Chomsky avoided defining the exact manifestation of an optimal society but left the door

open for a process to understand the necessary conditions, with liberty and community

being fundamental. More recently, Chomsky clarified, claiming that this connection

between his views on human nature and his political emphasis on liberty were "more than

coincidental but much less than deductive."[121]

On one level, Chomsky's rationalist epistemology appeared to echo neoliberal logic.

Neoliberalism emphasises liberty, although of the individual, and aims to decrease forms of

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[118]*Ibid.*

[119] Ibid. Additionally, for Chomsky on Humboldt and Rousseau see - Noam Chomsky, 'Language and Freedom', *Chomsky on Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005).

[120] 'On Human Nature', accessed 1.8.19, https://chomsky.info/199808__-2/.

[121] 'Why I Choose Optimism Over Despair: An Interview with Noam Chomsky', accessed 1.8.19, https://truthout.org/articles/why-i-choose-optimism-over-despair-an-interview-with-noam-chomsky/.

authority that might limit that being realised through the market, such as aspects of the state. However, in his bridge between his linguistic and political work Chomsky emphasised liberty not to foster a conception of it that allows for rampant competition but one that facilitated an environment where social bonds could be formed and where the freedom of the collective rather than individual could be embraced. Again, Chomsky's approach challenged the neoliberal emphasis on individualism that produces obfuscation, as the manipulation of reality to further one's position in it became less important when society is organised through collective rather than individual freedom. Therefore, Chomsky added a layer of authority to his resistance to neoliberalism as it was grounded in his longer view of political philosophy and his interpretation of human nature.

Chomsky's narrative of resistance and the necessity of philosophical realism is demonstrated by his rejection of theory within the humanities and social sciences and his argument that it inculcates intellectuals into the service of power.[122] In a 1998 interview Chomsky outlined that in "human affairs, I can't think of anything that deserves the name 'theory'" and that "a lot of what people call theories in social sciences - literary theory and others - is obfuscation."[123] Obviously Chomsky meant obfuscation in its traditional manner here, as opposed to it being a feeling playing a central part within the historical sensorium of the end of the twentieth century, but he is still charging intellectuals who embrace theory as failing in their responsibilities, as they then facilitate a climate where a detachment from reality becomes possible. They fail as Chomsky ultimately believes that politics and current

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[122] For a critique of Chomsky's views on theory see: Christopher Wise, *Chomsky and Deconstruction: The Politics of Unconscious Knowledge* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[123] Noam Chomsky, *Propaganda and the Public Mind* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 25-26.

affairs are relatively straightforward and that intellectuals "try to make simple things look difficult" for a multitude of reasons, including "domination and personal privilege."[124] Furthermore, Chomsky argues that relativism and empirical understanding of epistemology create a degree of malleability and inconsistency as they ultimately play into the hands of the powerful as they can use such flexibility to justify their position.[125] Therefore, by arguing against relativism, Chomsky implicitly attacked the marketplace of narratives and its assumption that what is true is what sells. Instead, he remained committed to the possibility of objective knowledge.

Whilst Chomsky steeps his narrative of hope in human nature and uses this to reaffirm a commitment to realism, what this narrative and commitment lead to is expressed through his conception of anarchism. Chomsky does not consider himself an anarchist thinker but rather a "derivative fellow traveller" of the tradition, but at the centre of his conception of what he often refers to as a "libertarian socialism" is that liberty needs to be maximised.[126]

Chomsky views liberty in terms of the collective being free from unjust authority, rather than the individual being free to dominate the collective. Therefore, democracy is a prerequisite for liberty for Chomsky, as it is through collective decision making that people exert a modicum of control over their lives and society at large. In the fifth lecture of the 1986 Managua Series, Chomsky explored the nature of American democracy and what conditions are missing for it to be achieved. He divided the types of decisions society faces

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[124] Chomsky, 'Anarchism, Intellectuals and the State (1996)', *Chomsky on Anarchism*, 216.
[125] Chomsky, 'Containing the Treat of Democracy (1990)', *Chomsky on Anarchism*, 174.
[126] Chomsky, *Radical Priorities*, 213.

into "investment decisions and political decisions."[127] The former include resource

production and distribution, profit and price control, and working conditions. The latter's

focus on the formation of state policy and who is allowed to participate within that

formation. To achieve democracy, Chomsky argued that both investment and political

decisions must contain a significant element of popular control. In terms of the more

political decisions, he suggested that in American society the public "is afforded an

opportunity to ratify elite decisions, but the option of participating in making them is

limited, very largely, to privileged elites."[128] Chomsky thus placed a particular importance on

the investment decisions as without popular influence the public are left hoping "for a

decent existence in their role as servants of private power".[129] Therefore, under Chomsky's

logic, without material equality there cannot be a full democracy, and without a full

democracy, liberty cannot be obtained. He therefore rejects the neoliberal notion of

markets being the optimal way to achieve human flourishing.

Chomsky's advocacy for increased popular participation is possible due to his optimistic

view of human nature as fundamentally good, and that because of this fundamental

goodness mass participation is necessary to prevent unaccountable forms of authority.

Moreover, this emphasis on liberty leads Chomsky to claim that "the essence of anarchism"

is "the conviction that the burden of proof has to be placed on authority, and that it should

be dismantled if that burden cannot be met."[130] By identifying these flaws within US

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[127] Chomsky, *On Power*, 150.
[128] *Ibid*., 153.
[129] *Ibid*., 151.
[130] Noam Chomsky, 'Anarchism, Marxism, and Hope for the Future (1995)', *Chomsky on Anarchism*, 178.
Originally published in *Red & Black Revolution: A Magazine for Libertarian Communism*, no.2 (1995-1996).

democracy, and capitalist democracy more broadly, it demonstrated that Chomsky's

conception of anarchism was largely predicated upon a heightened sense of democracy to

maximise collective freedom, a state which becomes possible through material equality.

This collectivism stands apart from the neoliberal focus on individual liberty and the state

existing merely to facilitate competition.

Chomsky advanced his views on liberty through his claim that libertarian socialists are the

true inheritors of classic liberalism from the enlightenment tradition.[131] Chomsky formed a

left-wing challenge to the efforts made by right-wing intellectuals to claim neoliberalism as a

rehabilitation of liberalism.[132] In a 1996 essay entitled "Goals and Visions", which mainly

focused on Chomsky's preparedness to compromise and even defend the state if it entails

vital short term victories, he also broached the topic of whether libertarian socialism or

neoliberalism was the true heir of classical liberalism. In the essay, Chomsky noted that

what he refers to as classical liberalism does not mean the version of it "that has been

reconstructed for ideological purposes, but the original, before it was broken on the rocks of

rising industrial capitalism, as Rudolf Rocker put it in his work on anarcho-syndicalism 60

years ago."[133] Benjamin Pauli notes that it was Rocker who was the first to argue that

anarchism merged socialism with classical liberalism and that Chomsky echoes this idea.[134]

Chomsky found that this 'reconstruction' further impinged upon freedom as there is no way

to opt out of neoliberalism, and, in a phrase running with sarcasm, he expresses a particular

level of horror for the neoliberal iteration of domination by stating: "As we admire the

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[131] Chomsky, *Chomsky on Anarchism*, 123, and Chomsky, *On Power*, 151.
[132] Dieter Plehwe, 'Introduction', in *The Road from Mont Pèlerin*, 16.
[133] *Chomsky, Power and Prospects*, 71.
[134] Benjamin J. Pauli, 'Noam Chomsky and the Anarchist Tradition', in *Noam Chomsky* ed. By Alison Edgley, 42.

imposing edifice of rationality incarnated, the compassion for the poor brings tears to the

eyes."[135] By arguing libertarian socialism was the true heir to classical liberalism Chomsky

undermined the neoliberal claim to it. This is not to solely suggest that liberalism is an

ideological prize, it is more that this debate over liberalism demonstrated Chomsky's

capacity to engage with another paradigm of thought, and by doing so attempted to

immunise anarchism against any deterministic charges that immediately conflate an

ideological emphasis on liberty with neoliberalism.

In 1999 Chomsky published *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* to develop

his thoughts on neoliberalism as a political and economic project and its relationship to

liberty.[136] Writing across the 1990s, Chomsky did not view neoliberalism and global order as

separate concepts, and their combination reflected a system of political and economic order

that Chomsky understood as having weakened democracy and strengthened inequality. This

was due to the proliferation and manipulation of free market rhetoric and corporate and

international financial institutions growing in power, with the US a core player. Moreover

though, *Profit Over People* is a volume that demonstrated that Chomsky did not necessarily

view neoliberalism itself as its own system of logic, or really even a particular break in the

political economic order, as for Chomsky, the guiding principles of neoliberal global order

remained consistent with the pre-neoliberal order.[137] Therefore, in Chomsky's view,

neoliberalism was a continuation, and even an intensification of a trend, although with

additional features.[138] However, the volume further demonstrated how Chomsky's own

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[135] *Chomsky, Power and Prospects,* 90-91.
[136] Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (London: Seven Stories Press, 1999).
[137] *Ibid*., 19.
[138] *Ibid*., 23-24.

analysis was able to target and reflect neoliberal characteristics, especially obfuscation and its relationship to the marketplace of narratives.

Chomsky debated the validity of the term neoliberalism by claiming that its "doctrines are not new", and that its liberal credentials are "far from those that have animated the liberal tradition since the Enlightenment."[139] The trend Chomsky places neoliberalism in relation to has two core aspects to it, the first is of the US attempting to maximise its wealth and power in the post-World War II era, echoing his analysis of foreign policy, and the second relates to a longer view of history that connects neoliberalism to Chomsky's interpretation of how those with power have a pattern of prescribing solutions to poverty that serve their own interests. By viewing neoliberalism as a trend, Chomsky historicises it and grounds it, and resultingly makes neoliberalism more comprehensible: by arguing it was a project of design and not exclusively a force, he implies that an alternative design can emerge that can overcome neoliberalism. Furthermore, Chomsky's rejection of neoliberalism as a form of liberalism not only undermined its supposed intellectual foundations but also began to offer an alternative framework that could replace it, namely his interpretation of liberalism.

However, regarding this history of neoliberalism, Chomsky is somewhat inconsistent. His first use of neoliberalism and its connection to the economic changes of the 1980s was at least as early as 1988, six years prior to the oldest essay in *Profit Over People*.[140] In a 2017

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[139] *Ibid*., 19.
[140] Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), 274. Note, Chapter 8 of *Deterring* is taken from *Z Magazine* articles by Chomsky in September and November 1988. Additionally see, 'Of Prussians and Traders', accessed 1.8.19, https://chomsky.info/198811___/ for another use of the phrase from the same year.

interview, Chomsky argued that neoliberalism very much did begin in the 1970s.[141] He went

on to characterise neoliberalism by asserting that "its crucial principle is undermining

mechanisms of social solidarity and mutual support and popular engagement in determining

policy."[142] Essentially, neoliberalism was an afront to democracy for Chomsky, and so whilst

he shifted his understanding of the beginning of the neoliberal era, his understanding of its

impact has remained consistent and it is neoliberalism's impact that significantly informs his

chronology in *Profit over People*. Moreover, in 1978 on Bryan Mcgee's 'Men of Ideas'

television programme, Chomsky characterised liberalism in the late 1970s as a philosophy

> that accepts a number of centres of authority and control, the state on the
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> one hand, agglomerations of private power on the other hand all interacting
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> with individuals as malleable cogs in this highly constrained machine, which
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> may be called democratic but given the actual distribution of power is very far
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> from meaningfully democratic and cannot be so.[143]

Thus, Chomsky viewed liberalism as evolving and developing neoliberal characteristics, as

the state and private power merged, a point that is consistent with Chomsky's longer

interpretation of neoliberalism's impact. The longer view in *Profit Over People* provides a

historical context for the economic shifts of the end of the twentieth century, but this did

not prevent Chomsky from acknowledging the idea of neoliberal characteristics intensifying

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[141] 'Noam Chomsky: Neoliberalism Is Destroying Our Democracy', accessed 1.8.19,
https://www.thenation.com/article/noam-chomsky-neoliberalism-destroying-democracy/.
[142] *Ibid*.
[143] 'Noam Chomsky interview on Language and Knowledge (1977)', accessed 1.8.19,
https://youtu.be/ZVXLo9gJq-U?t=2590 43:11-44:02.

towards the end of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, in his outline of the longer history of neoliberalism Chomsky still grappled with neoliberal obfuscation. He connected neoliberalism to the doctrines that weaken "social solidarity", placing neoliberalism in line with arguments as far back in time as David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus's on poverty relief, which Chomsky summarised as arguments that claim that "we only harm the poor by trying to help them, and that the best gift we can offer the suffering masses is to free them from the delusions that they have a right to live."[144] Moreover, Chomsky noted that there was a pattern regarding the actualisation of the ideas guiding economic development wherein "the designers tend to do quite well, though the subjects of the experiment often take a beating" and that this pattern, which neoliberalism is part of, can be traced back to the start of imperialism.[145] Therefore, Chomsky again observed a difference between doctrine and reality: neoliberalism was part of a history of doctrines that were sold as being able to alleviate poverty but in reality did the opposite.

Chomsky furthered his sense of obfuscation and critique of neoliberalism by observing the inconsistencies in how free market doctrine was applied, as he claimed it "comes in two varieties."[146] The first variety was the "official doctrine imposed on the defenceless" — that the free market is universally good — and the second was the "'really existing free market doctrine': market discipline is good for you, but not for me, except for temporary

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[144] Chomsky. *Profit*, 58-59.
[145] *Ibid*., 26.
[146] *Ibid.,* 34.

advantage."[147] By noting these two varieties Chomsky implied that there was a narrative

imposed from the strong to the weak, and that "free market doctrine" was positioned as

beneficial but that this narrative was not subscribed to by society's actual winners who were

advancing it. Taking the Reagan administration as an example, Chomsky felt that in terms of

being able to push a narrative of the benefits of the market whilst also using the state to

support corporations, they were "masters of the art".[148] With such remarks Chomsky

demonstrated that the emphasis on free markets was a narrative to allow the exploitation

of the weak by the powerful, but also that neoliberal doctrine, supposedly based around the

state having a reduced economic role, in fact, had an increased one in certain spheres.

Chomsky's ambivalence over the newness of neoliberalism is instructive. His attempts to

grapple with it by historicising it reflect an attempt to explain the tone of the 1980s and

1990s, and whilst the roots he draws out are plausible, when they are taken in conjunction

with Chomsky's own commitment towards intellectual responsibility he becomes aligned

with the Foucauldian readings of neoliberalism, such as by Wendy Brown or Pierre Dardot

and Christian Laval, that saw competition becoming *the* organizing principle of social life

under neoliberalism. This was due to Chomsky's wanting to forge a narrative that would

resonate with the general public, and so by focusing on the longer history of competition

within society and the discrepancies between narratives and reality more generally,

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[147] *Ibid.,* 34.
[148] *Ibid*., 37.

Chomsky's work became indicative of the high intensity that neoliberal obfuscation was operating at during the 1980s and 1990s.

This discrepancy between narrative and reality was demonstrated in a review of *Profit over People* published in *The Economist*, which remarked that: "To Mr Chomsky liberal capitalism is structurally flawed and morally wicked. You have to accept that before much of what he says can make sense", a point which suggested that Chomsky existed in a different paradigm of thought to that of the classically liberal *Economist*, as "you have to accept" Chomsky's narrative and ideological prerequisites for his work to resonate.[149] In contrast, Peter Whittaker, writing in the left-wing *New Internationalist* found that Chomsky rang true as he "brilliantly dissects neoliberalism's morally and intellectually barren rationale."[150] The reviews of *Profit over People* exemplified an intellectual climate of paradigms of thought and a marketplace of narratives, where 'prerequisites' had to be accepted to understand a dissident like Chomsky, and that if these prerequisites were accepted, such as with Chomsky and Whittaker, the establishment narrative's proponents seemed disconnected from reality.

In summation, Chomsky's understanding of hope, human nature, and his conception of anarchism outlined an approach to reality that aligned with the supposed benefit of neoliberalism — that it aims to maximise liberty and that this should facilitate human flourishing. However, Chomsky did not take his hostility towards unjustified authority, including potentially the state, towards the same conclusions as neoliberalism. Alternatively,

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[149] The Economist, vol. 350, no. 8110, March 13, 1999.
[150] Peter Whittaker, 'Profit over People Neoliberalism and Global Order', *New Internationalist*, 312 (May, 1999), 31.

Chomsky advocated for a form of liberty that emphasises the collective being free from the domination of a higher authority, as demonstrated by his critique of neoliberalism. This lofty vision of Chomsky's was predicated upon a sense of hope and ultimately a positive view of human nature that he drew from his rationalistic understanding of epistemology and a scepticism of relativity.

<center>***</center>

In conclusion, Chomsky's work examined, critiqued, and offered an alternative to neoliberalism and its system of logic. His wider efforts were able to demonstrate the subtlety and enormity of US power and the abuses that it has permitted or led to. Chomsky worked to upset the notion that the US was the leading global force in benevolence or morality and that its institutions, particularly the media, manage to produce a comprehension of reality that served public interests. Within this process of dissent and disruption, he tapped into the establishment narrative and identified a sense of obfuscation being deployed that allowed the brutality of US foreign policy to be permitted, and that the media were obsequious and engendered a state of apathy in an effort to further the position of society's winners.

Chomsky's conception of anarchism ultimately offered an alternative view of reality and demonstrated his capacity for political imagination, which was drawn from his commitment towards hope and his ability to query accepted forms of authority. Moreover, his understanding of philosophical realism reverberated into his foreign policy and media critique. In terms of neoliberalism, Chomsky attempted to grapple with a rationality that

allowed for the freedom to exploit others, and through this condition's acceptance, atomise

individuals as competition attempted to become a ubiquitous force that was internalised

and maintained through a process of obfuscation. He was well positioned to critique

neoliberalism as he engaged with how discourse was a tool to enhance a dominant group's

position as his methodology was directly based around entering paradigms of thought and

twisting the narratives that were supposedly used to connect their subscribers to reality.

Subsequently, the elites were portrayed as being able to advance their own position

through a combination of having a greater influence over reality and by not needing to

subscribe to obfuscating narratives, although they were not invulnerable to them. Chomsky

was ferociously committed to reality and his simultaneous popularity and disdain suggested

that the sense of reality being lost resonated, and that there were people who stood to gain

from Chomsky's exclusion. Shifting from the mechanics of power that Chomsky outlined,

Gore Vidal and Joan Didion offer an insight into how society's elite engaged with, and were

affected by, the marketplace of narratives and obfuscation.

Chapter Two
Finding and Playing in the Marketplace of Narratives:
Gore Vidal and Joan Didion's Response to Neoliberalism

Gore Vidal and Joan Didion were public intellectuals who had a liminal status within the

establishment, as their ideas and lifestyles forged a connection with it, and yet, at the same

time, they criticised the powerful and distanced themselves from the mainstream. Their

critiques of the establishment narrative were tinged by their relative proximity to power

that arose from their wealth and celebrity. They dabbled in fiction and non-fiction — with

the latter being where they found the most success — as they both found a home within

The New York Review of Books, a publication that was well served to contain their

connections and critiques as it balanced the highbrow, dense, stuffy, and pretentious

aspects of intellectual culture with sophisticated and genuine attempts at comprehension

and alternative thought. Vidal's career was one that blurred lines — his patrician sensibility

combined with populist politics as he attempted to find influence, be it as a politician or as a

public intellectual, a process that was central to his 1982 California Democratic primary

campaign for US Senate, a race that this chapter dissects. The *Review* had a greater impact

on Didion: it was where all her essays analysed in this chapter were published, and it

became an outlet for her to explore domestic politics.

In these efforts both writers focused their critiques on the political class and outlined their

sense of obfuscation. Vidal did so by directly competing in the marketplace through his

primary campaign, which engaged with the norms around electoral politics, and Didion did

so by focusing on the wider political culture that formed under neoliberalism, as she tackled

how narratives were bought and sold by the political class itself. Ultimately, they felt there

was a discrepancy between the establishment narrative and reality, as they argued the former portrayed the political class as responsible agents of democracy whilst the latter revealed them to be self-serving. In exploring this they both demonstrated the far-reaching impact of the marketplace of narratives, finding that the political class was compelled by its logic, and that their behaviour and thinking disproportionately focused on responding to and selling specific narratives rather than trying to engage with reality.

Gore Vidal – Competing in the Marketplace

Gore Vidal was born in 1925 and died in 2012. He was the grandson of the populist Senator Thomas Gore of Oklahoma, and his political education began as a child, when he would read to his grandfather.[1] He joined the Navy during World War II, published his first novel at 21, and never attended university. He would go on to publish a plethora of work that included historical fiction, as well as plays, film scripts, and a myriad of essays whilst also frequently appearing on television.[2] Vidal's writings balanced between serious and accessible, as he chronicled America's past and its present — often with a satirical edge that installed him as a consistent presence in American intellectual life.

Consequently, Vidal aggressively embodied the "public" aspect of the public intellectual. Of his oeuvre, Harold Bloom argued that his best work lay in his historical novels, but that they

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[1] *The Nation* provide a particularly succinct biography of Vidal: 'Gore Vidal', accessed 17.4.20., https://www.thenation.com/authors/gore-vidal/.
[2] For an exploration of Vidal's literary celebrity see: Guy Davidson, ''Just a couple of fags': Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Celebrity Feud', *Celebrity Studies*, 7 no.3 (2016), 293-308.

were underappreciated due to their genre.[3] However, Jason Epstein, Vidal's editor, found

that it was it was his essays, rather than his novels, where be best expressed himself.[4]

Vidal's approach towards politics and culture was idiosyncratic but was stabilised through a

consistent desire to challenge authority and to expand liberty. Regarding his own life, he

rejected a definitive sexual label, as he argued that homosexuality and heterosexuality were

"adjectives describing sexual acts, not people", and faced hostility for this as *The New York

Times* refused to review his *The City and the Pillar* novel, which, in 1948 was one of the

earliest examples of American novels that explicitly featured gay male sex.[5] Vidal's politics

were not without inconsistency: he embraced a form of left populism but at time advocated

for population control and was a staunch atheist who made antisemitic remarks, although

there were also instances of him speaking out against antisemitism.[6] Vidal's politics were

shaped by his hostility to cultural and social authority that contrasted with his establishment

connections and celebrity.

Vidal's celebrity mediated his career as he balanced between being an intellectual who

critiqued the establishment and having a desire to formally exist within the political class

itself. He unsuccessfully ran for office twice, first in 1960 for Congress in New York, and then

in 1982 when he tried to win the California Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate — a

campaign which forms this chapter's focus. Vidal also had a relationship with the Kennedy

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[3] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 21.
[4] 'Gore Vidal Dies at 86; Prolific, Elegant, Acerbic Writer', *The New York Times*, 1 August 2012.
[5] Gore Vidal, 'Sex is Politics', in *United States Essays: 1952-1992* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1993), 550.
[6] Gore Vidal, 'A Manifesto', *Esquire*, October 1968.
'Gore Vidal and the Jew he Loved', accessed 17.4.20, https://forward.com/culture/160362/gore-vidal-and-the-jew-he-loved/.

family that stemmed from being distantly related to Jackie Kennedy through his former stepfather. Contrasting the prestige of the Kennedys, Vidal was co-chairman of the People's Party between 1970 and 1972. He would then spend much of life in Revello, Italy where he analysed America from a distance. Complimenting Vidal's celebrity was his predilection for boasting and his ferocious wit — traits that became notorious in 1968 when he appeared alongside William Buckley for ABC News in their post-presidential convention coverage, during which Vidal called Buckley a "crypto-Nazi" and Buckley called Vidal a "queer" and threatened to punch him.[7] Viewed as a whole, Vidal's life and views are contradictory and inconsistent, but he used his proximity to power to advance both his own claims to it and his critiques of those who already held it.

There have been previous attempts to analyse Vidal, although there is not a wealth of literature focusing on him, and these efforts have observed both his roles as an intellectual and an artist. However, his 1982 election campaign has not been explored in detail, an omission this chapter aims to rectify. The significance of exploring Vidal's foray into the electoral arena is that it offers a rare opportunity to examine a public intellectual and their reception in the most public of settings, as he was no longer simply a critic penning essays from afar but was now a fully-fledged competitor vying for the attention of the electorate whilst also attempting to overcome his rivals. Moreover, as Vidal's campaign was designed around disturbing aspects of the establishment narrative it demonstrated his own sense of

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[7] 'William Buckley Vs Gore Vidal,', accessed 15.4.20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYymnxoQnf8.

obfuscation whilst also presenting the chance to examine the reaction to an attempt to peel back the film over reality.

The analysis of Vidal in this chapter differs to how the other intellectuals in this dissertation are approached. Here the focus is less on his published writings and more on his campaign speeches and barbs towards the other candidates. This shift is due to the significant extent that Vidal incorporated his own reputation and personality into his campaign. It was less an exercise in policy advocacy and more a process that was based upon Vidal's position as an individual public intellectual who was able to cut through the typical political process whilst still wearing the trimmings of the elite. Consequently, as Vidal's campaign was relatively independent from the usual political machinery and the political class at large, his efforts to communicate with the public were still drawn from and demonstrated his own affective reaction to the tone and mood of the end of the twentieth century, as he tried to disturb the disconnection that he perceived as defining 1980s politics.

Jay Parini was Vidal's biographer and has produced critical analysis of his work, including editing a 1992 collection in which he argued that Vidal was underappreciated as a writer. For Parini, Vidal's "tone" was of an insider and that this is what holds his essays together, as he invited "the reader to participate in the 'knowingness' of it all."[8] Parini observed that Vidal used his connections to the establishment to his advantage, drawing the reader in, and

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[8] Jay Parini, 'Gore Vidal: The Writer and His Critics', *Gore Vidal: Writer against the Grain*, ed. Jay Parini, (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 5.

then, as will be discussed, he used this intimacy to dismantle and subvert the establishment's narratives.

Heather Neilson further developed the understanding of Vidal's relationship to the establishment, noting that he was torn between a career as a writer or as a politician and that this was more than just a career choice but rather a decision over how to pursue influence and self-expression.[9] For Dennis Altman, this desire for influence was part of Vidal's role as a public intellectual and he directly explores Vidal's own politics, finding that he inherited his grandfather's "conservative populism" but shifted to the left over time as he aligned with the New Left and broke away from the New York intellectuals that he had previously been associated with, as he fell into feuds with neo-conservatives such as Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter.[10]

This chapter builds upon Altman's framing and uses the 1982 election campaign to outline how Vidal challenged the mood of obfuscation. The campaign was more than just an attempt to win political prestige from the establishment. It was also an opportunity for Vidal to test his appeal with the wider public. Marcie Frank has broached this appeal, as she used Vidal to explore how public intellectuals operated in the television age. Frank argues that Vidal used his essays and television appearances to enhance each other and consequently bolster his intellectual credentials.[11] In this regard, the election campaign can be read as an

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[9] Heather Neilson, *Political Animal: Gore Vidal on Power* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing: 2014), 15.
[10] Dennis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 68-73.
[11] Marcie Frank, *How to be an Intellectual in the Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal* (Durham, North Carlina: Duke University Press, 2005), 14.

extension of this negotiation — although that it is not to suggest that Vidal's effort was totally insincere. It synthesised Vidal's intellectual, political, and celebrity roles whilst also offering him the opportunity to challenge the political establishment and how they thrived within a heightened climate of obfuscation.

It is worth briefly outlining the state of Californian politics that Vidal was entering into in the early 1980s. Jonathan Bell's work on post-World War II California is particularly instructive, arguing that until the 1970s the state expanded the provisions of the New Deal and that from the end of the 1950s a diverse range of interest and identity groups were drawn together "to advance an agenda that brought together questions of poverty, welfare, gay rights, and labor rights into one package."[12] However, by 1980, Bell notes that this coalition was weakening: exemplified by the passing of Proposition 13 and Reagan taking California in his landslide presidential election victory over President Jimmy Carter, points that he notes were bolstered by California's most prominent political scion and then Governor, Jerry Brown's claim that the "realities of the 80s" would undermine the forces that expanded the level of support government offered.[13] Consequently, by the end of the 1970s, California was both "the spiritual home of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party as much as that of John Birch sympathizers."[14] Vidal fitted this contradictory environment, and the relatively weak hold of Democratic party machinery afforded space for a maverick candidate who wrote novels and essays, spent large amounts of time living in Italy, held connections to

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[12] Jonathan Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 9.
[13] *Ibid.*, 277.
[14] *Ibid.*, 5.

America's elite, and advanced a strident and idiosyncratic form of left-populism.[15] He

positioned himself as a disruptor who essentially wanted to rekindle and expand the liberal

coalition and to accelerate its programme. A strategy that he pursued through outlining how

the political class facilitated and thrived within a climate of misdirection and detachment.

Vidal's tensions and contradictions — between his patrician sensibility and his populist

politics, and between his intellectual hostility towards the political class and his attempts to

join it — are saliently demonstrated through his 1982 primary campaign and his polemical

essays. These tensions were not fatal, in fact they are elucidating, as they underwrote

Vidal's sense of obfuscation and his efforts to trade within the marketplace of narratives.

Furthermore, they offer the opportunity to explore the extent to which intellectuals can

distance themselves from the establishment narrative, and they enable the chance to query

the weight that an intellectual held in American politics during the 1980s, especially as

Vidal's campaign was an effort to connect with the wider public.

Ultimately, Vidal's intellectual credentials allowed for partial distance, and he had only a

limited influence. However, he did manage to articulate the extent that a detachment from

reality had become a core part of the national mood, a process that was informed by his

intellectualism and celebrity as he portrayed the political class as a self-serving elite. This

limited distancing from the establishment was demonstrated by how he consistently

coupled his left-wing populism with a focus on election and state apparatus as the central

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[15] *Ibid*., 278.

mechanism through which change was achieved in society. The implication of this interrelationship is that Vidal can be read as trying to draw the wider public into the establishment in a paternalistic manner, rather than trying to fundamentally rework the establishment narrative — the existence of the establishment and their mechanisms of organisation were not the problem for Vidal, it was that they simply needed to be less elitist. The critique and solution Vidal offered through his primary campaign demonstrated this interrelationship as he outlined his own establishment connections, his populism, his anti-imperialism, a rejection of neoliberal economic practice, a leftward critique of Jerry Brown, and his understanding of US history. Laced throughout all these arguments was Vidal's sense of obfuscation, which arose through a need to challenge the narrative that the political class were responsible agents of democracy.

Establishment Connections – Insider and Outsider Status

Vidal's liminal status within the establishment placed him on the border between the political class and the public. His celebrity and intellectualism mediated and sustained the connections to both spheres, and through examination of the reaction towards this position, Vidal's own politics and reputation come into sharper focus. In an interview for *San Diego Magazine* in 1982, Vidal remarked "I was brought up in the populist tradition and also brought up in the world of the ruling class, so I know what they're like, the rulers."[16] This

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[16] bMS Am 2350 (2704) Press Kits, 1982. Carton 062: items 2693-2717, GVP.

connection to the ruling class was used to contrast Vidal's own politics and his status as an autodidact. In the same interview, the interviewer remarked:

> Vidal's knowledge of wealth and taxation is in no way academically derived. He is not a struggling, leftist university prof or student armed with sophisticated analyses gleaned from *Mother Jones* or a Nader booklet. He is a rich man.[17]

Vidal was conscious of his 'ambivalent' status, but he attempted to use this as an advantage. He thus positioned himself as an insider, arguing that this made his criticism of the powerful legitimate, at the same time it also allowed him to sidestep the typical right-wing stereotypes of leftists.

Vidal's celebrity and his difference to other candidates factored into the media's reporting of his campaign. The *Los Angeles Times* outlined that places to see Vidal criticise the oil company, Arco, when he attended their Civic Action Programme "were in in such demand that Arco had to hold a lottery" for tickets.[18] The *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* found Vidal to be a novelty and this novelty emerged through his liminal status, as they felt he could be depended on to act "as a kind of political Air Wick, freshening the stale atmosphere with his radical patrician rhetoric".[19] This celebrity translated over into how the public viewed Vidal, with the *Times* reporting that Vidal had attracted "hundreds of volunteers for his maverick Democratic primary campaign" and that a Democratic party official found this number to be "unusual", suggesting that Vidal had managed to create a deeper connection with voters

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[17] *Ibid*.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] (2704) Press Kits, GVP.

than the Democratic establishment usually did.[20] Vidal's intellectualism and relatively

alternative politics attracted him attention, and he would use this to try to destabilise the

establishment in the marketplace of narratives. Vidal did not win the 1982 senatorial

primary in California. Indeed, he came a distant second to Jerry Brown, who eventually lost

to the Republican candidate, Pete Wilson.[21]

Defeat aside, Vidal's campaign offered an insight into the relationship between the

establishment and electoral politics and the norms and assumptions around the political

class. Regarding the wider political climate he was competing within, he characterised it as a

politically homogenous one and that this enabled a self-serving political class, a point he

stressed in his 'The One Party System' campaign speech where he stated:

> We have a one party system that is the creation of those great financial
>
> interests that have controlled our country off and on, but mostly on, since
>
> 1786. Our single-party system is currently divided into two factions. One is
>
> called Republican and the other is called Democrat. This division is supposed
>
> to give us a sense of choice at election time. But it's on the order of pain-killer
>
> X is better than pain-killer Y but each as we all know is aspirin.[22]

This illusion of difference between the political parties is not a point that Vidal began to

notice in the 1980s (he referenced it in his 1975 'The State of the Union' article for *Esquire*)

but that it featured as a prominent point within his campaign highlighted how Vidal felt that

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[20] *Ibid*.

[21] 'CA US Senate – D Primary', accessed 15.4.20
https://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=37146.

[22] bMS Am 2350 (2685) The State of the union: Ts, [ca.1982], Folder 4 of 4, Carton 061: items 2658-2692, GVP.

the political establishment was corrupt and that this state was maintained through

facilitating a detachment from reality.[23]

Vidal's views on campaign finance and his own ability to raise funds further illustrated his

view of a homogenous political class and his own complicated relationship to it. He

managed to raise, and mainly from small donations, a little over $102,000.[24] In a 1983

interview Vidal remarked he "spent no money at all for the excellent reason that I couldn't

raise any."[25] In a 1984 interview, he went on: "I went into it to win it, and also to see how

much strength I had 'out there'".[26] Whilst he may have begun ambitiously and wanted to

connect to the wider public, Vidal viewed the role of money in politics as a reason for why

he lost, arguing that a notable proportion of the electorate had reported that they "would

vote for me if I seemed a serious candidate, but I wasn't a 'serious candidate' unless I

bought spots on television" and that if he had campaigned in a conventional manner, then

those hesitant voters would know that

> serious money was behind me, and that I was part of the mainstream, it
>
> would have cost me $200,000, which I could easily have spent, and I would
>
> have beaten Jerry Brown and been the Democratic nominee. Then I looked
>
> down the road and saw the Republicans were going to nominate His Honor

[23] Gore Vidal, 'The State of the Union: 1975.' In *Gore Vidal United States*, 921-922.

[24] bMS Am 2350 (2689) Contribution cards and register, 1982 Folder 1 of 3, Carton 061: items 2658-2692, GVP.

[25] bMS Am 2350 (2833) Sawyer, Diane, 1945 - [Interview with GV]: Ts, 1983, Carton 065: items 2789-2851, GVP.

[26] bMS Am 2350 (2759) Bailey, Jeffrey. A conversation with Gore Vidal: Ts, [ca. 1984], Carton 064: items 2732-2788, GVP.

the Mayor of San Diego, Pete Wilson, and that they would spend $20 million

to elect him.[27]

Whilst Vidal was able to boast about raising $200,000, his bravado ran short when faced

with the Republican machine as he claimed he "certainly didn't have anything like $20

million, nor did I have the means of raising it."[28] However, he was certain in his capacity to

beat Brown but he believed he would still lose to the Republicans and that he would then be

"accused by the Democratic Party of being a 'spoiler.'"[29] This bitter post-mortem

exemplified how Vidal viewed politics as corrupted, and that his role within it was to

demonstrate just how undemocratic it actually was.

With Vidal viewing himself as a comparative outsider, a preliminary report on him

acknowledged his liminal status within the establishment, his intellectual credentials and

their drawbacks, consequently demonstrating the hold the establishment had over the

electorate and the public's hostility towards the establishment. The report stated that Vidal

is thought of as "most intelligent, well-informed, a charter member of what passes for high

society, and rather singular, particularly among American politicos, in his lifestyle and public

pronouncements."[30] Vidal, as an individual, might have been perceived as a nonconforming

elite, but his campaign, according to the report, was perceived as "a joke, the ravings of an

angry political dilettante, an insult to our system."[31] Whilst Vidal might have been serious

about the campaign, his comparative outsider status was seen as insulting rather than

[27] *Ibid*.
[28] *Ibid*.
[29] *Ibid*.
[30] bMS Am 2350 (2713) Clipping and printed materials, 1981-1982 and undated Folder 4 of 4, Carton 062: items 2693-2717, GVP.
[31] *Ibid*.

disruptive, as his campaign was tasked with being "geared to dispelling that final notion,

which is really a culmination of all the previous judgements. One does not win election by

seeming to disdain the very process which has built and sustains this country."[32] Vidal's

elitism and intellectual critique were seen as a hinderance because they undermined a

narrative of democratic participation. The report offered the solution that:

> Mr Vidal has not paid his dues in the political profession, as a public servant,
>
> and now is the moment. This cannot be accomplished by trying to ride the
>
> white wine and cheese circuit to mass appeal. It is time to wear the sackcloth
>
> to begin the journey to becoming one of the people.[33]

The report posited a divide within the establishment, first between those with celebrity and

wealth, and secondly those with formal political power, and suggests that only the latter

have the capacity to compete in elections.[34] This artificial divide, especially considering that

Reagan was president, factored into Vidal's liminality and the political class's reaction to it.[35]

The 'legitimacy' that the political class had obtained to compete in elections had been

'earnt' by advancing as public servants, a filter that homogenised them via the process of

professionalization, and which created rules and practices not to be disturbed. Vidal was

therefore an outsider, as his record could not afford sufficient access, and 'dilettantes' could

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[32] *Ibid*.
[33] *Ibid*.
[34] For how celebrity has influenced elections: Lauren A. Wright, *Star Power: American Democracy in the Age of the Celebrity Candidate* (Abingdon: Palgrave, 2019).
[35] This point is reinforced by Gerard DeGroot's study of Reagan's development from actor to politician that stressed that Reagan's history as an actor made his breakthrough into electoral politics easier, but it was not the sole factor in his success. See Gerard DeGroot, *Selling Ronald Reagan: The Emergence of a President* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 263.

not just be parachuted in. Subsequently, Vidal's establishment connections, represented by his celebrity and wealth, were perceived as detrimental and used to differentiate and exclude him from the political class. This control emerged through the report's contradictory portrayal: Vidal was simultaneously an insider who swilled wine and ate cheese who needed to convince the public he was serious, and an outsider as he lacked the track record of the traditional political class. Through arguing that Vidal needed to 'become one of the people', an ideological dimension was expressed that discounted Vidal's populist platform, and assumed that the political class, without the celebrity and wealth, were better representatives for the public. Therefore, Vidal's simultaneous insider/outsider status and the reaction to it revealed a contrast that assumed the traditional political class were defenders of democracy — a point which facilitated a climate of obfuscation. Politics became driven by the right type of insiders rather than policy, as the focus fell on those who conformed and who had paid their dues, as the report acknowledged that the support Vidal received from the "'Hollywood set'" should be discouraged, however the author stressed that they were "not referring to the money of course, just the glamorous cheering."[36]

Policies – Populism

Vidal used his populist and anti-imperialist policies to differentiate himself from the competition and to burnish his outsider status. Despite this, he still advocated for a paternalistic elite-public relationship, as he attempted to balance appealing to the political class and the wider public, an approach that his celebrity mediated. In a 1981 interview, before Vidal had officially announced his campaign, he was asked how his celebrity would

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[36] (2713) Clipping and printed materials.

impact upon running, and he remarked that "in politics there is no damage for being known for being well known", and that he noted he was the "Reagan of the left", as he had been a figure within American culture for decades, and that Reagan's fame had helped him win office.[37]

Vidal saw his celebrity, which was partially driven by his patrician upbringing, and the access to the political class it afforded his as a positive. Moreover, in Reagan's case this was as "the rulers wanted, first off, somebody who could read cue cards for them" — with the rulers being those who controlled capital, such as the oil and defence industries — and that "content is not very important" in elections.[38] This somewhat conspiratorial portrayal of the establishment alluded towards them pulling strings rather than advancing narratives within a marketplace. Nevertheless, it still demonstrated Vidal's sense of obfuscation and him interpreting it coming from society's winners, as he portrayed the establishment as using celebrity to dazzle the voters. However, Vidal did not entirely see his celebrity, his mass appeal, as elevating him above the public as he did not hold the public in contempt, that was reserved for the political class, as he attempted to challenge obfuscation through his populism. For example, he claimed that the "populist tradition" had failed, as the tradition

> had a mild hankering for democracy but it was never to be achieved. The
>
> people sense this, which is why half don't vote. Why should they? When there
>
> is no one to represent them in any case, only corporations who pay for the
>
> elections and [are] looked after by Congress, Executive, [and] Judiciary. Also,

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[37] 'Democrat | Gore Vidal Interview | US Politics | Afternoon plus | 1981', accessed 15.4.20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MPa-aZ3zmM.
[38] *Ibid*.

since 1950 we abandoned the public school system in favour of a militarized

economy, our people are the most ignorant in the industrialized world,

ranking last in general information.[39]

Vidal viewed the political class as responsible for the low voter turnouts, as they failed to

sufficiently represent the public's interests, and whilst he did call the public ignorant, the

cause of that was how the political class had managed state education.

Moreover, in terms of education, and the public's awareness of reality, in a different

interview Vidal noted:

Politics is ideally, as my old friend Eleanor Roosevelt used to say, educative.

She said, 'People are not stupid. Politicians think they are, and have some

reason to since the people voted for them.' But people are instinctively

intelligent about matters which interest them. Matters of self-interest like

taxes and war. But they are kept ignorant by an educational system which

deliberately keeps them ignorant, particularly of American and world history.

They don't know anything and they're not supposed to know anything.[40]

By Vidal invoking Roosevelt he did more than just burnish his connections to the political

class, he also historicised obfuscation in an effort to explain the climate and mood of the

1980s by arguing that the public have the potential ability to understand their own best-

interests, but the political class prevents them from doing so. Ultimately, Vidal was a

[39] bMS Am 2350 (2773) Crister, Greg. [Interview with GV]: Ts with AMs corrections by GV, 1994, Carton 064: items 2732-2788, GVP.
[40] bMS Am 2350 (2786) Gaydos, Steven. Gore on war: an interview with Gore Vidal: Ts, 1982, Carton 064: items 2732-2788, GVP.

populist who did not hold the public in contempt but still contained a paternalistic streak. He viewed the political class as responsible for ensuring the public's apathy but still felt ideally that those in power should educate the public and lead them out of obfuscation.

Policies – Anti-Imperialism and Isolationism

Vidal's policy positions elaborated on his populism, with him stressing that they differentiated him from the rest of the field, a point he achieved, in part, due to his identification of the role obfuscation was playing. However, in doing so Vidal created contradictions within his views on the public and his understanding of power. His anti-imperialism was the centrepiece of his platform and the point through which he tried to create the most friction with the establishment. In a dramatic retelling of submitting his candidacy application, where Vidal described himself being asked by the media why he was running, he answered by stating:

> "Because," I said, trying to focus all our problems into a single theme, "I am
>
> the peace candidate. Because no one else will talk of cutting the Pentagon
>
> Budget. Because no one else wants to use the money that we now waste on
>
> war to repair and perfect our own society."[41]

Vidal's attack on spiralling military spending positioned imperialism as a point of common sense within the political class, and that his candidacy was an alternative narrative within the marketplace. Moreover, Vidal directly connected this 'peace candidate' framing to a sense of obfuscation, as he claimed that "As the Peace candidate, I do my best to describe

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[41] (2704) Press Kits.

the world we live in."[42] Furthermore, in his 'The One Party System' speech Vidal asked why

"no matter how much we spend on defence it is never enough."[43] His stressed the

shortcomings and complicity of the political class, as they were a group that did not work to

solve this issue and that their membership was dependent on them not doing so, as "no

professional politician is going to answer that question because, if he did, he would lose his

professional status", and that the reason a politician could not create a healthy economy or

challenge poverty and strife is "because he is, by definition part of the problem."[44] Vidal

indicted the political class in and of itself, as membership meant accepting that one would

be a cause and symptom of America's issues as they did not disturb the status quo, and

were self-serving.

However, Vidal's critique of America's expansive military was not that it violated the

sovereignty of foreign nations and harmed their indigenous populations as Chomsky did.

Instead, he was much nearer to advocating for a form of isolationism.[45] Dennis Altman

characterises Vidal's isolationism as an appeal to both left and right populists through its

conspiratorial portrayal of how power was wielded, and that his critics argued it

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[42] bMS Am 2350 (2706) Press Kit: campaign issues, 1982, carton 062: items 2696-2717, GVP.
[43] bMS Am 2350 (2683) [One party system]: Ts note cards with AMs corrections, [ca.1982], carton 061: items 2658-2692, GVP.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] For insight into Vidal's view on isolationism and even his defense of Charles Linbergh, see: Gore Vidal, 'Foreward', to Bill Kauffman, *America First! Its History, Culture, and Politics* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus, 2016), and 'Master Polemicists from Similar Roots', *The New York Times*, 2 August, 2012.

represented Richard Hofstadter's "paranoid style" of American politics.[46]

Ultimately, Vidal's isolationism was caught between focusing on the American public and their hardship and a wider sense of global humanism. This was expressed most clearly when he stated:

> Close to a third of the military budget goes to the defense of Western Europe. Since these highly prosperous counties refuse to reimburse us for what we spend of their defense, I would invoke the Mansfield Resolution and begin a gradual phase-out of ground troops. Eventually, West Europeans should finance their own defences – and that would save us $83 billion a year.[47]

This tension between a focus on the American public and foreign citizens was further demonstrated by a campaign speech Vidal gave on the 'human race', in which he claimed that "in the name of tribal loyalty, sometimes called patriotism – the human race has committed incredible atrocities against itself."[48] From this, Vidal demonstrated a rejection of narrow nationalism and a commitment to humanism by arguing that "what matters is the survival of the human race as a whole, and that this can only be done by tapping a new kind of loyalty – a loyalty not to the specific tribe that one was born into but to the large tribe that inhabits this small planet – the human race."[49] The speech linked to Vidal's calls for "the systematic destruction of all nuclear weapons", a point that reflected his tension between nationalism and humanism as he does note this should start with Russia, and that

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[46] Denis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 87.
[47] (2706) Press Kit: campaign issues, page 40.
[48] bMS Am 2350 (2681) [Members of the human race]: Ts with AMs corrections, [ca. 1982], carton 061: items 2658-2692, GVP.
[49] *Ibid*.

"Nuclear war is not good for the human race. Nuclear war is not even good for American business. For one thing, every billion dollars spent of defense eliminates 33,000 jobs from the private sector."[50] Through this challenge to nuclear proliferation, Vidal demonstrated his wider humanism, but still connected it to a national context by stressing the potential job losses and the disturbance of American business. Vidal's analysis demonstrated that his populism was concerned with defending those not within the establishment from those who he judged to have power, and this could transcend borders. Moreover, Vidal's stance as an actor within a marketplace of narratives was clarified by his analysis attempting to differentiate himself from the political class. Vidal would attempt to actually fulfil his democratic responsibility rather than being self-serving, but not to the extent that he began advocating for a collectivist, movement-based approach to politics.

Policies – Economics

In a 1982 interview conducted by Stanley Sheinbaum, Vidal outlined his views on the shortcomings of neoliberal economic policy, and consequently demonstrated the limited distance he could achieve from the establishment. A thread throughout the interview is Vidal's interpretation of slowing productivity being linked to corporate tax-breaks and handouts from the state, and resultingly the best way to understand how the state had been operating was that it

> ought to be viewed as one gigantic investment bank – a till if you will – that
>
> allocates capital anarchically – without a conception of what patterns might

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[50] *Ibid*.

work best, responding on an ad hoc basis to the clamour of specific

lobbying.[51]

This sense of sporadic investment was driven, in Vidal's interpretation, by supply side

economics, an approach that was part of the system of "fads and hypes" which organised

America, with supply side economics being "intellectually 'in' – despite the disaster it has

wrought."[52] Whilst Vidal criticised the position of supply side economics within the

marketplace of narratives, he also found it unable to stimulate business to invest, as "if the

markets are not lively, if product isn't being bought, then even though it is cheaper for

business to invest, they won't do it."[53] The reason this occurred was that "supply-side

economics ignores who and what is the market." From this, Vidal argued that the demand

side, the public as both consumers and producers, was neglected as "capital as we have

seen goes to financial manipulation and speculation – not enhancing the production

base."[54] Elsewhere on the campaign, Vidal would describe the economic reality of 1982 as a

state of "socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor."[55] The practice of supply

side economics and its accompanying virtuous narrative were only sustained through

obscuring where production and consumption actually lay, which was with the people, and

wealth was then isolated within the capitalist class.

Vidal's analysis had a Keynesian element, as it maintained a commitment to a capitalist

economy despite observing the limitations of the free market. Vidal elaborated upon this by

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[51] bMS Am 2350 (2696) Media: interview, 1982, carton 062: items 2693-2617, GVP.
[52] *Ibid*.
[53] *Ibid*.
[54] *Ibid*.
[55] (2685) The State of the union.

noting that he if were advising Reagan he would call for a "focus on demand, get purchasing power into the hands of those who will spend it. Create a lively market so that business will ignore the obstacles of regulation and their aversion to risk."[56] This Keynesian flair was furthered by Vidal's unemployment policy that he floated in 1982, which argued for a centralised list of vacant jobs within the US and that the unemployed could find jobs aligned with their skillset, even if they were across state lines, and that "Government should help relocate the worker."[57] Such a simple and almost insouciant policy, which underplayed the complexities of labour markets and moving vast amounts of people, was Vidal's attempt to differentiate himself from the political class as it demonstrated how his intelligence could develop novel policy that cut through political miasma whilst also maintaining his faith in the state as an institution to ensure economic flourishing.

Vidal's effort at differentiation was enhanced by him stating: "from where I sit, as Marxists have said for a long time, there's no difference between the parties", as despite there being some disagreements of foreign policy, or social issues, "it's the economics of a system that determine the all other phenomena within society."[58] With Vidal overtly siding with economics being the central driving force of politics and responsible for America's rightward shift, he indicated the influence of neoliberal economic policy in 1982 and that he perceived himself and his narratives as a relatively isolated, due to the displacement of the left within the political marketplace. Nevertheless, Vidal still accepted the economic market as a site of distribution, demonstrating his proximity to the establishment, even if he did advocate for

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[56] (2696) Media: Interviews.
[57] (2706) Press Kit: campaign issues.
[58] (2696) Media: interview.

the need to stimulate markets through the downwards distribution of wealth — maintaining a populist and anti-elitist thread that attacked the political class wholesale in order to differentiate himself from it and to demonstrate its homogeneity.

California Über Alles – Gore Vidal on Jerry Brown

For Vidal progressive politics was in a state of decline, and part of his campaign was an attempt to draw attention to that and even potentially change it, as he highlighted a decline within mainstream Democratic politics and politicians. His main rival was Jerry Brown, the former Governor of California, and if Vidal alienated the political class and was a comparative outsider, Brown was nearer the opposite as he was accepted within the political class. As Ethan Rarick notes, the Browns were the "preeminent family of California politics" and were almost "the one true dynasty of the state's public life."[59] Their electoral credentials were not their only points of contrast as Vidal also positioned himself as an ideological foil to demonstrate liberalism's rightward movement. As Brown was the frontrunner, Vidal attacked him to establish his legitimacy. In an effort to create a state of equivalence between them, and to potentially shame him, Vidal offered to pay $25,000 to a charity of Brown's choice if he agreed to debate.[60]

Provocation aside, Vidal connected his opponent to American imperialism and the waste that he associated with it. In a speech given at UCLA, Vidal noted that Brown claimed that

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[59] Ethan Rarick, 'The Brown Dynasty', in *Modern American Political Dynasties: A Study of Power, Family, and Political Influence* ed. Kathleen Gronnerud, Scott Spitzer (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2018), 211.
[60] bMS Am 2350 (2655) Ba- through Bz. Letters, various dates, Carton 060: items 2595-2657, GVP.

he wanted to decrease defence spending and increase education spending, and yet he had

supported the production of the B-1 bomber, a programme which Vidal considered to be a

"40 billion dollar mistake" as it would be obsolete by the time it was completed.[61] Vidal was

far outside of the mainstream Democratic foreign policy here. As Julian Zelizer notes,

Brown, in the 1980 presidential primary, was a comparative dove to the rest of the party as

he attacked Carter for being too hawkish — consequently Vidal expanded the parameters of

acceptable debate within the marketplace of narratives by attacking the supposed dove and

demonstrated the Democrat's rightward drift and his external relationship to it.[62] Separate

from specific policies, fellow candidates positioned Vidal, due to his sexuality, as progressive

and on the left side of the field and beyond Brown, as demonstrated by Paul Carpenter

claiming that Vidal was "likely to get a great deal of the homosexual vote in this state.

That's perhaps 10% of the vote and that's votes that would otherwise go to Jerry Brown."[63]

Vidal continued to come at Brown from the left when he argued Brown refused "to find new

tax sources like higher business property and income taxes to offset a state budget

deficit."[64] This reluctance to redistribute wealth downwards led Vidal to draw a parallel

between Brown and Reagan, he stated: "The sad part is that people like Jerry and Reagan –

or Jerry Reagan, if you will – who are completely out of touch with the day-to-day realities

of American youth".[65] This parallel between Brown and Reagan was part of Vidal's effort to

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[61] bMS Am 2350 (2680) [Jerry Brown]: notes with AMs corrections, [ca. 1982], 1982 Carton 061: items 2658-2692, GVP.

[62] Julian Zelizer, 'Conservatives, Carter, and the Politics of National Security', *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 283.

[63] bMS Am 2350 (2713) Clippings and printed materials, 1981-1982 and undated, Folder 3 of 4, Carton 062: items 2693-2717, GVP.
Vidal's sexuality, and his reluctance to make it an overt point of his campaign was said to have drawn criticism from Randy Shilts at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the first openly gay male reporter at a major US newspaper. 'The Great Gorino' *The Los Angeles Times*, 7 May 2006.

[64] (2680) [Jerry Brown].

[65] *Ibid*.

illustrate the ideological homogeneity of the political class, their wholesale rightward drift, and, therefore, the self-serving nature of the political class as they failed to offer the public a tangible choice and the suggestion otherwise engendered obfuscation.

Nevertheless, and despite Vidal's hostility towards Brown, he still wrote speeches for his 1992 presidential primary campaign, although he did remark that he felt that Brown was increasingly echoing his own arguments.[66] Vidal's attacks on Brown differentiated them, demonstrating the limitations to Brown's progressivism, a contrast that aimed to demonstrate the limitations of what was considered progressive in the 1980s. Essentially, Vidal's alternative narrative exposed the left side of the establishment, and his critique of the Democrats such as Brown emphasised their similarities to counterparts in the Republican Party. In making this point, he elucidated what he saw as the illusion of democratic choice and, by extension, a wider climate of obfuscation.

The Mantle of Historian

Vidal's understanding of political homogeneity was grounded in his longer comprehension of American history, in which, he argued, a propertied class had always dominated proceedings. Vidal's use of history within his campaign fed into his calling for a constitutional convention, which allowed him to further demonstrate his intellectual

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[66] 'Gore Vidal on Jerry Brown at City Arts & Lectures', accessed 17.4.20, https://www.kqed.org/news/71997/gore-vidal-on-arnold-jerry-brown-at-city-arts-lectures.

credentials. Moreover, his use of history more generally created friction with what he deemed to be the establishment intellectuals. In 1982 Vidal began a campaign speech by claiming that "The Founding Fathers feared two things – monarchy and democracy. As a result, they gave us a constitution which has seen to it that we have yet to experience either."[67] This immediate challenge to the political class ever being responsible led to Vidal claiming that he was running "in the race to throw light upon a system that no longer works."[68] One solution that Vidal offered was for a constitutional convention to be held. He noted:

> Thomas Jefferson thought there should be a constitutional convention once a generation. That strikes me as too often. But, a convention once every two centuries is hardly over-doing it. The hopeless mess that we have made of our political system can only be undone by a new constitutional convention.[69]

However, in this instance, Vidal decontextualized his portrayal of the convention, presenting it as akin to a Rawlsian original position, rather than one influenced by competing interests, yet his proposal took on a degree of legitimacy and plausibility as he invoked an episode from the past.[70] Essentially, Vidal played off of the 'legitimacy' of the past to his own ends. Calling for a constitutional convention was not an entirely new idea. Iwan Morgan and Jonathan Bell both note that going into the 1980 presidential primaries Jerry Brown supported a convention on the grounds of ensuring a balanced federal budget — a strategy

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[67] bMS Am 2350 (2679) [The Founding fathers]: Ts with AMs corrections, [ca.1982], Carton 061: items 2658-2692, GVP.

[68] *Ibid*.

[69] *Ibid*. Vidal's idea of holding a convention was not one that he conceived for the campaign, he discusses it in his 'The Second American Revolution', *The New York Review of Books*, 5.2.1981.

[70] See Vidal's 1987 Playboy interview for a further discussion on the convention proposal: bMS Am 2350 (2828) Playboy Enterprise. Playboy interview: Gore Vidal (1987): galley proof, printed (photocopy), 1987, Carton 065: items 2789-2851, GVP.

that Morgan notes allowed Brown to "position himself as both a populist crusader and a moral critic of politics-as-usual."[71] Again, Vidal went further than Brown, creating a contrast that showed the tepidness of Brown's populism and his relative proximity to typical politics. Vidal even acknowledged the malleability of history and historians, in a 1995 interview when he was asked about the concept of historic truth, he replied: "Historic truth is simply agreed upon facts that constantly change according to the needs of a people's rulers in order to shore up those myths that make their rule appear inevitable."[72] This understanding of history positioned Vidal as observing the potential for narrative manipulation and obfuscation and his remarks during the campaign indicated that he wanted to challenge that.

For Vidal this manipulation was seen to be advanced by intellectuals, and in this sense he echoed Chomsky's analysis. One of Vidal's many feuds was with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. They had a history together, both having connections to the Kennedys, but by 1987 their relationship had soured, and in a *Playboy* interview, when Vidal was asked if he subscribed to Schlesinger's interpretation of American history and politics swinging like a pendulum between liberalism and conservatism, he replied: "Arthur, watch out! Here it comes; oh, my God, the pendulum! Crassshhhh! The pendulum got Arthur. My God, it can get any of us."[73] In 1996, Vidal offered a more extensive analysis of Schlesinger and the liberal intelligentsia

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[71] Bell, *California Crucible*, 272, and Iwan Morgan, 'Unconventional Politics: The Campaign for a Balanced-Budget Amendment Constitutional Convention in the 1970s"', *Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 3 (1998): 430.

[72] bMS Am 2350 (2751) Aguilar, Yolanda. [Interview with GV]: Ts (fax), Ts with AMs corrections by GV, 1995, carton 064: items 2732-2788, GVP.

[73] (2828) Playboy.

in his 'The End of History' article in *The Nation*.[74] The same year, he produced three

television programmes for Britain's Channel 4 on the American presidency, arguing it was an

imperial institution. The US rights to the programmes were bought by The History Channel

and for their broadcast the programme was bookended by a panel consisting of two

journalists, Roger Mudd and Sander Vanocur, and two historians, Richard Slotkin and Arthur

Schlesinger Jr., who provided commentary and challenged Vidal's interpretation. Vidal saw

this as an attempt to undermine his work and his intellectual credentials, stemming from

The History Channel's position in the system of corporate media that Vidal's narrative

undermined.[75] This point of corporate media dominating was expressed when Vidal noted

that he was portrayed as biased and that the establishment were painted as objective, Vidal

claimed:

> As a spokesperson for The History Channel put it, 'Vidal is so opinionated that
>
> we had to have real experts on.' *The Nation's* recent warning about the
>
> danger of allowing the corporate few to make and control mass opinion was
>
> about to be dramatized at my expense.[76]

These "real experts" undermined Vidal's intellectual credentials, a thread he met in kind by

stating:

> Schlesinger does say that I misquote Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.
>
> That must sound pretty serious to the average viewer. It also sounds pretty

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[74] Gore Vidal, 'The End of History', *The Nation*, 30 September, 1996.
[75] *Ibid*.
[76] *Ibid*.

serious to me that Arthur doesn't realize I was quoting, accurately, the original

preamble, not the one edited and published by Congress.[77]

Vidal attempted to reveal Schlesinger as illegitimate, a point he reinforced when he

suggested Schlesinger was a servant to power as he called him a "Harlequin historian".[78]

Elaborating, Vidal argued that the purpose of Slotkin and Schlesinger was

> to keep the two essential facts of our condition from the people at large: the
>
> American class system (there is no such thing, we are flatly told) and the
>
> nature of the U.S. empire (no such thing, either).[79]

Vidal demonstrated his feeling of obfuscation here by arguing that Slotkin and Schlesinger

were historians who advanced historic truths which served the establishment. Vidal used his

understanding of history to challenge what he deemed to be the establishment narrative of

America history, which was that it was not an imperialist power, and argued that he was an

authoritative source of historical knowledge. This use of history featured in his campaign

and enabled him to demonstrate his role as an intellectual, which gave his support for a

constitutional convention an increased legitimacy whilst emphasizing the extent of the

fracture within American politics. However, that Vidal still offered a solution that involved

the state demonstrated his inability to fully detach himself from the establishment. In terms

of Vidal being a competitor within a marketplace, he can be understood as effective as he

connected to and twisted the establishment understanding of history, and yet his sense of

political imagination was limited as he still accepted that change should be led by the top

down through the state.

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[77] *Ibid*.
[78] *Ibid*.
[79] *Ibid*.

Vidal's connections to the establishment and his celebrity contrasted with his populism and anti-imperialism as he attempted to destabilise the establishment by revealing it to be self-serving. During the campaign, Vidal's lack of political experience was used to attack him and was a point that he tried to counter by proving his own legitimacy. Moreover, his populism differentiated him from the rest of the field, and it was expressed through a critique of America's expansive military and the influence of money within politics. This enabled Vidal to launch an alternative narrative that attempted to at least widen the spectrum of debate. Vidal sought friction with the political class, and this was achieved by criticising Jerry Brown from the left, or by using US history to undermine the establishment's claim to it. Ultimately, Vidal was unsuccessful, but his campaign and ideas represented a self-proclaimed attempt to drag back a sense of reality and remove the film of obfuscation, demonstrating the difficulty of attempting to destabilise the winning narrative – even by a candidate who enjoyed partial access to the establishment through their liminal status.

Joan Didion

Joan Didion, born in Sacramento, California in 1934, did not consider herself an intellectual, as she claimed she did not "think in abstracts" and was driven to write "entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."[80] For Didion, writing was an attempt to understand herself and the reality around her, and that she was impressing her "sensibility on the reader's most private space."[81]

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[80] 'Why I write', *The New York Times*, 5 December, 1976.
[81] *Ibid*.

Didion entwined her perception of reality and her perceptions of herself — ultimately offering a window into a mind attempting to process its own tools and the sufficiency of those tools to comprehend reality. Within this was an attempt to understand what narratives there were within society, how those narratives effect oneself or others, and what those narratives did or did not clarify about reality. Didion changed how she approached this issue over time, and by the end of the twentieth century she was deploying this approach to explore and reflect on the nature of political discourse.

During the 1980s and 1990s Didion's non-fiction writing homed in upon America's political class, tackling how politics was conducted, the role of the media within it, and the distance between the public and politicians and the media. Didion's efforts here clarified and contextualised the environment within which Vidal had been competing. Ultimately, Didion portrayed the political class as self-serving, arguing that they aimed to maximise their own influence over the political process and dilute the public's. A sense of obfuscation was therefore consistently present within her analysis, as she felt that the self-serving actions and values of the political class conflicted with the establishment narrative's portrayal of them as responsible agents of democracy. Didion developed this expression of obfuscation by finding a discrepancy between how the political class approached reality and how the public did, and by arguing that the political class's approach lacked a critical edge. By focusing on this discrepancy, Didion perceived the political class as isolated within a paradigm of thought that was disconnected from reality through their elitism, and which advanced a mood of obfuscation and apathy. Therefore, Didion's sense of the neoliberal affect of obfuscation was connected to the destabilisation of democracy, and in that sense,

she echoed Wendy Brown.[82] Nevertheless, Didion did not express herself through

systematic analysis but narrower descriptions that focused on perspective and reaction.

Didion's writing was drawn from, and best understood in terms of, narratives and how they

guide society, as she developed, identified, and responded to the narratives in circulation at

a given time. By focusing on perspective, Didion clarified the narratives influencing and

advanced by the political class, and her thought is therefore particularly apt for

understanding the discourse neoliberalism impacted.

Didion's career began with a job at *Vogue* after winning a writing competition in 1956, and

from this she would craft a life of freelancing and regular columns interspersed with writing

film scripts and novels, creating and maintaining a strong following amongst women.[83]

Regarding her twentieth-century non-fiction, her penetrating personal essays in *Slouching*

Towards Bethlehem (1968) and *The White Album* (1979) have garnered the most attention,

and whilst they did express a conservative sensibility, these essays were more driven by

introspection and aesthetics than advancing an ideology.[84] Her cutting prose style enhanced

her cultural capital — she has been described as having a "genius" method which had the

capacity to "attenuate nature, strip it of its force and vitality" — and this led her to become

an "established talisman of taste".[85] A mystique of celebrity and glamour developed around

Didion (*Vogue* would deem her a literary and sartorial icon) and after becoming the face of

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[82] , Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York, New York: Zone Books, 2015).

[83] 'Joan Didion Staking Out California', *The New York Times*, 10 June, 1979.

[84] 'The Autumn of Joan Didion: The writer's work is a triumph — and a disaster', *The Atlantic*, January/February 2012.

[85] For the genius quote see: 'How Joan Didion the Writer Became Joan Didion the Legend', *Vanity Fair*, 2 February, 2016.

For the talisman quote see: 'Why Loving Joan Didion is a Trap', *The Cut*, 15 January, 2015.

the French fashion house Celine in 2015, she was cemented as "a kind of pop-cultural inamorata, sparking many breathy appreciations (and many Instagram and Tumblr posts) from style-conscious young women."[86] Didion's cultural hold exists, in part, due to her connection and chronicling of California. Her 1961 novel, *Run River*, and her 2003 memoir, *Where I was From* both deal with California, although the latter departs from the portrayal in the former, and Didion has been used as an enduring Californian cultural touchstone — the 2017 films, *Ingrid Goes West* (Matt Spicer, 2017) and *Ladybird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017), both of which are partially about California, directly reference her.[87]

Didion's 'middle period' of the 1980s and 1990s, examined in this chapter by focusing on her 1980s collection of non-fiction, *After Henry*, and the 1990s collection, *Political Fictions*, attracts less attention that her earlier and later work, and yet the 1980s was a period of accelerated practical, stylistic, and ideological change for Didion. *Henry* contained Didion's first real attempt to wade into the events and discourse that made up formal domestic politics and governance, and *Fictions* further continued this effort. The essays discussed in this chapter – 'Insider Baseball' (1988), 'In the Realm of the Fisher King' (1989), 'Sentimental Journeys' (1991), 'Political Pornography' (1996), and 'Clinton Agonistes' (1998) – were all originally published in the *New York Review of Books*. Didion first wrote for the *Review* and its editor, Robert Silvers, in 1973, but it was not until 1982, with the publications of Didion's *El Salvador* essays, that she published major pieces of writing for the *Review*, and it was not

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[86] For the icon remark see: 'Why We're Packing Our Bag Like Joan Didion Did in 1979', *Vogue*, 16 June 2014.
For details on Céline see: 'Céline Unveils Its Latest Poster Girl: Joan Didion', *Vogue*, 6 January, 2015.
For the inamorta quote see: 'Joan Didion Is Ready for Her Close-Up', *Vogue*, 18 September, 2017.
[87] Joan Didion, *Run, River* (New York, New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1963), and Joan Didion, *Where I was From* (New York, New York, Knopf, 2003).

until 1987 that she became a frequent fixture in it. Previously, Didion had written for an array of publications, ranging from writing for *The National Review* from 1959-1965, to having a column at *Life*, and contributing to *The American Scholar*. This shift to writing about politics for the *New York Review* was a deliberate move by Didion: she acknowledged that she was "bored" with the "limiting" style of the personal essays that she had previously produced, and felt the trust Silvers had in her allowed her to pivot, as he pushed her towards domestic political reporting because he sensed that she "would be outside it enough", as the process was initially "a learning experience" for Didion in a subject she "simply knew nothing about."[88] This inexperience and comparative outsider status, buttressed by the support of Silvers, allowed Didion to probe and outline a climate of obfuscation.

Stylistically, in the 1980s and 1990s Didion shifted, turning towards extrospection and away from the introspection of her essays in the 1960s and 1970s. Sarah Kerr's incisive 2007 review of Didion's collected non-fiction clarified the central "problem" of which Didion's writing both contributed to and attempted to solve: that of perspective. Essentially, for Kerr, as Didion "can never totally transcend her point of view", and cannot suggest otherwise, she was caught between trying to "stay true" to her point of view whilst also maintaining "her ethical duty to hazard larger truths about the world."[89] The critic John Lahr connected the introspection and conservatism of Didion's pre-*After Henry* work when he remarked that "sent to get the pulse of a people, Didion ends up taking her own temperature. Narcissism is

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[88] Joan Didion and Hilton Als, 'Joan Didion: The Art on Nonfiction No.1'. *Conversations with Joan Didion*, ed. Scott F. Parker (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 117.
[89] Kerr, 'The Unclosed Circle'.

the side show of conservatism", and that her style, "for which she is praised, obfuscates as it

persuades."[90] During this earlier period, Kerr argues that Didion's reporting contained

"aspects of emotional projection" but by the late 1970s and into the 1980s Didion became

more focused on "the 'truth of what happened'" and on finding the "euphemisms people

rely on to avoid naming that truth."[91] This shift is why Didion is so apt for chronicling

neoliberalism: during her early period she overtly and self-consciously attempted to grapple

with her own paradigm of thought and used this to project narratives about reality.[92] By the

1980s and 1990s she interpreted this same approach being used by the political class — the

emotional projection that obfuscated reality — meaning Didion was well served to critique

and perceive the obfuscation that narrative and euphemism generated.

Ideologically, Didion pivoted by the 1980s, but she did not suddenly embrace socialism.

Didion initially defined herself as a Goldwater conservative, although not an ardent one but

what is clear is that she did not align herself with the evolutions and revolutions of the

1960s and 1970s.[93] As Kerr noted, Didion paid scant attention to Martin Luther King or

Vietnam but did focus on the "pathos of the hippies" and John Wayne's confidence.[94] John

Leonard, in his *New York Times* review of *Political Fictions* bluntly remarked that Didion "is

no left-wing herbivorous feminazi."[95] In 1987, Edward Said offered a more subtle critique

that engaged with Didion's lack of radicalism when reviewing her book *Miami*, noting that

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[90] John Lahr, *Automatic Vaudeville* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: William Heinemann, 1984), 215-216.
[91] Kerr, 'The Unclosed Circle'.
[92] For further on Didion's use of introspection, image, and reality in Didion's earlier work see: Mark Z. Muggli, 'The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism', *American Literature* 59 no.3 (1987), 402-421.
[93] Joan Didion, *Political Fictions* (New York, New York: Vintage International 2001), 7.
[94] Sarah Kerr, 'The Unclosed Circle', *New York Review of Books*, 26 April, 2007.
[95] 'Who Stole Democracy', *The New York Times*, 23 September, 2001.

"Didion is a writer, not a journalist, and despite her skilful use of out-of-the-way sources, she is not fully an alternative or oppositional figure, not a C. Wright Mills, nor a Chomsky, nor an Alexander Cockburn."[96] Elaborating, Said stated: "And that is the problem with Didion's work. It offers no politics beyond its sometimes admirably crafted turns of phrase, its arch conceits, its carefully designed but limited effects."[97] However, Kerr explained why Didion was received as more of a writer, as beginning with *Salvador* in 1983, she started to become "an increasingly dogged processor" of sources, as Kerr noted:

> It's almost as if manipulatable statistics, rhetorical obfuscations, and drifting bites of information were the light and the sounds in a new atmosphere, a landscape more abstractly moral than physical, which she has to teach herself all over again a method to render.[98]

Therefore, this 'atmospheric' change that prompted Didion's shift can be read as her developing an increased awareness of a mood of obfuscation. Crucially, Mark Engler, an editor at *Dissent*, argued in his review of *Political Fictions*: "Didion's anger at political developments that many people, in advanced states of cynicism, have come to take for granted is genuinely refreshing."[99] Therefore, whilst Didion is not especially profound to those already disenchanted with the establishment narrative, such as Chomsky, she still clarified the political culture, and the manner in which she did this is notable. Furthermore, that Didion began to feel the climate and mood of obfuscation reflected its heightened intensity. This capacity to act as a clarifying force arrived through Didion's focus on perception, rather than ideology or power, and with her apparent lack of politics she was

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[96] Edward Said, 'Miami Twice', *London Review of Books*, 10 December 1987.
[97] *Ibid*.
[98] Kerr, 'The Unclosed Circle'.
[99] 'Ordinary Outrages', accessed 17.4.20, https://democracyuprising.com/2002/04/24/ordinary-outrages/.

well primed to make a connection between the manipulation of perception and the increase in intensity of obfuscation through the marketplace of narratives.

There is a limited amount of scholarship on Didion but even within that her shift has been observed, and whilst this literature engages with narratives and obfuscation to varying degrees, thus connecting her to neoliberalism, the essays in *After Henry* and *Political Fictions* have not been analysed as outlining a marketplace of narratives with obfuscation being a central component – a point this chapter demonstrates.

Didion's non-fiction is in the style of new journalism. Donald Eason, writing in 1984, outlined the genre as a longer form of journalism that included narrative and literary techniques.[100] Eason framed Didion as a cultural phenomenologist, in that she aimed to describe the sensation of experiencing a specific moment through engaging with "the experiential contradictions that call consensual versions of reality into question" via analysing the process of communication between the writer and reader whilst maintaining a "hesitancy to foreclose the question, "'Is this real?'"[101] However, as Eason was writing prior to Didion's shift, her later work in the 1980s and 1990s would appear to undo some of Eason's categorisation, as Didion began to focus more upon the nature of reality and its narratives, rather than how her own psyche could be mirrored on reality.

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[100] Donald Eason, 'The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 1 (1984), 52.
[101] *Ibid.*, 52.

Didion's shift was largely framed as a process of her readjusting her epistemological framework and questioning her own assumptions. Sam Diamond has outlined how Didion came to use her previous methods of introspection and "putting across her own subjective position in the guise of objective truth" as tools used in "debunking the false narrative and arguments of others" and that this led her to argue that the wealthy "distorted any notion of truth in exchange of capital – at the expense of the majority."[102] For Diamond, the significance of Didion's shift is that her "use of authenticity counters this type of political power."[103] If obfuscation is the sensation of losing connection with reality, the production of authenticity can be read as an attempt to reverse this. As Diamond focuses on Didion, and not neoliberalism, it is logical that he tracks Didion's individual pursuit of authenticity. Nevertheless, the analysis in this chapter adopts a wider lens, scrutinising the significance and implications of Didion's analysis by focusing on her outline of the marketplace of narratives and its resultant obfuscation.

Didion's writing has been connected to a societal fracture, although this has been done in a manner that underappreciates neoliberalism or which underplays the pivot and outsider status in her work. Laura Julier focuses on Didion's analysis in *After Henry*, positioning it in contrast to a "preferred" — in other words an establishment narrative, and observes that narratives were placed in competition with each other.[104] However, Didion is not connected to a wider force, nor is the nature of this competition elaborated upon, points this chapter

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[102] Sam Diamond, 'Joan Didion's Aesthetic Transformation', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 6(1):6 (2018), 2 and 20.
[103] *Ibid*., 20.
[104] Laura Julier, '"Actual Experience, Preferred Narratives: Didion's After Henry"', in *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, ed. Sharon Felton (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 252.

develops. Daniel Worden does connect Didion to neoliberalism, particularly in regard to the

way she represents and elucidates the primacy of the individual and societal

fragmentation.[105] However, Worden underappreciates the pivot within Didion's work,

viewing her writing from the 1960s to the 1990s as congruous, and does not attempt to

view Didion as outlining a neoliberal discursive modality in the marketplace of narratives.

Ultimately, Didion's sense of obfuscation has been insufficiently probed as it has not been

tied to neoliberalism.

Didion holds a liminal status within the establishment and shifted towards its edge in the

1980s and 1990s when she began to focus on domestic politics. Didion's relative closeness

to cultural, media and political elite enabled her to outline and grapple with the

marketplace of narrative through focusing on how they understood themselves and reality.

This understanding arose through her focus upon the internal machinations of politicians,

their aides, and the media, and she attempted to describe how the political class

understood itself and the public, how this differed to how the public viewed the

establishment and reality, and the implications of this as Didion consistently portrayed the

political class as self-serving.

Insider Baseball – Elitism

Didion's 1988 essay 'Insider Baseball' argued the political class and the public approached

politics differently and the former worked to exclude the latter. The essay was Didion's first

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[105] Daniel Worden, *Neoliberal Non-Fictions* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 48-60.

foray into campaign politics as she reported from the 1988 presidential campaign trail. Renita Coleman argued that Didion's lack of experience made her "uniquely" a public journalist who managed to exist as both a "participant as well as observer/critic".[106] This external position alienated Didion from the elitism of campaign politics, enabling her to act as a voice of dissent.

This insider/outsider dynamic and understanding of politics was central to 'Insider Baseball.' The essay begins with Didion realising it had not "been by accident that the people whom I had preferred to spend time in high school had, on the whole, hung out at gas stations."[107] Didion elaborated, noting that these gas station regulars grew up and "led lives on the social and economic edge" and that

> They were never destined to be, in other words, communicants in what we
> have come to call, when we want to indicate the traditional ways in which
> power is exchanged and the status quo is maintained in the United States, 'the
> process'.[108]

A plebiscitary democracy was not in operation. Instead, democracy had a culture and style, referred to as the political process, and, according to Didion, it excluded the working class. Moreover, Didion juxtaposed what she judged to be reality against the narrative that the political class advanced to the public, as she quoted Tom Hayden's, the then California State Senator, and prior to his ascent to office a New Left organiser, claim of how democracy

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[106] Renita Coleman, 'The Intellectual Antecedents of Public Journalism', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 21 no.1 (1997), 70.

[107] Joan Didion, *After Henry*, in *Live and Learn*, ed. Joan Didion (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 394.

[108] *Ibid.*, 394.

traditionally operated: "'The process today gives everyone a chance to participate'".[109]

Didion explicitly rejected the idea that the process was democratic, instead arguing that it

was "connected only nominally and vestigially, to the electorate and its possible

concerns."[110] Alternatively, Didion clarified that 'the process' was

> a mechanism seen as so specialized that access to it is correctly limited to its
>
> own professionals, to those who manage policy and those who report on
>
> it...to that handful of insiders who invent, year in year out, the narrative of
>
> public life

and that "the narrative should be not just written only by its own specialists but also legible

only to its own specialists".[111] The exclusivity of the process was actualised through Didion's

direct observation of the neoliberal logic of a marketplace of narratives playing out at the

1988 Democratic Party convention, as she characterised the convention as "the incorporeal

heart of the process itself, the agora, the symbolic marketplace in which the narrative was

not only written but immediately, efficiently, entirely, consumed."[112] By Didion's

interpretation, 'the process' was a vehicle for narrative production and competition

amongst the political class, a vehicle not designed to be accessible to public despite

pretences otherwise, and consequently, this elitist system enabled and perpetuated a

climate of obfuscation as the pretence of democracy was unfounded — therefore outlining

the part of the establishment narrative she challenged.

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[109] *Ibid.*, 394.
[110] *Ibid.*, 395.
[111] *Ibid.*, 395-396.
[112] *Ibid.*, 413-414.

How the process generated an elitist culture and style was outlined through Didion's

critique of the performative nature of political events and their reporting. 'Insider Baseball'

referred to a game of catch played by the Democratic Party nominee, Michael Dukakis, and

his aides on an airport runway in front of the media.[113] For Didion, the purpose of the game

was to humanise Dukakis, and she reported that the onlooking cameramen remarked that

Dukakis was a "regular guy".[114] Didion, however, found the game, and the media's

willingness to report it — and therefore make it part of the campaign and the political

process — "eerily contrived."[115] This contrived nature arose from the game having been

attempted before but there had been insufficient media attention and so it was repeated,

and that those participating in it and observing it understood it to "be a setup" but that

"only an outsider, only someone too 'naïve' to know the rules of the games, would so

describe it."[116]

Didion's disdain for such acceptance framed the political class as insular and isolated within

their own paradigm of thought, as they created and advanced narratives that only they

could engage with — such as those around the character of the candidate, rather than the

candidate's policies. Didion's critique of this setup was echoed by the media scholar, Jay

Rosen, who argued that 'Insider Baseball' illustrated the effects of how during the campaign

the media shifted from writing for the public to their "primary working relationship" being

with politicians and their aides.[117] Through framing the media and politicians as allies,

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[113] *Ibid.*, 403.
[114] *Ibid.*, 404-405.
[115] *Ibid.*, 404.
[116] *Ibid.*, 405.
[117] Jay Rosen, 'Making Things More Public: On the Political Responsibility of the Media Intellectual', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 11, 4 (1994), 374.

Didion critiqued the political class as a whole and their elitist engineering of the process, a manoeuvre facilitated by creating a climate of obfuscation through marginalising policy and substantial critique and replacing them with unverifiable notions of character.

In the Realm of the Fisher King – Governing Through Narrative

In 1989 Didion reviewed the exorcisms and autopsies produced by the staff of the recently departed Reagan administration. In her meta-analysis Didion argued that the staffers demonstrated an administration governing through narrative, and this undermined the notion that the political class were competent or motivated by a commitment to the public. Didion characterised the administration as having a "peculiarity" that "had to do less with the absence at the centre than with the amount of centrifugal energy this absence left spinning free at the edges."[118] This unrestrained energy was described as the aides and officials that occupied the West Wing as pushing "a populist revolution trying to make itself, a crisis of raised expectations and lowered possibilities" as the staffers tried to "tear down the established order and what they saw as its repressive liberal orthodoxies."[119] Essentially, Reagan's administration was a high octane but unfocused one, as "the favoured style here, like the favoured foreign policy, seems to have been less military than paramilitary, a matter of talking tough."[120] Didion portrayed the Reagan administration as governing through narrative as they embraced bravado and therefore hollowness, as the staffers perceived themselves as heterodox and as competent agents of change when their approach was more performative, and so consequently within the thrall of obfuscation. However, this

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[118] Didion, *After Henry*, 379.
[119] *Ibid.*, 380-381.
[120] *Ibid.*, 81-382.

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observation of performativity is indicative of Didion's lack of politics, as beyond explaining a hostility to liberal orthodoxy there is no sense of conservative ideology influencing the Reagan administration.

Nevertheless, Didion replaced ideology with a focus on what she perceived as the illegitimate claim of Reagan and his staffers to California and the West. Didion remarked that she was consistently told that Reagan, first and foremost, was "a Californian, a Westerner" and that "it was the 'Westernness'" of Reagan and his cabinet that "explained not only their rather intransigent views about America's mission in the world" but also their inability to connect with the Americans who did not subscribe to, or who were incompatible with, their intransigent views.[121] However, Didion challenged the Reaganite claim to California, finding that they frequently "only had a convenient connection" to the West.[122] Instead, the administration was occupied by "a relatively new kind of monied class", one who was "devoid of social responsibility precisely because their ties to any one place had been so attenuated."[123] The implication here was that the administration should be socially responsible, but their combination of wealth and remoteness allowed them to abandon a commitment to wider society. In this, Didion outlined a discrepancy between narrative and reality.

Casey Shoop elaborates, arguing that Didion's umbrage with Reagan's manipulation of the western archetype stemmed from factual details being "so explicitly props for the first

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[121] *Ibid.*, 383.
[122] *Ibid.*, 384.
[123] *Ibid.*, 384.

postmodern president."[124] Shoop's argument that Didion viewed Reagan as dismissing

reality provides a foundation for understanding the Reaganites as governing through

narrative, and consequently fostering and effected by a climate of obfuscation. Didion

argued that Reagan was guided by "'feelings' about things", rather than reality, and that his

instinctive interpretations "took on a magical quality" amongst his staff, as they were taken

as "the sources of that ineffable contract with the electorate" that Reagan had, enabling the

administration to forsake "the art of the possible" rather than having a cogent approach.[125]

The abdication of reality enabled Didion to position the Reaganites as within their own

insular paradigm of thought that they interpreted as both rational and synchronised with

the wider American psyche. This emphasis demonstrated Didion sensing a climate of

obfuscation, and ultimately arrogance, within the political class that was tolerated, in

Didion's opinion, because of Reagan's appeals to westernness. Consequently, Didion moved

against the establishment narrative that suggested the political class operated in the

interests of the wider public.

Sentimental Journeys – Narrative Proliferation

With 'Insider Baseball' grappling with how the media and politicians worked in tandem to

produce narratives to control 'the process', and 'In the Realm of the Fisher King'

demonstrating a mechanism of governing through narrative, Didion's 1990 essay,

'Sentimental Journeys', explored a narrative-based approach to reality proliferating across

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[124] Casey Shoop, 'Joan Didion's Style: A Revisionist Western', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31:3 (2016), 589.
[125] Didion, *After Henry*, 391.

society. It was focused less on a self-serving political class and instead crucially demonstrated Didion's interpretation of the marketplace of narratives organising localised discourse, creating societal fractures, and interlinking with social hierarchies.

The essay was published as a special supplement in the *New York Review of Books* due to its extensive length. Didion considered it the piece she had the most difficulty producing, but Silvers pushed her to lengthen it and to not shy away from the controversy of the subject or the reaction it might generate.[126] 'Sentimental Journeys' focused upon the 1989 rape and assault of Trisha Meili in Central Park, New York City, and how assumptions around race, class, and gender entwined with the narratives used to process reality in 1989. Ultimately, 'Sentimental Journeys' was concerned with how New York's criminality and corruption was sustained. This state, for Didion, was maintained through a sentimental edge developing around New York's criminality, as narratives were used to explain it, consequently causing crime to be obscured and internalised. Deborah Nelson summarises Didion's observation as finding New York's sentimentality to be "a morally bankrupt system of self-delusion that both soothes and numbs as the same time."[127] In this reading, Didion's essay was an attempt to break the stupor, thus transforming its author into a figure of dissent.

Trisha Meili was a young, affluent, white woman who was working in finance on the evening that she was attacked in Central Park. Conversely, the accused, who would eventually be found innocent, were six poor Black and Hispanic boys, four of whom would give videotaped

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[126] 'Robert B. Silvers', *New York Review of Books*, May 11, 2017.
[127] Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 151.

confessions and one who described his role in the attack in an unsigned verbal statement, all without a lawyer present. Part of the controversy, as Didion noted, arose through the coverage of the attack being understood as turning "on the demonstrable 'difference' between the victim and the accused assailants".[128] The case was a synecdoche of New York life for Didion, and consequently a way to understand the city's fractures and social forces, and how they were obfuscated through competing narratives. Didion perceived the discourse around the case as tapping into the discrepancy between New York's "actual life and its preferred narratives" and that the case became "a way of expressing, without directly stating, different but equally volatile and similarly occult visions of the same disaster."[129] The powerful and the underclass's narratives mirrored each other, both viewing each other as responsible for the city being "systematically ruined", despite the powerful focusing on Meili's attack and the underclass focusing on the arrest of the defendants.[130] For both groups, Didion interpreted the case as offering "a narrative for the city's distress", and one which "the actual social and economic forces wrenching the city could be personalised and ultimately obscured."[131] Didion's holistic interpretation of the case's discourse demonstrated her perceiving how interpretations of reality were filtered through competing narratives which created the potential for obfuscation, as the actual forces influencing society were obscured.

Didion's analysis of competing narratives led her to perceive that marketplace-organised discourse interacted with existing societal hierarchies and became a means to perpetuate or

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[128] Didion, *After Henry*, 535.
[129] *Ibid*., 563.
[130] *Ibid*., 563.
[131] *Ibid*., 563.

resist them, and that reality was expendable within this. The naming of Meili and the accused illustrated this. Didion noted that conventionally the media did not name rape victims in order to protect them, a convention Didion challenged on the grounds it stigmatised rape and defined it on male terms, and that by Meili taking on a degree of anonymity the case became more abstract and emblematic of wider societal issues for those who focused on her assault.[132] For example, Meili became "Lady Courage" in the *New York Post* and "A Profile in Courage" for the *Daily News and New York Newsday*.[133] Despite convention, Meili's name was still public knowledge, according to Didion, as it was available in the court records, local media had released it in the days following the attack, and the Black-owned media did name her, highlighting just how deliberate the attempts at anonymity were.[134] Furthermore, Didion noted that the convention of maintaining the anonymity of minors was not applied to the accused due to the seriousness of the incident, a point Didion again challenged, as if the incident was that serious it would be a "compelling reason to avoid any appearance of a rush to judgement by preserving the anonymity of a juvenile suspect".[135] Therefore, the wealthy white woman was afforded a level of protection the poor Black and Hispanic boys were not, demonstrating how narrative entwines with social hierarchy.[136]

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[132] *Ibid.*, 537-538.

[133] *Ibid.*, 537.

[134] *Ibid.*, 541

[135] *Ibid.*, 541.

[136] For an expansion on how the perception of the victim and the accused changed over time see: Greg Stratton, 'Transforming the Central Park Jogger into the Central Park Five: Shifting Narratives of Innocence and Changing Media Discourse in the Attack on the Central Park Jogger, 1989–2014', *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 11 no.3 (2015), 281-297.

Narrative did not just perpetuate social hierarchies: there were also counter-narratives which arose to challenge those hierarchies. For Didion, the Black media reported Meili's name not just because they doubted the quality of the police and prosecution's approach but also due to a wider 'conspiratorial' or 'suspicious' paradigm of thought that doubted white driven narratives. As Didion outlined, interpretations that were not mainstream or voiced in establishment mediums, "seemed to derive exclusively from the suspicions of conspiracy increasingly entrenched among those who believe themselves powerless."[137] From this paradigm, which centred around there being "a conspiracy to destroy blacks, particularly black boys", a narrative of the accused's innocence developed that was prepared to incorporate "a series of fantasy details that conflicted not only with known facts but even with each other."[138] Didion's outline for why the less powerful became obfuscated, as facts and reality were deviated from, arose from the powerless developing "the sense that secrets must be in play" and the society's powerful "were in possession of information systematically withheld – since information itself was power – from those who did not have power."[139] Therefore, Didion's observation of thinking and discourse being modulated by information equalling power highlighted the proliferation of narrative-based interpretations of reality. Narratives are information and the establishment narrative was perceived as inadequate, and to overcome this, conspiratorial counter narratives were launched. Moreover, beyond interpretation, mediating power and social hierarchies through a marketplace of narratives enabled a state where accuracy and reality were marginalised to advance a claim to power and the affective sense of grievance behind it.

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[137] Didion, *After Henry*, 565.
[138] *Ibid*., 566.
[139] *Ibid*., 566.

Regarding the actual social forces that the marketplace of narratives obscured, Didion

outlined a state of corruption in New York. This corruption had an anesthetizing effect as it

became part of the narrative around New York's 'energy', obscuring and justifying

corruption and inequality as they became sentimentalised and internalised. Nelson even

notes that this approach and argument led Didion to "sound like Wendy Brown or Lauren

Berlant", despite their political differences, as all three explore "this use of sentiment to

mask structural pain" in the 1980s and 1990s.[140] Therefore, Nelson indicates that Didion

probed the affective component of neoliberalism. For Didion, the narratives that obfuscated

corruption and inefficiency were unified through a sense of sentimentality, a sentimentality

that was

> A preference for broad strokes, for the distortion and flattening of character
>
> and the reduction of events to narrative, has been for well over a hundred
>
> years the heart of the way the city presents itself…each devised to obscure
>
> not only the city's actual tensions of race and class but also, more significantly,
>
> the civic and commercial arrangements that rendered those tensions
>
> irreconcilable.[141]

By historicising narrative, Didion noted they are not an exclusively neoliberal phenomenon,

but by focusing on the role of narrative she highlighted their elevation to the modality

through which reality was organised, and consequently demonstrated the significant

intensity of which obfuscation was operating at. This narrative system obscured New York's

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[140] Nelson, *Tough Enough*, n.15,190.
[141] Didion, *After Henry*, 550.

racial and class inequalities, which existed, in part, because the reality of New York being was one that

> works, when it does work, not on a market economy but on little deals,
> payoffs, accommodations, baksheesh, arrangements that circumvent the
> direct exchange of goods and services and prevents what would be, in a
> competitive economy, the normal ascendance of the superior product.[142]

In order to elucidate New York's corruption, Didion defended the notion of a market economy, demonstrating her lack of left-wing radicalism, as instead of "normal competition", New York ran through corruption and inside deals, but still consequently indicated how the marketplace of narratives obfuscated the actual neoliberal economy and how its functioning depended on the former.[143] For example, Didion noted that the lack of supermarkets in New York arose from a relationship between the mafia and the state, as "produce, we have come to understand, belongs to the Gambinos" and that "keeping the door open belongs finally to the inspector here, and the inspector there".[144] This state of criminality and corruption was sustained in New York, as it was "within the transforming narrative of 'contrasts'" — the discrepancy between narrative and reality — that "the essential criminality of the city and its related absence of civility could become points of pride, evidence of 'energy': if you could make it here you could make it anywhere, hello sucker, get smart."[145]

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[142] *Ibid*., 553.
[143] *Ibid*., 553.
[144] *Ibid*., 553-534.
[145] *Ibid*., 556.

Narrative thus obfuscated corruption and inequality, and these transgressions became points of pride which gave the city a unique energy. Didion became more explicit about the impact of narrative obfuscating inequality as she noted that "this notion of the city's 'energy' was sedative, as was the commandeering of 'crime' as the city's central problem."[146] The fusion of anesthetizing narrative around New York's energy and New York's crime and corruption ultimately led Didion to draw a parallel between "sentimental, or false, narrative", and that the impact of these false narratives was that events and processes become "rendered merely illustrative, a series of set pieces, or performance opportunities."[147] Ultimately, Didion's sense of obfuscation led her to portray New York and the US at large as gripped by inaccurate narratives making reality obsolete, as comprehensions that complied with the needs of society's set pieces superseded reality.

Political Pornography – Incompetency

Moving into *Political Fictions,* the focus on journalistic merit continued in Didion's 1996 essay 'Political Pornography', originally titled 'The Deferential Spirit', as it outlined the absence of critical thinking, and therefore competency, in the media as they advanced narratives that served the political class. The essay centres on Bob Woodward, the investigative reporter who helped to break the Watergate scandal for *The Washington Post*, and the insights offered in his 1996 book, *The Choice: How Bill Clinton Won*. *The Choice* focused on the strategies and relationships of political operatives on each side of the presidential election campaign, with Woodward presenting an exposé of internal

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[146] *Ibid*., 557.
[147] *Ibid*., 561.

machinations and gossip, as this revealed, as he himself blithely stated, that in terms of understanding the direction and impact of elections "when all is said and sifted, character is what matters most."[148] For this reason, Jacob Weisberg reviewed *The Choice* as having an expiry date "somewhere between milk and yoghurt."[149]

Didion's umbrage with Woodward was trained on what she deemed to be his manipulative sense of realism, and that this coupled with a descriptive rather than critical approach that failed to challenge politicians, enabling self-serving narratives to proliferate. Didion's indictment of Woodward was in response to what she interpreted as his "aversion to engaging the ramifications of what people say to him" and that in Woodward's work "measurable cerebral activity is virtually absent."[150] Didion was not alone in criticising Woodward for presentation rather than critique, as Weisberg also noted that Woodward was a "skilful reporter" but he has "he has no talent as a writer, no mind for analysis, no eye for observation, no opinions and no sense of humour."[151] This absence of critique was reflected in Woodward's focus on presenting a deluge of information, as Didion found that "not much said to the author by a candidate or potential candidate appears to have been deemed too insignificant for inclusion, too casual for documentation."[152]

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[148] Bob Woodward, *The Choice: How Bill Clinton Won* (New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 11.
[149] Jacob Weisberg,' Bill and Bob's Big Adventure Presidential Campaigns Always Go on too Long, but the Current Battle for The White House Doesn't Even have a Decent Storyline', *The Observer*, 28 July, 1996.
[150] Didion, *Political Fictions*, 193-194.
[151] Weisberg, 'Bill and Bob.'
[152] Didion, *Political Fictions*, 196.

Didion argued that Woodward's sense of realism through information flooding was an attempt to manufacture credibility and authority, as it gave the impression "that significant and heretofore unrevealed information must have just been revealed by a reporter who left no stone unturned to obtain it."[153] The significance of this sweeping approach, for Didion, was that

> The informant who talks to Mr. Woodward, on the other hand, knows that his or her testimony will be not only respected but burnished into the inside story, which is why so many people on the inside, notably those who consider themselves the professionals or mangers of the process – assistant secretaries, deputy advisers, players of the game, aides who intend to survive past the tenure of the patron they are prepared to portray as hapless – do want to talk to him.[154]

Through this, Didion managed to indict both journalists and the careerist aides that played politics. Woodward was seen as a credible through his history with *The Washington Post* and therefore capable of legitimising narratives which served politicians and their aides, rather than focusing on the public. Furthermore, those who spoke to Woodward did not so much take advantage of his congeniality as they demonstrated a symbiotic relationship between journalists and politicians, highlighting the insularity of the political class. The significance of portraying this cooperation is that the media becomes unable to check the politicians, and from this cooperation the political class distance themselves from the public as reality is reported and accepted on the former's terms.

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[153] *Ibid*., 195.
[154] *Ibid*, 202.

In this sense, Didion echoed Chomsky's analysis of the difficulties of dissent within the media. Contrasting Didion's analysis but still ultimately reinforcing it was Michael Lewis's review of *The Choice* for *The New York Times* where he noted that Woodward's interview subjects are "victims", rather than self-interested willing participants as Didion suggested, and that they cooperated as they risked either being "described by Mr. Woodward as they were described to Mr. Woodward by their enemies", or

> they can cave and tell Mr. Woodward their version of events. Either way the sort of important people Mr. Woodward writes about know as well as he does that they are at his mercy, not merely because of who he is and what he does but also because of who they are and what they do.[155]

Lewis presented Woodward as less of a useful idiot for political operatives and more of a manipulative agent who pressured aides into sharing their story with him. Nevertheless, Lewis and Didion were unified in finding Woodward to be forwarding the establishment understanding of politics and facilitating the journalist-operative relationship, Didion just gave Woodward less credit.

The essay shifts, with Didion pivoting to discussing how the news can warp conceptions of reality due to media modulating themselves through a marketplace model centred around a notion of 'fairness.' Didion tackled how the media created comprehensions of reality when she noted that the selection, production, and maintenance of news stories was controlled

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[155] Weisberg, 'Bill and Bob.'

by a limited number of people as she stated: "I once heard a group of reporters agree that there were at most twenty people who run any story."[156] Didion's indication that the news was manufactured, rather than following reality, was an attempt to actualise her sense of obfuscation, as she offered an insight that reflected her liminal status and inside knowledge of journalistic practice. Moreover, Didion further echoed Chomsky by advancing his 'limited spectrum of debate' argument as she noted: "In this business of running the story, in fact in the business of news itself, certain conventions are seen as beyond debate."[157] Within this spectrum, and this is where Didion highlighted reality being modulated through a marketplace of narratives, she notes that Woodward enshrined "fairness", and that

> The genuflection towards 'fairness' is a familiar newsroom piety, in practice
>
> the excuse for a good deal of autopilot reporting and lazy thinking but in
>
> theory a benign ideal. In Washington, however, a community in which the
>
> management of news has become the single overring preoccupation of the
>
> core industry, what 'fairness' has often come to mean is a scrupulous
>
> passivity, an agreement to cover the story not as it is occurring but as it is
>
> presented, which is to say as it is manufactured.[158]

Therefore, for Didion, the media had a propensity to follow an 'agreed' upon line. They did so explicitly through those limited number of people who ran the story and they did so implicitly through the guiding logic of 'fairness' which meant accepting sources at face-value and positioning them against each other essentially within a competitive marketplace, rather than actually critically evaluating reality or a proposed narrative. This orchestration of

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[156] Didion, *Political Fictions*, 205.
[157] *Ibid*., 206.
[158] *Ibid*., 207.

events and the centring of 'fairness' led Didion to directly state that aiming to "reach a

conclusion is seen as suspect."[159] Again, Didion grappled with neoliberalism's capacity to

economise everything, as abstract values, such as specific conclusions, were supplanted by a

logic of competition that was represented by a focus on fairness that contrasted narratives

against each other to be bought and sold without critique.

Didion then outlined how the logic of fairness enabled a perception of the political class as

responsible, and she resultingly elucidated and moved directly against the establishment

narrative. Didion presented Woodward's approach as prompting a mode for understanding

politics that focused on the "human story" as Woodward presented Washington as "a

diorama of decent intentions in which wise if misunderstood and occasionally misled

stewards will reliably prevail."[160] Therefore, this was the establishment narrative in action,

the political class seen as well intentioned and capable individuals rather than there being a

focus on structural dynamics and material distribution.

Didion echoed this sense of obfuscation when she argued that "this crude personalization,

works to narrow the focus, to circumscribe the range of possible discussion or

speculation".[161] Politics was individualised and personalised and the structures and reality

that the political class operated within were unmoved and obfuscated — for Didion, to

personalise politics was to produce "political pornography".[162] Consequently Didion saw

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[159] *Ibid*., 209.
[160] *Ibid*., 213.
[161] *Ibid*., 213.
[162] *Ibid*., 214.

Woodward's 'deferential spirit' as representing his own journalistic incompetency, as it enabled a connection between politicians and journalists. Essentially, for Didion, the establishment narrative around political operatives was that they were fundamentally good and responsible, and this was only ever undermined by individuals, a state achieved by running stories through an insider lens of personality and fairness. In contrast, Didion undermined the establishment narrative by portraying the media class as self-serving and dependent upon a state of obfuscation that they generated through a marketplace modality.

Clinton Agonistes – Discrepancies in Understanding Reality

Didion's 1998 'Clinton Agonistes' came a decade after her first formal foray into domestic politics, and by this point she was less surprised by the self-serving nature of the political class, now viewing them instead with a combination of exasperation and ferocity. The Clinton administration, the Lewinsky scandal, and the role that the political class played in both forms the subject of 'Agonistes.' Ultimately, Didion's arguments provided a salient insight into the discrepancy between how the political class and the wider public understood reality. From this, obfuscation was connected to a sense of apathy as the political class advanced the role of character and pandered to a narrow subsection of the electorate through culturally conservative narratives.

In 'Clinton Agonistes' Didion outlined an interpretation of Clinton's personality and the public perception of it, and then explored how the reception to it changed over time —

analysing both Clinton and how the media attempted to pressure the public. Didion began

by characterising Clinton's behaviour in the 1992 presidential campaign as having "the

familiar predatory sexuality of the provincial adolescent" and with having a "reservoir of

self-pity, the quickness to blame, the narrowing of the eyes, as in wildlife documentary,

when things did not go his way".[163] Essentially, Didion noted that there was nothing known

about Clinton in 1998 that was not known in 1992, as his hostility and impropriety

interlinked with question around his 1969 draft status and his affair with Gennifer Flowers.

The question then became, why were Clinton's consistently present flaws an issue in 1998

but not in 1992?[164] Didion stated this directly when she claimed

> The flaws already apparent in 1992 were by no means unreported, but
>
> neither, particularly in those parts of the country recently neutralized by their
>
> enshrinement as 'the heartland,' were they seized as occasion for rhetorical
>
> outrage.[165]

Beyond the heartland, whose enshrinement denoted a wider shift to the right, Didion found

that "coastal opinion leaders" shared this lack of outrage and gave Clinton a "*laissez-passer*"

on the question of sex.[166] Therefore, the public, in Didion's sweeping portrayal of them, and

the political class were aligned in 1992 over Clinton. However, Didion argued that as the

press were not calling for a "demonstration of 'contrition'" by Clinton in 1992 but were by

1998, despite his character remaining consistent, and that this was not "evidence that the

interests and priorities of the press have changed."[167] Didion's rejection arose through

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[163] *Ibid.*, 215.
[164] *Ibid.*, 215-216.
[165] *Ibid.*, 217.
[166] *Ibid.*, 217.
[167] *Ibid.*, 218-219.

noting that the media were drawn to evidence that "gave promise of advancing the story of the day, the shared narrative" the one that gripped "the full resources" of the media.[168] The impact of working to advance 'a shared narrative' was that "once the 'zeitgeist' had been agreed upon by this quite small group of people, any unrelated event, whatever its actual significance" became marginalised. [169]

Again, Didion expressed her sense of obfuscation by finding the media complicit in prioritising narrative over reality. Didion indicted the entire political class here by noting that the media took "their cue from political professionals" in 1992.[170] Essentially, reporting was directed by the shared narrative, and when it dictated that Clinton was acceptable due to having sufficient "'centrist credentials'" his impropriety was a non-issue, but by 1998 that small group of people had set a new narrative in response to the Lewinsky scandal.[171]

Regarding the Lewinsky scandal, the undercurrent to Didion's argument was that focusing on the President's sex life, even it did involve an intern and perjury, was not inherently a matter of national interest and that the public and political class fell out of alignment due to a logic of competition. This undercurrent led Didion to note that in trying to understand why the issue "came so incongruously to escalate" the media were criticised and "was in turn quick to criticize itself" on the grounds of "excessive and erroneous coverage."[172] However, Didion argued that the story became important to the media as it became "important by

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[168] *Ibid.*, 219.
[169] *Ibid.*, 220.
[170] *Ibid.*, 221.
[171] *Ibid.*, 221.
[172] *Ibid.*, 224.

definition, significant because it was commanding the full resources of everyone on it" as it exemplified the media's capacity to align around a 'shared narrative' which could easily settle into the "personalized 'horse race' narrative that has become the model for most American political reporting."[173] This model, for Didion, was why the story was framed as one "where there was a 'sexual element,' but as we so frequently heard, it was not about sex" and was in fact about which of the competitors, the "'strong-willed prosecutor' or his high-placed target, would go the distance to win the race."[174] Therefore, Didion sensed a neoliberal logic of competition orchestrating how the media approached the Lewinsky scandal, and this supplanted a focus on any other values, sexual or otherwise.

The logic of competition drove apart the public and the media for Didion, as the media were compelled to neglect the concerns of the public and instead follow their shared narrative. Clinton's prize in this competition was to stay in office, for Kenneth Starr, the media that advanced the shared narrative, and Clinton's opponents it was to see him removed. Didion quoted Jacob Weisberg in *Slate* to clarify the shared narrative the media were compelled by, as he claimed that "there is no story as exciting as that of the fall of a president.'"[175] However, Didion noted that the climax of the media's narrative was slowed on legal grounds, causing the media to pivot as "in the absence of any allegation bearing on the president's performance of his duties, the reasons the president needed to go were that he had been 'weakened,' and that he would be 'unable to function.'"[176] Crucially, by Didion's logic, this was an infliction the media had wrought themselves, and questioning Clinton's

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[173] *Ibid*., 226.
[174] *Ibid*., 227.
[175] *Ibid*., 227.
[176] *Ibid*., 228.

capacity to lead became a "strategy, an argument" to "re-educate that 'substantial majority'

who 'still feel that Mr. Clinton should remain in office.'"[177] Subsequently, through this point

of re-education Didion outlined a discrepancy between how the public processed reality and

how the political class did, as Didion described a climate of obfuscation where the political

class internalised their own narrative and tried to get the public to buy into it.[178]

This state of discrepancy was directly identified by Didion when she noted that society had

reached the point of

> 'the disconnect,' as it was now called, between what the professionals - those
>
> who held office, those who worked for them, and those who wrote about
>
> them – believed to be self-evident and what a majority of Americans believed
>
> to be self-evident.[179]

Regarding the public's position within this discrepancy, Didion argued that their reaction to

Clinton's "embarrassing but not illegal" affair and its concealment "had not, it seemed,

impressed most Americans as serious."[180] Moreover, Didion noted that the public rejected

the media's narrative as they became "impatient with what it had come to see as a self-

interested political class".[181] In summation, as the media created and were compelled by

their own shared narrative, one which called for impeaching Clinton, a divergence emerged

between how the political class and the public viewed the scandal. A point which outlined

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[177] *Ibid*., 229-230.
[178] For further discussion on the public's lack of enthusiasm to impeach Clinton see: Diane Hollern Harvey, 'The Public's View of Clinton' in *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton Legacy in US Politics* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000) ed. Steven E. Schier, 132-133.
[179] *Ibid*., 230.
[180] *Ibid*., 231.
[181] *Ibid*., 232.

Didion's identification of a mood of obfuscation. Didion demonstrated this by arguing that the political class attempted to re-educate the public, and the public reacted to this, in Didion's interpretation, by viewing the political class as self-serving.

Didion pushed beyond simply observing the discrepancy and outlined its wider impact by arguing that it synergised with apathy and enabled the political class to filter politics through character and facilitate a rightward shift. To explain how this discrepancy deepened a sense of apathy, Didion outlined the elitism within democracy, stating: "'Average folks,' however, do not call their elected representatives, nor do they attend the events where the funds get raised and the questions get asked."[182] This elitism led the political class to neglect the element of the public that did not align with their shared narrative, as when the political class "spoke about the inability of Americas to stomach 'the details'" of Clinton's sordid actions, they were, in fact,

> speaking, in code, about a certain kind of American, a minority of the
>
> population but the minority to whom recent campaigns have been
>
> increasingly pitched. They were talking politics. They were talking about the
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> 'values' voter, the 'pro-family' voter, and so complete by now was their
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> isolation from the country in which they lived that they seemed willing to
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> reserve its franchise for, in other words give it over to, that key core vote.[183]

Whilst Didion referred to the political class in general here, she moved to focusing on the increased influence of conservatism and how that complied with the logic of competition.

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[182] *Ibid*, 239.
[183] *Ibid*., 240.

She found that what the likes of John Podhoretz, William Kristol, the Christian Coalition and

The Weekly Standard were asking "the Republican Party and (by logical extension) its

opponents to do in 1996 was to further narrow most-likely to vote, by removing from

debate those issues that concerned the country at large" as pursuing those who agreed with

the shared narrative and of seeing it through to its finale took priority over democratic and

legal precedent.[184]

However, Didion had previously observed the shift to the right from a position of liberal

acquiesce, rather than conservative dominance as she does in 'Agonistes.' In 1992 Didion

argued that the Democrats were increasingly focused on the "small group of people" that

made up the "'Reagan Democrats'" and they were "whom all election appeals would be

directed, a narrowing of focus with predictable results, not least the significant of which was

that presidential elections would come to be conducted entirely in code."[185] In both

circumstances, the political class narrowed the range of the population and the issues they

engaged with, as they embraced the marketplace of narrative and pitched themselves at

voters who already agreed with their shared narrative, resultingly marginalisation and

apathy increased.

As a consequence, in 1998 Didion identified a new form of politics emerging where

character dominated as "future elections could now be focused on the entirely spurious

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[184] *Ibid, 245-246.*
[185] *Ibid.,* 144.

issues of correct sexual, or 'moral,' behaviour".[186] Character overrode policy, and this interlinked with and served politicians as

> the fact that an election between two candidates arguing which has the more correct 'values,' left most voters with no reason to come to the polls had even come to be spoken about, by less wary professionals, as the beauty part, the bonus that would render the process finally and perpetually impenetrable.[187]

The process's impenetrability rendered it elitist by facilitating a state of apathy that was maintained through obfuscation. For Didion, this obfuscation arose because politics focussed on character, which justified a media that was obsessed with insiders, as their access allowed them to divine whether a candidate reached the necessary moral standards, rather than account for the candidate's ideology and how it related to the material circumstances within the electorate. This obfuscation and apathy was observed by Didion when she noted that a focus on values led to a "removing from debate those issues that concerned the country at large" and that it was "irrelevant" that the public "seemed capable of separating Mr. Clinton's behaviour in this matter from his performance of president".[188] Didion thus charged the political class with buying and selling a narrative that did not resonate with the public, and resultantly facilitated a climate of obfuscation and apathy.

Didion's writing was a clarifying force, but it did not describe society from an abstract position that categorised the actors she focused upon or ordered the forces she found

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[186] *Ibid*., 248.
[187] *Ibid*., 248.
[188] *Ibid*., 246 and 248.

influencing society. Instead, her analysis was narrower, as she was predominately focused on publishing journalistic essays that described the nature of, and shifts within, the political class. Didion viewed this class as self-serving irresponsible agents of democracy, as they advanced narratives to their own ends. Through this doubleness, between self-service and responsibility, Didion outlined and resisted an aspect of the establishment narrative. Whilst her observation is not a profound one, the manner through which Didion described the political class was significant. She outlined neoliberalism's discursive logic and its generation of obfuscation via portraits of a marketplace of narratives influencing the political class, with narratives positioned against each other and with the political class following a shared narrative that did not map onto reality. Didion viewed the political class as self-serving, a point that was reflected by their lack of critical analysis which in turn prompted incompetency, their enshrinement of character, and the discrepancy between how the political class and the public processed reality and the elitism entwined within this. From 'Insider Baseball' to 'Clinton Agonistes', Didion remained hostile towards the political class and elucidated the modality through which they operated by demonstrating the extent that a market logic influenced discourse, and through this, her work became a clarifying schematic of how obfuscation was generated.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Ultimately, Vidal and Didion's efforts to destabilise the political class were unsuccessful. Both spat venom towards them, driven at least in part by spectacle and entertainment. However, their more substantive value arose through their liminal status and its influence on their critique of the establishment's relationship to a self-serving marketplace of

narratives. Vidal's primary campaign formally inserted the intellectual as a competitor in the marketplace. He caused friction with the political class by challenging the homogeneity he found there and by offering an alternative narrative that engaged with the imperialism and the lack of democracy that he perceived to be at the heart of the American system. Didion provided multiple insights into the wider elitist political culture and the marketplace of narratives, as she focused on the incompetency of the political class, as well as the discrepancy between their behaviour and how the public processed reality. However, neither fully repudiated the establishment, as Vidal was too contradictory to offer a coherent critique, and Didion was prone to description rather than analysis of power and ideology. By viewing the political class as self-serving, Vidal and Didion elucidated the downward pressure of obfuscation, whilst also demonstrating how the political class were not immune from it themselves, as they encouraged abstaining from critical analysis and instead embraced placing narratives in competition with each other. From this, it becomes necessary to analyse the role of obfuscation across the wider culture and how the marketplace of narratives led to insular paradigms of thought, points which Ellen Willis and Thomas Frank aptly explore.

Chapter Three
Notions of Authentic Dissent and Myopic Paradigms of Thought:
Ellen Willis and Thomas Frank's Riposte to the Counterculture

Ellen Willis was born in 1941 and Thomas Frank was born in 1965. Despite their generational

differences both were radical cultural critics during the 1980s and 1990s, who positioned

themselves as existing beyond what they deemed to be an inauthentic mainstream

counterculture that was not radical, and which aligned with a right-wing ascendancy. It was

through this challenge towards inauthentic dissent that they outlined a climate of

obfuscation and the aspect of the establishment narrative they challenged. Willis and Frank

balanced between lampooning and serious deconstruction and were unapologetically

radical. They were activist intellectuals whose subversive approach was guided via a system

of paradigms of thought that they aimed to contrast and expand through their capacious

political imaginations.

Their similarities continued through their associations with institutions of higher education

(Frank had a PhD and Willis taught college classes later in her career), as well as their work

in the alternative press. Willis wrote for a variety of publications but was most embedded as

a columnist and editor at *The Village Voice* newspaper, and Frank co-founded *The Baffler*

magazine in 1988. The *Voice* began publication in 1955 as the nation's first alternative

newsweekly, and Devon Powers has noted that it was initially aligned with the Democratic

Party, but its liberal politics would eventually "give way" to reporting from the "frontlines"

of the culture wars with stories on Stonewall, feminism, sexual politics, and New York state

governance that eventually led to the *Voice* gaining an "edgy legitimacy and earned its

writers a prestigious national audience."[1] Operating on a smaller scale *The Baffler* carried

forth an independent zine aesthetic, positioning itself as a publication for a youthful

generation who were both interested in culture and dissatisfied with much of what was

being produced around them. However, there were also stark differences between Willis

and Frank, especially over the legacy of the 1960s. Willis came of age during the decade as a

radical feminist and was deeply involved in the women's liberation movement. Her writing

was influenced by her experience with the counterculture, as she placed a high value on

liberation and pleasure. Almost two decades younger, Frank's permanent distance from the

social upheavals of the 1960s led him away from focusing on the liberation movements and

their spirit of transformation, and instead towards the role of business, advertising, and the

presence of the counterculture in the mainstream. This difference in focus was reflected in

how the pair analysed popular culture during the 1980s and 1990s. Willis pushed towards a

content and reception-based approach, whilst Frank often engaged with culture in terms of

its context and its production. This contrast would come to head in 2006 with Willis

providing a scathing review of Frank's magnum opus, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*[2]

However, their work shared a common foundation during the 1980s and 1990s as they both

strove to dethrone what they perceived as an inauthentic radical culture and its resultant

obfuscation. From this, both challenged the notion of a leftward cultural shift during the

period as they identified the right as wielding a significant degree of cultural power. Willis

challenged the production of neoliberal guilt, viewing it as antithetical to radical politics and

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[1] Devon Powers, *Writing the Record: The Village Voice and the Birth of Rock Criticism* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 17-18.

[2] Ellen Willis, 'Escape from Freedom What's the Matter with Tom Frank (and the Lefties who Love him)' *Situations Project of the Radical Imagination*, 1 no.2 (2006), 5-20.

inhibiting pleasure. Frank grappled with the commodification of dissent and the influence of

right-wing populism. The foundation of both Willis and Frank's thought was a desire for

authenticity: they both aimed for a culture and a political movement that was undiluted by

moderation or corporatisation. This is consequently a chapter as much about how

neoliberalism and its marketplace of narrative was perceived to filter discourse through

myopic paradigms of thought, which reflected a climate and mood of obfuscation, as it is an

analysis of how two distinct approaches to left-wing ideology and cultural analysis

synergised and probed inauthenticity and queried the notion of a left-wing cultural shift.

There is not a raft of 'Willis studies' or 'Frank studies' literature to dive into. Willis features

within the literature on radical feminism but has not been treated as an individual

intellectual, which is how this chapter approaches her. Frank has received some scholarly

attention, but it is mainly through reviews for his *What's the Matter with Kansas*, rather

than his earlier writing in *The Baffler*.[3] Willis and Frank have not been the subject of direct

and sustained analysis — a point this chapter will rectify though offering an exploration of

how their thinking elucidated a mood of obfuscation. However, Willis and Frank did not

exist in a vacuum, and their work intersected with histories of authenticity and dissent.

Doug Rossinow positioned the pursuit of authenticity and challenging alienation as central

elements of the New Left and the student movement during the 1960s.[4] This chapter

continues this focus on authenticity beyond the radical fervour of the 1960s and the 1970s

and expands on Rossinow's claim that "in the 1970s and 1980s, the search for authenticity

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[3] For an insight into how *Kansas* was received see: Sarah Jaffe, 'Zombie Neoliberalism How "There Is No Alternative" gave us Donald Trump', *Dissent*, Fall 2017.

[4] Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 19.

continued, but demands for more democracy, like talk of alienation, ebbed."[5] Frank and

Willis were less concerned with tackling alienation and more concerned with purging

inauthentic forms of dissent — a step that would need to be achieved before the wider

climate of alienation could be tackled.

In their influential history of the post-1945 American left, Howard Brick and Christopher

Phelps have conceptualised intellectual radicalism by "apprehending margin and

mainstream as the constitutive duality of the American radical experience."[6] From this, they

argued that dissenting radicals are marginal figures, but they simultaneously desire for their

views to become mainstream.[7] Both Willis and Frank lay nearer the marginal side, as Willis

was a utopian and Frank found the mainstream repugnant. Robert Collins and David Skover

echoed this dichotomy by arguing that dissent contributed to the marketplace of ideas, as it

"promoted competition between diverging viewpoints" , which could lead to a "more

enlightened citizenry."[8] Willis and Frank played within the marketplace of narratives,

although they did not endorse the process — they probed its ramifications and departed

from Collins and Skover by arguing that dissent was being used to enforce the status quo

rather than the exchange of ideas. They were attuned to the political and epistemological

implications of the narratives advanced by 'inauthentic' dissent, and their sense of

inauthenticity partially arose from modulating their critiques through narratives that

contrasted the ones sold by their opposition. To an extent, then, Willis and Frank were

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[5] *Ibid.*, 345.

[6] Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The US Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

[7] *Ibid.*, 7-8.

[8] Ronald K. L. Collins and David M. Skover, *On Dissent: Its Meaning in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xii.

vanguard intellectuals who adopted a 'more radical than thou' attitude and held steadfast principles that they defended in their pursuit of authenticity. Nevertheless, this status arose due to their efforts to consider the entire political spectrum and to engage with ideas and forms of culture they disagreed with. Ultimately, Willis and Frank significantly departed from each other, but they both embraced their marginal status and were prepared to challenge other forms dissent in their commitment to authenticity.

Willis and Frank centred their arguments and analysis on repudiating what they deemed as an inauthentic counterculture during the 1980s and 1990s, challenging the notion of a leftward cultural shift during the period. Willis critiqued the role of guilt in society, arguing that the women's liberation movement was being driven by cultural feminists who advanced an understanding of gender relations that limited liberty and desire, and which consequently aligned with a conservative understanding of gender and intercourse. This hostility towards guilt led Willis to defend pleasure, including through drug consumption, as she placed pleasure as central to political transformation. This commitment to pleasure and enmity towards guilt was part of Willis's wider commitment to culture as a political arena, and this was reflected in her critiques of leftists that subscribed to the 'the majoritarian position' or identity politics. Willis continued to argue that the left had fallen short in her analysis of the entrenchment of guilt within the left and in her comprehension of why the right had more success.

Frank tackled the commodification and enshrinement of dissent through his 'production side' critique that focused on the creation and production of art and cultural products,

rather than Willis's 'content side' that focused more on how the audience received a piece of art or cultural product. From this, he attacked cultural studies, deeming it the intellectual backbone of commodified dissent as it committed to a comprehension of agency driven by a market logic. This commitment to the market was further critiqued by Frank in his understanding of the rise of obfuscation and its connection to anti-intellectualism and right-wing populism. Willis and Frank both tackled the prominence of inauthenticity within the 1980s and 1990s and by doing so highlighted a climate of obfuscation, myopic paradigms of thought, and the cultural power of the right.

Ellen Willis – The Value of Joy

Ellen Willis had a middle-class Jewish upbringing. She earnt a degree from Bernard College in 1962 and from there she would go on to graduate studies at Berkeley. She was involved in student politics and dabbled in the psychoactive side of the counterculture but would drop out of Berkeley and instead begin a career as a journalist. By 1968 she had become the first rock critic for the *New Yorker*.[9] She was a radical feminist, although one who maintained a connection to the traditional left, and in 1969 she founded the women's liberation group Redstockings with Shulamith Firestone. By 1990 Willis had begun work at New York University, and in 1995 she created the US's first cultural reporting and criticism programme. Willis's feminism carried a psychoanalytic edge and was especially influenced by the radical Freudian, Wilhelm Reich.[10] She placed substantial weight on desire and its repression in explaining oppression, and argued its liberation was necessary for political

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[9] Ellen Willis, *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music*, ed. by Nona Willis Aronowitz (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[10] For discussions on Wilhelm Reich see Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America* (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), and James Edgar Strick, *Wilhelm Reich, Biologist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2015).

transformation. This sincere appreciation for pleasure and liberty led Willis to define herself, like Chomsky, as left libertarian.[11]

The role of pleasure and the use of guilt to control it was consistently expressed throughout Willis's three collections of political essays: *Beginning to See the Light: Pieces of a Decade* (1981), *No More Nice Girls* (1992), and *Don't Think Smile! Notes on a Decade of Denial* (1999), with the latter two providing the foundation of this chapter's analysis of Willis.[12] These collections were comprised of pieces from a variety of publications, from *Rolling Stone*, *Dissent, Tikkun,* and most frequently *The Village Voice*. Reviews of *No More Nice Girls* noted how Willis was writing at a time of backlash and moderation, as she represented "the old-fashioned, in your face radical feminism" and that she wrote "from an earlier era; her anger is directed not at concrete social and economic injustices so much as at more insidious intellectual and conceptual wrongs."[13] Willis opened *Beginning to See the Light* by claiming that when assembling the collection she realised how she had been "obsessed with the idea of freedom" and argued that there is an "aspect of human personality, a core of basic – if you will, biological – impulses, that transcends and resists the incursions of an oppressive culture."[14] For Willis, the desire for freedom could be weakened but never removed.[15] Willis saw that this focus on freedom aligned her "with cultural radicals rather

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[11] For Willis's most direct engagement with her own libertarianism see: Ellen Willis, *Don't Think Smile! Notes on a Decade of Denial* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1999),176-193.

[12] Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light: Pieces of a Decade* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), Ellen Willis, *No More Nice Girls* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), for this chapter the 2012 University of Minnesota version of *No More Nice Girls* was consulted, and Ellen Willis, *Don't Think Smile! Notes of a Decade of Denial* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1999).

[13] Ellen Willis Papers, 1941-2011; No More Nice Girls: reviews, 1993. MC 646, folder 7.29. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Hereafter abbreviated to folder title, MC 646, folder number.

[14] Willis, *Beginning to See the Light, xiv*.

[15] *Ibid*., xiv.

than socialists" as her umbrage was with "not capitalism per se, but the authoritarian structure of all our institutions, including those – the family, especially – that regulate our so-called private lives."[16] It was this focus on freedom and the optimism of faith in individual agency that led Ann Snitow, a fellow radical feminist, to describe Willis as "way out front, beyond the paradigms people were using. Most academics [and journalists] clump around the thinking of the time. She didn't gather the discourse at a particular moment and work with that."[17] The inhibition of freedom through controlling pleasure by the establishment was how Willis outlined her sense of obfuscation, as she interpreted these controls as limiting an awareness of reality and allowing inauthentic radical forces to flourish.

Guilt, Willis's Feminism, and Sexual Repression.

Willis understood guilt as a mechanism that enabled a right-wing culture and hierarchical society, and which prevented the transcendence of the establishment narrative. She was more concerned with the advancement of guilt and the resulting denial of pleasure than of the advancement or retraction of pleasure itself and the politics around that. Naturally, these points cannot be totally separated, as guilt is often the stick where pleasure is the carrot, but Willis focused less on how pleasure could be a tool or prize for winners. Therefore, the following discussion centres on how Willis viewed guilt as embedded into society and the way it limited conceptions of reality and was a means of control that consequently enabled obfuscation. Moreover, Willis discussed the elevation of guilt in relation to how it reduced politics to a morality battle where contrasting moral codes

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[16] *Ibid*., xiv.
[17] 'The Passion of Ellen Willis', accessed: 21.8.20, http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/judith-levine-ellen-willis.

clashed and politics was conceived as the triumph of good over evil, or vice-versa, causing

shockwaves of obfuscation as discourse was driven by individual righteousness. It is in these

senses that Willis portrayed guilt as a spiritual and psychic underpinning to a neoliberal

order that contrasted the moment of potential that existed during the 1960s

By the 1980s Willis had adopted a tone of retrospection towards the height of the women's

liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s and she used this to outline her conception of

feminism, a point that requires discussion to sufficiently contextualise how and why Willis

took umbrage with cultural feminists and their use of guilt. Willis's feminism understood

that "male supremacy was in itself a systemic form of domination – a set of material,

institutionalized relations, not just bad attitudes."[18] This material understanding of gender

relations was inspired by the Black Power movement and Willis saw herself and many of the

early radical feminists as leftists who "took for granted that 'radical' implied antiracist,

anticapitalist, and anti-imperialist."[19] From this position of committed radicalism, Willis

viewed herself and her contemporaries as "radicalizing the left by expanding the definition

to include feminism" and in doing so demonstrated her ability to exist beyond the

counterculture.[20]

According to Ruth Rosen, this expansion had a galvanizing effect, as it provided a fresh

framework through which to filter transformative politics.[21] However, Willis emphasized the

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[18] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 119.
[19] *Ibid.*, 120.
[20] Ibid., 120.
[21] Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Women's Movement Changed America* (London: Penguin, 2001), 140.

difficulty of establishing feminism, and argued that women were met with derision in radical

circles when stressing that men had oppressed women.[22] This difficulty arose not just due to

external resistance but also the internal "insoluble contradiction" which arose, for Willis, as

feminists needed to separate male domination from its wider context, so that it might be

analysed in an isolated state in order to understand the impact of sexism and

androcentrism, but doing so resulted in "problems of theory and strategy that could only be

resolved within a larger context."[23] This friction was ultimately grappled with in the process

of consciousness raising, as Sara Evans stressed that the women with an activist history

understood that challenging hierarchy required a change in thinking.[24]

Nevertheless, divisions emerged within the women's liberation movement, particularly

between Willis's radical feminists and cultural feminists. Alice Echols noted that radical

feminism was the dominant strand of feminism until 1973 but by 1975 cultural feminism

had supplanted it as the hegemonic approach.[25] For Echols, cultural feminism stressed

"women's essential sameness to each other and their fundamental difference from men"

and that this offered a bypass to the gay-straight split within feminism, as "male values

rather than men were vilified and female bonding rather than lesbianism was valorized, thus

making it acceptable to heterosexual feminists."[26] Nancy Fraser argued this shift enabled a

focus on identity and the politics of recognition but this came at the expense of a focus on

redistribution, and that "the feminist turn to recognition dovetailed all too nearly with a

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[22] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 120.

[23] *Ibid.*, 120-121.

[24] Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York, New York: Free Press, 2004), 29.

[25] Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in American 1967-1975 Thirtieth Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 243.

[26] *Ibid.*, 244.

hegemonic neoliberalism that wants nothing more than to repress socialist memory."[27]

Material feminists departed from the essentialism of cultural feminists through their

understanding of how women reacted to oppression. For Willis and the radical feminism of

Redstockings, women's behaviour was "always and only" a rational response to their

material conditions, and appearances of accepting oppression was a coping strategy.[28] Willis

described this understanding as the "pro-woman line" and claimed it was "absolutely

antipsychological" as it denied psychological explanations of women's submissiveness, as

they "implied that women collaborated in or were responsible for their oppression" and

consequently excused men for male supremacy.[29]

Willis was influenced by this line, although she did not fully discount the role of the

unconscious, and happily admitted that the line challenged her "tendencies to over-

psychologize everything when social explanations were staring me in the face."[30] However,

regarding sexual violence, Willis found that radical feminists discounted its sexual and

emotive components, and that cultural feminists took up male violence towards women as

their central effort as their lack of material focus allowed them to use psychological

explanations, which in Willis's view let them "rightly (and therefore effectively)" argue that

sexual violence was an "erotic experience, an end in itself."[31] Nevertheless, Willis disagreed

with how cultural feminist's fed their psychological explanations into their "neo-Victorian

caricature of men's sexual nature" and how this led them to "generalize it to all patriarchal

[27] Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2020), 217.
[28] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 124.
[29] *Ibid*., 124-125.
[30] *Ibid*., 125.
[31] *Ibid*., 143.

relations."[32] Ultimately, Willis understood gender relations as structural and not just the product of 'innate attitudes,' and that this structure operated on both a material and psychological level. This approach saw Willis blend elements of radical and cultural feminism, but by doing so she also distanced herself from these more established lines of feminist thought that would contest her amalgamation. Nonetheless, this gave her the capacity to critique these paradigms of thought and find how they contributed to a climate of obfuscation.

For Willis, the nuclear family was a core site of the production and maintenance of guilt as it facilitated sexual repression. In this argument, feminism, as a political project, would only succeed when sexual liberation for both women and men was achieved. Contained within this argument was Willis's idiosyncratic psychoanalytic approach towards feminism and her view that cultural feminists were inauthentic radicals as they enforced a sense of guilt. Her most direct engagement with this came in an essay entitled 'Towards a Feminist Sexual Revolution' that was originally published in *Social Text* in 1982 but was updated for *No More Nice Girls*. The updated essay began by Willis outlining that she was a pro-sex feminist "who saw sexual liberalism as deeply flawed by sexism but nonetheless a source of crucial gains for women" and that this approach caused friction with "feminists who dismissed the sexual revolution as monolithically sexist and shared many of the attitudes of conservative moralists."[33] This was not Willis's first foray into the Sex Wars, and she herself claimed to have coined the term 'pro-sex feminism' in 1981.[34] Regarding who was winning the war,

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[32] *Ibid.*, 143.
[33] *Ibid.*, 20.
[34] 'Lust Horizons' https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/10/18/lust-horizons/ (accessed: 21.8.20). For an early intervention by Willis into the Sex/Porn Wars see: Willis, *Beginning to the See the Light*, 219-227.

Willis found that the pro-sex side had "succeeded in countering the prevailing public assumption that the anti-pornography movement's sexual conservatism was *the* feminist position" and that the pro-sex side had largely won the "hearts and minds of feminist academics, journalists, and other intellectuals."[35] However, in a 1994 essay Willis argued that the cultural feminist position had become conflated with the feminist position.[36] Moreover, in 'Towards a Feminist Sexual Revolution' Willis further problematised the notion of a left-wing cultural shift as she claimed that "on the level of the unexamined, semi-conscious attitudes that permeate popular culture and politics", in other words, on the level of common sense, the affective, and therefore within the establishment narrative "the equation of sexual liberalism with sexism and violence against women is, if anything more widespread than it was ten years ago" and that this right-wing cultural shift was accelerated by the "intensity of the anti-sexual backlash of the Reagan-Bush years."[37] Essentially, the idea of sexual liberation itself had not managed to gain significant traction.

Willis argued that sexual liberation would only be possible when sexual satisfaction was considered as a "biological need" rather than being entirely socially constructed, and whilst this moved against the "deep (and well-founded) distrust of any kind of biologically-based theory" within women's and gay liberation movements, Willis deployed this framing not to overcome social constructivist arguments but instead to attempt "to resolve the seeming contradiction between a sexual liberationist politics and a feminist critique of male sexual

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[35] *Willis*, *No More Nice Girls*, 20.
[36] Willis, *Don't Think Smile!*, 128.
[37] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 20.

aggression."[38]

In reviewing *No More Nice Girls*, Leora Tanenbaum summarised Willis's approach as arguing that "sexual needs are biologically rooted but not biologically determined."[39] Willis dubbed the cultural feminist critique, which removed this sense of biological need, as "neo-Victorian" as it viewed heterosexual relations as "more or less synonymous with rape, on the grounds that male sexuality is by definition predatory and sadistic" and that the implications of this logic was that "women who profess to enjoy sex with men, especially penile-vaginal intercourse itself, are liars or masochists; in either case victims of, or collaborators of oppression."[40] Willis's disagreement demonstrated her hostility towards guilt, and consequently challenged the notion of cultural feminists wielding a radical edge. Willis stressed that the cultural feminist emphasis "on controlling male sexuality" hindered feminism as it provided "powerful reinforcement for conservative efforts to manipulate women's fear of untrammelled male sexuality, intimidating women into stifling their own impulses toward freedom so as to cling to what little protection the traditional roles still offer."[41] Moreover, Willis noted that a neo-Victorian approach "echoes conventional moral judgements" and resultingly "their guilt-mongering has been quite effective" as they undermined feminism as "many feminists who are aware that their sexual feelings contradict the neo-Victorian idea have lapsed into confused apologetic silence."[42] Cultural

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[38] *Ibid.*, 21.
[39] 'No More Nice Girls Reviews, 1993', MC 646, 7.29.
[40] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 28.
[41] *Ibid.*, 30.
[42] *Ibid.*, 30.

feminists were deemed inauthentically radical as they affirmed a conservative morality by advancing guilt and by removing straight women's desire for sexual pleasure.

From this alignment between cultural feminists and conservatives the question then became "how can women support sexual freedom for both sexes without legitimizing the most oppressive aspects of male sexual behaviour?"[43] Part of answering this involved Willis arguing against the assumption that society was already sexually liberated due to the proliferation and prominence of sex within the culture, as demonstrated by the rise of casual sex, access to contraception and legal abortion, the relaxation around sexual taboo and 'deviancy,' and the frequency of sex and sexual images in mass media. Crucially, these shifts fell short as they approached sexual liberation in terms of "the quantity and variety of sexual activity, rather than the quality of sexual experience."[44] By focusing on quality Willis challenged the notion that actual left-wing values had managed to be installed, especially as she argued that the focus on sex was indicative of sexual repression rather than sexual freedom, pithily summarising this point by noting: "People who are not hungry are not obsessed with food."[45]

High quality sexual liberation would be achieved when "sexual desire, tenderness, and empathy" were approached as "aspects of a unified erotic impulse" and that "the splitting of this impulse and the attendant perversion of sexual desire into exploitative, solipsistic lust are an artificial social product."[46] The artificiality, which ultimately produced guilt and

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[43] *Ibid.*, 31.
[44] *Ibid.*, 31.
[45] *Ibid.*, 32.
[46] *Ibid.*, 34.

obfuscation, arose, for Willis, through Wilhelm Reich's comprehension of libido theory, as

he posited that "parental condemnation of infantile genital desires and sensations forces

the child to split (bad) sex from (good) love. The child reacts to this thwarting of its sexual

expression with frustration, rage, and a desire for revenge."[47] The impact of this thwarting

was that "people's guilt at their own overt or repressed sadism, along with their observation

of other people's anti-social behaviour, prompts the conviction that sex is inherently

destructive" and that this "is in turn crucial to the maintenance of an authoritarian,

hierarchical social order."[48] Therefore, Willis perceived the production of guilt through

sexual repression as partially responsible for preventing a more equitable and free society,

as it created a cycle of guilt where sex could be present but it was not to be engaged with in

a positive manner. Willis grasped that this analysis was based on a normative outline of a

traditional family and that this outline was decreasingly reflected in reality, but maintained

it still reflected the underlying logics of a male supremacist society.[49] Consequently, Willis's

capacious political imagination called for "a fundamental transformation in people's sexual

psychology" and that this had to be done by committing to "sexual liberation as a feminist

goal" — distancing Willis from cultural feminists as she claimed "it is a losing proposition for

feminists to compete with the right in trying to soothe women's fears of sexual anarchy"

and whilst those fears were legitimate, "a law-and order approach to sex" only curtails

freedom and real victory would only be found "if women (and men) want freedom (and

love) more than they fear its consequences."[50] Willis's utopian approach demonstrated her

faith in freedom and her hostility towards guilt, and by doing so she contrasted an

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[47] *Ibid.*, 34.
[48] *Ibid.*, 34.
[49] *Ibid.*, 36.
[50] *Ibid.*, 48

establishment which contained neo-Victorian sensibilities, either expressed by the right or

cultural feminists, and who resultingly only offered an inauthentic form of dissent.

Transcendence, Drugs, and the Legacy of the 1960s

Incorporated within Willis's hostility towards guilt was her understanding of drug use, her

view on the legacy of the 1960s, and the affective foundations of radical politics that she

positioned as contrasting that of the neoliberal order. Willis approached drugs in two

interrelated ways. The first was through their potential to facilitate "transcendence," as

drugs, particularly psychedelics, were a means to understand the value of pleasure. The

second was that drugs and the politics around them were a synecdoche to understand the

backlash towards the 1960s and the conservativism of the 1980s and the 1990s. In 1993, in

a speech given to the Wisconsin Historical Society, Willis defined herself as a cultural radical,

suggesting that this meant holding a commitment to challenging hierarchical orders, and

consequently "cultural radicalism is a politics about everyday life, about challenging a

pervasive pattern of unfreedom."[51] Part of challenging 'unfreedom' meant that "a

commitment to freedom is also intrinsically intertwined with a commitment to pleasure,

because what people want the freedom to do is, at bottom, to enjoy their lives, to really live

them and not just get through them, to meet their basic needs for self-expression."[52] In

contrast, an authoritarian culture would stipulate that "you don't live life to enjoy it but for

some higher purpose which is needless to say defined by social and moral authorities, not

by you" and that cultural radicals consequently "challenge the deep anti-pleasure bias of the

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[51] '"The Cultural Legacy of the '60s," Wisconsin State Historical Society, April 29, 1993', MC 646, folder 10.7.
[52] *Ibid*.

culture."[53] Therefore, to challenge the hostility towards pleasure and the resultant guilt was part of challenging the establishment narrative, and that sacrificing desire was not inherently a component of radical politics.

This challenge to 'unfreedom' was outlined by Willis when she grappled with the role of drugs and consumption in radical politics, arguing that collective pleasure was stymied and authentic dissent undermined, and that resistance towards drugs advanced a climate and mood of obfuscation. Willis had used psychedelics, but they were more than just a hallucinogen for her, and their value was reflected in her use of the term 'transcendence.' Willis never defined transcendence, but it was a term that she frequently used, her daughter Nona Willis Aronowitz drew attention to her Mother's use of it in her introduction to *The Essential Ellen Willis* collection, where she noted that it was "a code word for a portal into political and emotional freedom, a description for an idea, large or small, that helps us plot through the inertia and our endless rationalizing about the forces that govern us and the decisions we make about our lives."[54] Transcendence meant to overcome or to move beyond, particularly on an individual psychic level, the myopia induced by wider social structures. In a piece for the *Village Voice* in 1989 entitled, 'Coming Down Again: Excess in the Age of Abstinence' Willis positioned transcendence in relation to drugs. The essay discussed the hangover of the counterculture into the 1980s and the shift in attitudes towards pleasure. In discussing the experiences of proponents of the 1960s counterculture

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[53] *Ibid*.
[54] Nona Willis Aronowitz, 'Introduction: Transcendence', *The Essential Ellen Willis* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) edited by Nona Willis Aronowitz, xii.

who subsequently joined Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1980s, Willis stated:

> taking drugs enriched their vision, was in fact a powerful catalyst for the very
> experience of transcendence, and yearning for it, that now defines their
> abstinence. It's crucial not to forget that the limits we challenged—of
> mechanistic rationalism, patriarchal authority, high culture, a morality deeply
> suspicious of pleasure, a 'realism' defined as resignation — were prisons. Still
> are.[55]

This sense of using drugs to transcend parochial parameters was elaborated upon when Willis stated: "The ability to get high (I don't mean only on drugs) flourished in the atmosphere of abandon that defined the '60s — that pervasive cultural invitation to leap boundaries, challenge limits, try anything, want everything, overload the senses, let go."[56]

This is not to say that Willis revelled in excess (she stressed that she never "embraced excess as a fundamental principle of being") but rather that the 1960s offered a climate of permission to expand paradigms of thought. This climate of transcendence through pleasure had been undermined by the 1980s, as even though "transcendence through discipline," such as through meditation or voluntary poverty "was always the antithesis in the '60s dialectic," in the 1980s pleasure had been removed and transcendence expressed through discipline was "the only game in town" and such expressions were "emblems of scarcity."[57] Moreover, in Willis's 1986 essay 'Drug War: From Vision to Vice' she positioned herself against a right-wing culture that denied pleasure by arguing: "the ideological right's triumph

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[55] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 259.
[56] *Ibid.*, 258.
[57] *Ibid.*, 258.

over the 60s liberationism has been nothing short of a rout" with it being "an unquestioned

axiom of public discourse that drugs … are simply, monolithically evil." To add evidence to

this point, she offered that "dope is the enemy that unites Ronald Reagan and Jesse Jackson,

that gets blamed for everything from the plight of the black community to teenage

alienation to America's problems competing in the world market."[58] Transcendence enabled

by the pleasure of consumption was a vehicle for Willis's utopianism, and drugs could serve

as the 'catalyst' to facilitate the paradigm of resistance that emerged through

transcendence, even though getting high did not necessarily involve drugs. This stance

reflected Willis's content side approach to culture, as she did not fully engage with the

repercussions of consumption, addiction, or the production of drugs.

However, by the 1980s the pursuit of transcendence through pleasure had been annihilated,

and resultingly, by Willis's standard of cultural radicalism, unfreedom and obfuscation

flourished as pleasure was discouraged. Obviously, the advocacy for pleasure or discipline

did not neatly align between left and right. However, Willis challenged the assumption that

the left should be driven by resisting commodification and consumption, and instead that

there needed to be an affective undercurrent of positivity, expressed via pleasure, rather

than grim flagellation – elsewhere she would claim that "anticonsumerism is the puritanism

of the left".[59] In summation, Willis's focus on pleasure and transcendence challenged

obfuscation and was part of a wider interaction with the politics of consumption that

stemmed from the 1960s counterculture. Moreover, by the 1980s the potential for

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[58] *Ibid*., 245.
[59] Willis, *Don't Think* Smile!, 33.

transcendence had evaporated and panic and negativity had advanced as a climate of collective pleasure had diminished, which was indicative of a rightward cultural movement and the declining possibility of authentic dissent.

Intra-Left Debates – The Majoritarian Position and Identity Politics

Willis's targeting of guilt combined with her sense of political strategy as she waded into the intra-left debates of the 1980s and 1990s. Willis found 'the majoritarians,' who were left-wing cultural conservatives, and the proponents of identity politics, unsatisfying. This dissatisfaction arose from her cultural radicalism and her finding that both 'the majoritarians' and identity politics contained logics and implications that would hinder radical politics. It was implicit within Willis's thinking that winning the intellectual debate was necessary for the advancement of a radical movement, as the victorious epistemology and focus would contribute towards the foundations of the movement and guide its direction. Put more poetically, Richard Beck claimed that in reading Willis he sensed that "she was trying to make maps for the feminists who would come after her, even though she didn't know who they would be, or when, if ever, they would arrive."[60] Guilt factored more into Willis's critique of identity politics, but to be able to engage sufficiently with that her analysis of the majoritarian position requires outlining, as that demonstrated her idiosyncratic commitment towards pleasure and liberty and the weight she gave to culture

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[60] 'Willis and Happiness', accessed: 21.8.20, https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/willis-and-happiness/.

in driving politics.

Willis's challenge to the 'majoritarian position' exemplified her commitment to culture as a legitimate political arena. According to Willis, the position was insufficient as it undervalued the influence of culture over a person and as an area where politics advanced or regressed — instead its proponents valued class and economics and either dismissed culture or only appreciated a certain form of it. Willis's most salient critique of the position was in the preface to *Don't think Smile!* entitled the 'The Majoritarian Fallacy' which began by Willis claiming that since Reagan's election a variety of liberals and leftists had called "for unity around a campaign for economic justice" as "the country has moved steadily rightward."[61] Willis's analysis of this position continued across *Smile!* and she attributed it to the likes of Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Richard Rorty, Todd Gitlin, Michael Tomasky, and Michael Kazin.[62] The preface of *Smile!* was drawn from a 1998 article for *The Nation* entitled 'We Need a Radical Left' where Willis, specifically in relation to electoral politics, characterised majoritarians as believing "in economic fairness, and the way to achieve it is through appealing to the majority's economic interests while (it is implied) avoiding other issues that are potentially divisive."[63]

Willis's most substantial disagreement with the majoritarians' economic centrism grew from her understanding of economics and culture as unified, and that the latter was not just a divisive distraction, and the majoritarian view of politics "as a zero-sum game — we can do

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[61] Willis, *Don't Think Smile!*, ix.
[62] *Ibid.*, 10.
[63] 'Published articles, The Nation, 1981-2004', MC 646, folder 7.18.

class or culture, but not both — are simply wrong."[64] The wrongness arose not just because "people's working lives, their sexual and domestic lives, their moral values, are intertwined" but also as "class is itself a cultural as well as economic issue" as the notion that the wider public could easily unify exclusively, in regard to an electoral coalition, through their economic interests "makes sense only on the same bonehead premise advanced by the right's 'rational choice' theorists: that human beings are economic calculating machines."[65] The assumption underlying the majoritarian position, and which enabled their myopic paradigm of thought, was that they had "uncritically equated the cultural values of workers and 'ordinary people' with their historically dominant voices: white, straight, male, and morally conservative."[66] Therefore, Willis indicated that the majoritarian position presented a diluted and inauthentic radicalism.

Willis demonstrated this myopia in a 1989 article for the *Village Voice* where she argued that Chomsky, Vidal, Cockburn, and Christopher Hitchens subscribed to an "outmoded economic determinist paradigm" and that "it is precisely Cockburn-Chomsky-Hitchens' refusal to take into account how deeply politics, economics, and culture are intertwined that distorts their stand on the Middle East" as they failed to fully appreciate the role of antisemitism in global history.[67] Willis interpreted majoritarians as bolstering their neglect of culture by first claiming "it is not our business to try to change the culture or politicize relationships that belong in the realm of 'civil society'" and secondly, that "the left must repudiate the 'politics of difference' and subordinate racial, sexual, and other particularist

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[64] *Ibid*.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] Willis, *Don't Think Smile!*, xii-xiii.
[67] 'Published articles, Village Voice, 1972-1996', MC 646, folder 7.8.

identities to our common identity as Americans, which is founded on the ideal of liberal

democratic government."[68] Ultimately, Willis's disagreement with the economic determinist

paradigm demonstrated her own efforts to highlight the role of culture as political arena.

Resultingly, although only expressed indirectly, the interaction between pleasure and guilt

that modulated cultural expression became a legitimate site of political analysis and action.

If the shortcomings of the majoritarian position demonstrated that Willis valued culture

highly, her critique of identity politics demonstrated her focus on liberty and the role that

cultural politics played in facilitating or limiting it through moral pressure and guilt. Willis's

critique of identity politics was driven by what she deemed to be its effects, logic, and

implications, and not what the motivations of its proponents were. As a radical feminist

Willis was not averse to identity politics, and in a 1991 issue of *Tikkun* she outlined her

understanding of how it operated as a value system, claiming:

> As I see it, the basic premise of identity politics is that membership in an
>
> oppressed group (in my case, as a woman or a Jew) determines my legitimacy
>
> as a political person, the validity of my political ideas, and indeed, my moral
>
> right to express them. Conversely, it assumes that as a member of a dominant
>
> group or majority (white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.), I am
>
> morally bound to take political direction from the oppressed, since my
>
> experience, permeated as it is with privilege, can only steer me wrong.[69]

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[68] Willis, *Don't Think Smile!*, 10.

[69] 'Published articles, Tikkun, 1991-1994', MC 646, folder 7.23.

Ultimately, by the early 1990s, Willis found that "the left has taken identity politics as far as

it can go (and not to mention some places we would have done better to avoid)" and that it

was necessary to "recreate a politics that emphasizes our common humanity, to base our

social theory and practice on principles that apply to us all."[70]

Willis's endorsement of universalism formed two points in her critique: first, identity politics

led to a "balkanization of the movement into even smaller and more particularist groups as

the ranks of the righteous thin steadily"; second, that it also "balkanizes the self" due to the

range of "dominant and subordinate" identities within an individual, leaving them "morally

ambiguous" and from this it became difficult "for any of us to see ourselves as principled

radicals."[71] This was exacerbated for Willis as she understood the politics between identities

as structural, and that oppression was not just the product of individual action, however,

this approach was prone to manifesting itself as a Manichean moral conflict and this pushed

an identity driven approach towards inertia and contradiction. For example, in relation to

sexism, Willis argued:

> struggle undertaken in such a close-to-the-bone context inevitably became a
>
> drama of anger and disappointment, accusation and guilt - in effect, of good
>
> and evil. According to my political analysis, there was no way for individual
>
> men simply to give up their supremacy - yet that was my implicit moral
>
> demand. I was righteous; and the men in my life were in an impossible moral
>
> position, where the only thing they could conceivably do to get off the hook

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[70] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, xx-xxi.
[71] 'Published articles, Tikkun, 1991-1994', MC 646, folder 7.23.

was simply give up agency and follow my lead (yet wouldn't this too be

fundamentally oppressive, abdicating responsibility and putting it all on

me?).[72]

There was a difficulty translating the structural theory of identity politics into individual

praxis on a micro level. This difficulty led to contradiction because it enabled the oppressor

to abdicate responsibility, and thus removed any real sense of agency from the oppressor if

they were inclined to reform, which moved against the principles of Willis's libertarian

impulse and psychoanalytic framing.

This was an approach that Leora Tanenbaum felt ultimately "gives men too much credit" but

which was nonetheless consistent with Willis's commitment to individual freedom.[73]

Furthermore, for Willis, this structural conception of reality could only be actualised through

a morality battle where guilt was a central weapon, an affect that Willis rallied against as

she deemed it antithetical to radical politics, a state that arose through the oppressed

unequivocally holding political and moral authority. The implications of this logic were that

it created a temptation towards a "censorious posture" which surfaced as

Identity politics is also anti-intellectual; it substitutes moral pressure for

argument. If the oppressor has no right to an opinion, there is no need to

contest the substance of what he says; similarly, members of the oppressed

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[72] *Ibid*.

[73] 'No More Nice Girls Reviews, 1993', MC 646, 7.29.

group who dissent from the prevailing movement opinion can be dismissed as shills for the oppressor.[74]

The logic of moral pressure was expounded upon by the organiser Bernice Fisher, and whilst she was less hostile towards guilt she clarified that the moral pressure would be better conceptualised as shame, as it arose from "a failure to live up to an ideal" — an ideal that arose from wanting change and which could be wielded by proponents of identity politics to create pressure — but Fisher conceptualised shame as a force for potential individual and collective political development, as it encouraged the questioning of values and assumptions.[75] However, Willis rejected this notion of development, and argued identity politics was more likely to lead to inertia.

The issue with moral pressure was demonstrated in Willis's 1982 review of works by Angela Davis, Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, and bell hooks for the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* entitled 'Sisters Under the Skin Confronting Race and Sex', an essay that analysed the divisions between Black and white feminism and how gender and race interact. In its conclusion, Willis argued that focusing on which was worse, more basic, or more pressing in regard to racism or sexism led to dead-ends, as despite it being clear that "some oppressed people are worse off than others…this kind of ranking does not lead to a politics of genuine liberation" and it instead led to "a politics of *ressentiment*, competition, and guilt."[76] Therefore, with identity politics being epistemologically aligned with neoliberalism through

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[74] 'Published articles, Tikkun, 1991-1994', MC 646, folder 7.23.
[75] Berenice Fisher, 'Guilt and Shame in the Women's Movement: The Radical Ideal of Action and Its Meaning for Feminist Intellectuals', *Feminist Studies* 10, no. 2 (1984), 191-193.
[76] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 115.

its logic of competition and ranking, it resultingly played "into the divide and conquer tactics of white men."[77] Essentially, Willis interpreted this logic of competition, with guilt being a tool within it, as allowing people to wield their own suffering over others, as identity politics created a 'moral pressure' which connected with its censorious posturing, and resultingly it undermined its radical potential, and became an inauthentic form of dissent. Willis observed this mechanism by claiming:

> Insistence on a hierarchy of oppression never radicalizes people because the impulse behind it is moralistic. Its object is to get the "lesser victims" to stop being selfish, to agree that their own pain (however deeply they may feel it) is less serious and less deserving of attention (including their own) than someone else's. Its appeal is that it allows people at the bottom of social hierarchies to turn the tables and rule over a moral hierarchy of suffering and powerlessness.[78]

Willis argued that moral righteousness, no matter its validity, does not lead to institutional power, justice, or freedom and the pretence that it did facilitated obfuscation. The implications of this epistemology factored into Willis's views on debating politics, where she argued that "moral coercion is as undemocratic as any other kind" and that "democratic radicalism can only succeed through persuasion" and that coercion created a pressure for people "to feel that their identities are contingent on conformity."[79] Therefore, the coercion, guilt, and pressure of identity politics led to inertia as it caused more division than

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[77] *Ibid*., 116.
[78] *Ibid*., 116.
[79] 'Published articles, Tikkun, 1991-1994', MC 646, folder 7.23.

unity, and undervalued and was even hostile towards liberty.

The alternative Willis offered was that the aim should be to form "a radical vision based on recognizing a common *principle* in liberation movements – a commitment to freedom and against authoritarian hierarchies" and to find "where the universally human and the culturally particular converge." To do so required "accepting contradictions, and understanding that although the personal is political, not all politics is personal."[80] This thinking reflected Willis's activist history. For example, in 1984, in an essay where she partly grappled with the withdrawal of the radical feminist movement, she stated that she "rejected the idea of the primacy of women's oppression" as she understood that "the fate of feminism at any given time and place was bound up with the fate of the larger left".[81] The fracturing of radical feminism shaped Willis's critique of identity politics: she felt that it operated through a logic of guilt and competition that undermined its own political aspirations. Ultimately, both the majoritarian position and identity politics were insufficiently radical, and consequently neither could represent a left-wing shift, as identity politics failed to resonate across divisions, and the majoritarian position failed to account for the myriad of issues people defined themselves against.

The Right's Successes and the Left's Failures

Willis's sense of the left falling short continued in her understanding of why Reagan and the right were successful, and again, guilt was present. In the epilogue to *No More Nice Girls*

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[80] *Ibid*.
[81] Willis, *No More Nice Girls*, 142.

entitled 'The Neo-Guilt Trip' Willis contrasted the narratives around consumption during the 1970s and the 1980s. Willis attributed Reagan's victory over "Jimmy 'Moral Malaise' Carter" in 1980 to the former's offering of "a not-so-subliminal platform of freedom from guilt."[82] For Willis, Carter's administration had been "a nonstop lecture to the effect that the days of wine and roses were over" and this dourness had given Reagan an unobstructed path to advance his conception of freedom.[83] Reagan's narrative was limited as "sex and drugs were still taboo" but what was permissible was "to channel our thwarted desire for some sort of joy in life into 'opportunity'" and that in practice this meant "making and spending money, vicariously identifying with people who make and spend money, and getting sadistic thrills from stomping all over the poor, blacks, women and gays."[84] Essentially the uncorking of pleasure that Reagan facilitated was not sprayed in a leftward direction and used to create a paradigm of liberty and transformation. Willis did not endorse pleasure wholesale. Instead, she focused on defending the ideal of pleasure itself and on correcting the overemphasis of guilt that was used to admonish pleasure in order to limit it. This defence of pleasure was demonstrated by Willis stating: "Yet life without pleasure – without spontaneity and playfulness, sexuality and sensuality, esthetic experience, surprise, excitement, ecstasy – is a kind of death."[85] Willis's sincere appreciation for pleasure rejected the neoliberal process of optimisation, especially when she stressed that "the nation's repressed guilt has been lurking around all along, in the form of workaholism and our fabled obsession with health and fitness."[86] In this ebb and flow between guilt and pleasure the latter was needed to dilute reactionary impulses or overcorrection, as "guilt always backfires because it only

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[82] Ibid., 271.
[83] Ibid., 271.
[84] Ibid., 271.
[85] Ibid., 272.
[86] Ibid., 271.

aggravates the pleasure shortage." Asceticism was precarious as "at some point they'll abruptly decide they've had enough, and start stuffing themselves again with whatever's handy – another version of Reaganism, or (given a deteriorating economy) worse."[87]

Reagan was enabled not just by the right's own efforts, but also the failure of the left. Willis continued this outline into the 1990s as she argued that "conservatives have claimed the ground of freedom and pleasure that the left so readily abandoned."[88] The reason for this abandonment harked back to Willis's view of the majoritarian position and its neglect of culture, as by doing so it had enabled the right to be the only side offering voters a cultural programme. Willis expressed this sentiment in a 1995 review of Michael Lind's *The Next American Nation* where she remarked:

> The right is winning, in short, because it's seen as the party of virtuous freedom. The left can counter this powerful perception only by challenging the right's cultural as well as economic propaganda. Until people feel entitled to govern their personal lives they can't fight consistently for their economic and political interests. Democracy is a way of life.[89]

For Willis, the right had been able to moderate the transaction between guilt and pleasure, whilst the left had given up on offering a serious narrative around pleasure. Elsewhere, Willis argued that the left had been unable to conceptualise a narrative of pleasure as "for the most part, they too, unconsciously identified freedom with power" which Willis considered an inaccurate conflation as "they fear the destructive potential of the will to

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[87] Ibid., 272.
[88] Willis, *Don't Think Smile!*, 27.
[89] 'Published articles, The Nation, 1981-2004', MC 646, folder 7.18.

power and so conclude that individual freedom is inherently dangerous."[90] This thinking was

driven by Willis's libertarian individualism and anti-statism, as she charged the left with

wanting to use the state to "supress 'selfishness' in the interest of 'social justice'" and that

this neglected liberty and pleasure as it led the left to "openly use guilt as a political

weapon. Freedom becomes a positive value only when redefined to mean collective

empowerment for the subordinate classes and social groups."[91] Willis rejected statism and

the assumption that it secured rights as "the idea that the state *gives* us these benefits is a

mystification" due to the impetus for social improvement in fact coming from below, and

the state would always be a means to moderate that, as "the liberal state's priority is

stability, not equality (let alone emancipation)" and consequently attempts to control the

state by "the cultural left does not further equality so much as it reinforces law and

order."[92]

In essence, Willis offered a left libertarian interpretation of pleasure via her critique of guilt.

She viewed it as an affect that was embedded within the left during the 1980s and 1990s

and partially responsible for their inability to challenge neoliberalism, as they failed to

advance a narrative that resonated with the desire for pleasure and freedom. Within this

failure was Willis's understanding of cultural and economic unity, and that attempts to split

the two when advancing a political programme were at best insufficient and at worst

myopic and inauthentic. By orientating her critique between guilt and pleasure Willis

analysed how the former undermined the validity of the latter and reinforced conformity

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[90] Willis, *Don't Think Smile!*, 189.
[91] *Ibid*.,189.
[92] *Ibid*., 190-191.

through dismissing the role that pleasure played in freedom. Resultingly, by Willis's standards this represented a climate of obfuscation, as it supported conservative-aligned, and therefore inauthentic, forms of dissent.

Ellen Willis viewed guilt as inhibiting radical politics as it stifled the role of pleasure in liberation and was wielded by a conservative establishment and inauthentic radicals. From this, guilt contributed to obfuscating a wider political imagination, maintained the status quo, and by Willis's analysis, indicated that the counterculture of the 1980s and 1990s was inauthentic. Willis was essentially a utopian, believing that the film of obfuscation could be transcended, and that a reconceptualization of pleasure was part of this process. She acknowledged the risks within her commitment to pleasure and freedom but argued that the cost of their restriction was worse. Willis's commitment to pleasure and her hostility towards guilt arose through challenging cultural feminists who manufactured a sense of guilt around straight women's sexual desire, and which ultimately aligned them with conservative sensibilities. The guilt around drug consumption restricted pleasure and undermined the collective impetus of freedom that was partially unified through the pursuit of pleasure. Willis's dissection of intra-left debates outlined the value she ascribed to liberty and culture as a site of politics – this was achieved by critiquing how the majoritarian position neglected culture and separated it from economics, and how identity politics inhibited cultural freedom through advancing guilt. Lastly, Willis viewed the right as more successful during the 1980s and 1990s than the left, as the left had failed to advance a narrative that invoked people's desire for freedom whilst the right had. The interaction between guilt and pleasure enabled Willis to highlight the myopia of acceptable paradigms

of thought, and, as a result, how weak radical cultural politics was during the 1980s and 1990s.

Thomas Frank and *The Baffler*

As recent graduates from the University of Virginia in 1988, Thomas Frank and Keith White published the first issue of *The Baffler.* Frank was editor in chief and would be a frequent contributor to what they initially pitched as an independent "punk literary magazine."[93] The second issue was published after a two-year hiatus and the scope was widened to encapsulate general cultural and social critique, but crucially the punk sensibility remained, as Frank and his writers rained invective down on the establishment and its accepted dissidents. Frank and White's initial target in 1988 was to ridicule the "baffling jargon of academics and the commercial avant-garde, to explode their paralyzing agonies of abstraction and interpretation."[94] The introduction to the first issue concluded with the rousing statement that:

> We denounce the self-declared critical junta that dominates literature from its
>
> platform of 'creative writing' workshops and affirm true creativity that
>
> resonates with human experience. In place of the shallow trendiness, affected
>
> opaqueness, and brazen commercial aspirations of established literary circles
>
> we offer youth, energy, and vitality. We present *The Baffler,* the journal that
>
> blunts the 'cutting edge' and sends the 'vanguard' scurrying in disarray.[95]

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[93] 'History', accessed: 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/about/history.
[94] *Ibid*.
[95] 'Introduction no.1', accessed: 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/intros-and-manifestos/introduction-5.

From the outset Frank positioned himself as beyond the mainstream counterculture and able to skewer what he considered as inauthentic dissent. Matthew Price in *Lingua Franca* in 2001 argued that Frank had been deemed an "authentic culture critic who mixes academic theories with smartass prose."[96] The pronounced zeal with which *The Baffler* attacked the establishment thus reflected its commitment to authenticity and the editors' desire to see political and cultural change, even if they risked coming across as culturally elitist.

Although Frank is no longer at the helm, *The Baffler* continues into the present and has attracted contributions from the likes of Irvine Welsh, Barbra Ehrenreich, and Naomi Klein. Frank is now a public historian and received his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1994, with his dissertation forming the subject of his first book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1997). The book was a bestseller and argued that the business and advertising culture of the 1950s and 1960s carried an ethos of dissent which preceded and synergised with the counterculture.[97] Along with Frank's writing for *The Baffler*, it expressed his sense of obfuscation as he argued that there was a climate of mainstream inauthentic rebellion that arose due to the commodification of dissent. In making this argument, he challenged the notion of a leftward cultural shift in the United States in the aftermath of the 1960s. Frank attacked this inauthentic dissent in the 1990s by critiquing the narratives around the generation of 'twenty-somethings' and the ways youth culture and the notion of constant disruption

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[96] 'Frank Talk', *Lingua Franca*, January 29, 2001.
[97] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).
'Everybody's a Critic', accessed: 21.8.20, https://magazine.uchicago.edu/0402/features/index-frank.shtml.

advanced a market logic and perpetual consumption. Complimenting this was a wider

abrasiveness towards popular culture, as Frank rejected the idea of its radical potential due

to its corporate production, and his argument that cultural studies defended popular

culture, and with this the establishment, as it advanced a market logic. This critique

continued over into Frank's analysis of how the internalisation of the market sustained the

contradiction of right-wing populism.

The Commodification of Dissent

In *The Baffler* Frank frequently worked to outline his understanding of the commodification

of dissent, indicating that a leftward cultural shift had not occurred, and that this distorted

the standard for what qualified and was positioned as subversive. Essentially, Frank argued

that dissent had become a virtue for the establishment and that it was a narrative that

served corporate profits, and therefore, it was inauthentic. In this, Frank focused more on

attacking the establishment than producing a systematic guideline on how dissent could be

genuine and transformative.

In the second issue, in an essay entitled 'Twentieth Century Lite' Frank challenged the

insular nature of suburbia and its influence over the wider culture, finding it both a site and

driver of commodified dissent. This influence led to a

> stripped-down postmodern ethos that has dutifully encompassed and
>
> fetishized rebellion, as it has been told to by advertiser and DJ alike. 'Old-time
>
> values' are an eternal straw-man allowing them to congratulate themselves

for their progressiveness and rebelliousness and ensuring a bottomless

market for new goods. The simulated rebellion found among the suburbanites

of the nineties is mainly a matter of clothing and attitudes towards

consuming, and it does not prevent them from flicking to places like 'Brittany

Yesteryear' or voting Republican. Above all else this perpetual revolution of

style must be perfectly unthreatening, working itself out entirely within the

dialectic of mall boutiques and MTV. In cultural terms it means the

cutrification of the bohemian pastimes of the sixties.[98]

Essentially, the inauthentic rebellion of suburbanites was one where they positioned

themselves as challenging or winning out over retrograde conservative values but

only through a surface level commitment that was reflected in their aesthetic and

consumptive trends, as they toothlessly operated within corporate structures. For

Frank, this represented a mood of obfuscation as an inaccurate narrative around

dissent was sold.

Beyond suburbia, and in the third issue of *The Baffler,* Frank outlined how corporations and

the media had commodified dissent through enshrining the rebel. Using Norman Mailer's

conception of 'the hipster' — a "young art-appreciating free-spirit alienated from an

increasingly repressive society" — Frank argued that in the 1990s "the hipster is now a

figure to be revered" as the establishment had embraced their rebellion by making the

hipster "a central symbol of the technocratic system he is supposed to be subverting: a

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[98] 'Twentieth Century Lite', accessed: 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/twentieth-century-lite-2.
["Cutrification" is Frank's portmanteau of cute and purification.]

model consumer, a good citizen in a society which demands moral indifference and a perpetual patronage of the new in order to keep its gigantic wheels turning."[99] The benefits of selling the hipster lifestyle were that it complimented a consumer culture as it "utilized images of rebellion to encourage a mindset of endless dissatisfaction with the old and a never-ending compulsion to buy, buy, buy" and that this encouraged "the identification of individuality with product choice."[100] In this, consumption and commodified dissent aligned with the neoliberal homo economicus, where the individual engages in a constant state of competition to optimise every facet of their existence. The individual dissented against the establishment and those who carried its stylistic sensibilities by winning out over it, consumption was the individual's weapon within this as individuality came through product choices, and products could be imbued with narratives or reflected a style that supposedly ran against the establishment's.

For Frank there was no sense of transcendence through consumption as all it offered was a hollow façade of resistance. He did not think that the enshrinement of dissent was a niche aspect of the culture, instead stating: "The commodification of dissent is the great ideological innovation of our time, the central theme and image of almost all our mass culture."[101] For example, Frank twice cited Spike Lee, the African-American film director, as representing this state of commodified dissent as Lee held the reputation of a "free-floating radical, as a spokesman without portfolio for the nation's outsiders and oppressed, as a fulminator against convention and bourgeois morality. He is also a spokesman for the Nike

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[99] 'The American Nonconformist in the Age of the Commercialization of Dissent', accessed: 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-american-nonconformist-in-the-age-of-the-commercialization-of-dissent.
[100] *Ibid*.
[101] *Ibid*.

corporation, and you can regularly see this daring and revolutionary young filmmaker on prime-time TV, selling an extraordinarily expensive athletic shoe."[102]

In contrast, Willis had referred to Lee and his film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), as "a pop visual poem or series of iconic snapshots — witty, sensuous, full of irony, and implicitly self-critical — about urban black culture and the issues of self-definition now preoccupying Spike Lees's generation of (largely middle-class) black artists and intellectuals. The movie's vital center is not black-white confrontation but blacks' relations with each other — sexual, generational, politicoculutral, aesthetic."[103] Frank's standards placed a greater value on the wider context of production, whilst Willis was more appreciative of the content itself. At his most effective, Frank was able to pierce the hollow call to dissent by the likes of Burger King and their advertising slogan of "sometimes you gotta break the rules."[104] Mainstream commodified dissent derived a sense of legitimacy by mimicking the art world's "traditional reverence for a hyper-alienated avant-garde".[105] The art world itself was not above "pseudo-dissent" as Frank attacked Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine, deeming it to be "a lucrative testimony to all in the art/fashion/ad world that is unfailingly superficial and aggressively stupid, *Interview* puts forward a consistent ideal of the alienated, vaguely artistic (and always handsome) outsider as ideal consumer."[106] Frank's echoed Martha Stone's analysis of *Interview*, which, she argued, was in the years before Warhol's death in

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[102] For Frank on Spike Lee see: 'Twenty-Nothing', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/twenty-nothing, and for where the quote originated, 'The American Nonconformist in the Age of the Commercialization of Dissent', accessed:21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-american-nonconformist-in-the-age-of-the-commercialization-of-dissent.
[103] 'Published articles, Salmagundi, 1991-1994', MC 646, folder 7.22.
[104] 'The American Nonconformist in the Age of the Commercialization of Dissent', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-american-nonconformist-in-the-age-of-the-commercialization-of-dissent.
[105] *Ibid*.
[106] *Ibid*.

1988, as driven "by Warhol's desire to hang out with the rich and famous rather than the underground crowd."[107] Dissent was subsumed under corporate auspices for Frank, and his rejection of the avant-garde highlighted the weight he gave to production when interpreting authenticity.

With the artworld providing an outline, youth was the area through which commodification was focused and which demonstrated, to Frank, the disconnection between the establishment and his marginal and authentic radical status. In issue four of *The Baffler*, Frank became a self-appointed spokesperson for his generation as he engaged in a bout of generational warfare and challenged the attempts to find a narrative that defined 'twenty-somethings.' Addressing the baby-boomers who came of age during the 1960s, Frank argued that youth had been commodified and that it sold "even better to oldsters than to actual young folks" but to be able to do that "you must first invent an easy generational stereotype in order to properly transform the allure of youth and, ultimately, the memories of a decade, into concrete saleable products. According to you, we are what we consume."[108] By Frank's declaration, a stereotype — a narrative — had to be created to enable a material shift and the idea of youth itself allured an older generation to depart with their money. The rest of the essay was spent shouting rhetorical barbs at the baby boomer generation, it is a particularly salient example of *The Baffler's* invective and Frank's distance from the mainstream. Frank defined the 'twenty-somethings' by arguing:

> We are TWENTY-NOTHING, forever lost to your suburban platitudes; lost to

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[107] 'Warhol's Interview: A Brief History', *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 23, no.3 May/June 2016.
[108] 'Twenty-Nothing' https://thebaffler.com/salvos/twenty-nothing (accessed 21.8.20).

the simple lather of your TV; dead to your non-politics … Our youth has been a

classroom of resistance in which we have learned how to free ourselves from

the grasp of your understanding, your manipulation.[109]

Aside from homogenising his own generation and then attempting to rally it, Frank's

polemic demonstrated his hostility towards an establishment and a disconnection between

their values and the experiences of his generation, indicating a climate of obfuscation as the

culture sold to people was a hollow façade designed to generate profit rather than actual

dissent.

Frank then shifted towards outlining how his generation had produced authentic dissent

and did so by contrasting it against corporate production of alternative music in an essay

entitled 'Alternative to What?' in issue five. The essay argued alternative music aligned with

corporate interests, as it served as a product that enabled a new cycle in the establishment-

rebel dichotomy. Elaborating, Frank stated: "Forget the music; what we are seeing is just

another overhaul of the rebel ideology that has fuelled business culture ever since the

1960s, a new entrant in the long, silly parade of "countercultural" entrepreneurship."[110] The

band Pearl Jam were seen as exemplifying this corporate subversion, and with dissent being

drawn into the establishment, the result, and the accompanying sense of obfuscation, was a

sustained contradiction as "with its endless ranks of beautifully coiffed, fist-waving rebel

boys to act as barker, business is amassing great sums by charging admission to the ritual

simulation of its own lynching."[111] Beyond the simulation, Frank maintained that his

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[109] *Ibid*.
[110] 'Alternative to What?', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/alternative-to-what.
[111] *Ibid*.

generation had managed to produce authentic dissent, as "between the multitude of small presses and independent record labels that were founded, produced, and distributed by young people over the last decade, we have been a remarkably articulate, expressive group."[112]

Frank was less explicit about what constituted authentic dissent, but he did imply that independent production was central. He gestured towards independent production when refuting how the media and academia understood popular culture, as he claimed: "Under no condition is 'popular culture' something that we make ourselves, in the garage with electric guitars and second-hand amplifiers, on the office photocopier when nobody's looking. It is, strictly and exclusively, the stuff produced for us in a thousand corporate boardrooms and demographic studies."[113] Regarding examples of this independent production, Frank cited the noise artists Borbetomagus and Merzbow. Both are sonically abrasive and in 1995 *The New York Times* referred to Merzbow as a "one-man electronic noise terrorist."[114] For Frank, the value of Borbetomagus and Merzbow was their distance from corporate production and that this was partially reflected in their aesthetic and sonic direction, rather than their aesthetic and sonic stances being inherently valuable. This focus on authenticity arising through production and the actual content itself being secondary was more useful for divining inauthentic dissent than finding authentic dissent, but Frank's

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[112] *Ibid*.
[113] *Ibid*.
[114] "Sounds Around Town', *The New York Times*, September 8, 1995.

approach maintained there had not been a leftward cultural shift.

However, Frank did slip into the content side. In another of his addresses to the establishment, he declared: "the bourgeoisie now thrives on being shocked. Your avant-garde posturing now serves to reinforce the planned obsolescence so central to the system you are supposed to be subverting".[115] However, this declaration reflected a contradiction within Frank's thinking and the flaws of placing so much weight on the production side. For Frank, dissent and rebellion, and their resulting sense of shock, were core axioms of the establishment ethos and were desirable cultural traits. However, *The Baffler* itself, through its use of invective, and noise music as well, which Frank considered a legitimate form of dissent, were shocking, and therefore aligned with bourgeois sentiments and would be considered inauthentic.

Frank tried to argue that authenticity arose from production and that what was treated as rebellious was in fact inauthentic and conformed with the establishment due to its production. However, this ultimately led him to a position of removing the possibility of expressing dissent, as even independent forms of dissent would buttress the values of the establishment if they thrived on being shocked. Dissent and shock had become incorporated into the establishment to such an extent that Frank declared that faux rebels "flail against the phantom enemies of puritanism, self-restraint, and nonexistent censorship" which would suggest that culture had overcome conservative values and all that remained was a

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[115] 'Art as Lifestyle (monoculturalism)', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/art-as-lifestyle-monoculturalism.

ruthless capitalism hiding behind a veneer of left-wing values, implying that, to an extent,

Frank echoed the majoritarian line.[116]

In summation, dissent in its commodified form served corporate interests as it was a means

to move the dial between establishment and radical, and by doing so it created an impetus

to buy new products, as dissent itself was a valued ideal. In this sense, Frank tapped into

neoliberal ethos as he sensed the logic of competition as the dissident consumer competed

to overcome 'the establishment.' His analysis placed high value on the production side of

cultural critique, as he extolled the values of independent culture. At that point dissent was

supposedly possible, but Frank not only discounted that people engage with both

production and content but contradicted himself, as if dissent itself was a value prized by

the establishment even independent dissident culture would align with the establishment.

This unintelligibility reflected Frank's attempt to identify what he deemed as a significant

problem, not necessarily solve it. Moreover, to a certain extent, Frank's incoherence

reflected the difficultly of dissent under neoliberalism, as he recognised how its competitive

logic impacted how individuals related to culture.

The Market Logic of Cultural Studies

Frank's analysis of the intellectual climate of commodified dissent did not answer the

question of what constituted authentic dissent, but it did develop his sense of obfuscation

as he outlined and resisted the effects of a market logic by committing to a set of values

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[116] *Ibid*.

through his cultural elitism. The central point that caused friction between Frank and what he interpreted as the dominant strain of critique, represented by the field of cultural studies, was of the value of popular culture. Frank, staying true to his production-centric approach, dismissed the radical potential of corporate-produced popular culture, and argued that advocates of cultural studies legitimised popular culture, unfairly dismissed those who were critical of popular culture as elitists, and that the discipline was based upon a market logic through the power and value it ascribed to popularity. Frank's disdain for academic cultural analysis dated back to *The Baffler's* first issue, where he echoed Chomsky's criticism of critical theory by mocking the obscurantist and inflated claims of postmodern cultural analysis.[117]

Whilst Frank found cultural studies elitist through its language, he did not respond by trying to position himself as a voice of the masses. Elsewhere, Frank outlined his interpretation of the foundations of cultural studies, finding it a discipline that was built upon the observation that the content of a cultural product is where value should be derived from. For Frank, the implications of this point were that "the facts of corporate cultural production are therefore utterly irrelevant" and to focus on these facts potentially diminished the radical potential of a cultural artifact, and resultingly proponents of cultural studies looked to "devise new ways to apply the label 'elitist' to people who don't like TV."[118] Beyond this disparagement, Frank's most strident critique of cultural studies was in *Conquest of Cool* and a 1999 essay for *The Baffler* entitled 'New Consensus for Old.' The former highlighted why Frank believed

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[117] 'Semiology and the Cartoon Outdoorsman', accessed: 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/odds-and-ends/semiology-and-the-cartoon-outdoorsman.
[118] 'Dark Age', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/dark-age.

cultural studies was analytically insufficient, and the latter portrayed its political

ramifications.

In *Conquest* Frank's history of post war business trends and the 1960s counterculture

directly addressed the issue of "co-optation theory" which argued that in the 1960s business

mined a revolutionary and authentic counterculture and repackaged and diluted it for

profit, and in doing so undermined the counterculture's radical potential.[119] Instead, Frank

challenged this approach by focusing on the history of advertising and menswear, as they

were industries that "imagined the counterculture not as an enemy to be undermined or a

threat to consumer culture but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles

against the mountains of dead-weight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over

the years."[120] For Frank, business practice and the 1960s counterculture aligned, and this

continued into the 1990s — a point he outlined in *The Baffler*. This view of alignment set

Frank apart from cultural studies, as he interpreted it as a discipline that understood that

"business and hip are irreconcilable enemies, the two antithetical poles of American

culture" and that hip "is a set of liberating practices fundamentally at odds with the

dominant impulses of postwar American society."[121] Going further still, cultural studies

proponents were hostile to focusing on the production side as they interpreted it as

containing the implication, the narrative, that the public were "mere 'cultural dopes,' pawns

of a malevolent and conspiratorial culture industry."[122] By engaging with the production

side, Frank portrayed a facile popular culture, and whilst his anger and invective indicated

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[119] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of* Cool, 7.
[120] *Ibid*., 9.
[121] *Ibid*., 18
[122] *Ibid., 19.*

that his target was business itself and not an opiated public, the implications were that

popular culture was pushed from above and it did not possess radical potential.

Additionally, and Frank cited the historians Warren Susman, William Leach, and Jackson

Lears in making this point, "prosperity of consumer society depends not on a rigid control of

people's leisure-time behaviour, but exactly the opposite" and therefore the understanding

of co-optation and dissent advanced by cultural studies departed from the historical record,

as capitalism flourished more through freedom to consume rather than its constriction.[123]

However, in reviewing *Conquest* for *Dissent*, John Palatella argued that Frank's argument

regarding the dominance of coolness and hipness was ultimately too vague. This was due to

him neglecting the reception to corporatized hip as he focused on the internal workings of

business and that it was "erroneous to draw the conclusion that cool advertisements — and

by extension capitalism itself — are impervious to criticism based solely on the analysis of

their content" and corporatized hip only undermined dissent if "consumers are a bunch of

dolts who will devour whatever semiotic bone is tossed their way."[124] Palatella observed the

nihilism within Frank's analysis and how that could verge into determinism, as Frank

positioned the cultural industry and its products as hegemonic, but doing so depended on

not accounting for the public's reception to such a direction. Consequently, Frank's view of

cultural studies as an inauthentic form of dissent, as it neglected cultural production and

was resultingly unable to critique power, was mediated by an attempt to contrast himself

against cultural studies, even to the extent that he undermined his own analysis as he

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[123] *Ibid*., 19.
[124] 'Foibles of Abundance', *Dissent*, 45 no. 2 (Spring 1998), 112-113.

disregarded cultural reception. This demonstrated a climate of obfuscation within academic

cultural analysis, as neither Frank nor cultural studies could balance content, production,

and reception simultaneously to actually understand reality, and instead their focus was

influenced by a marketplace of narrative as they tried to undermine the implications of the

other's paradigm of thought — be it through charges of elitism or inauthenticity.

Frank's analysis of how cultural studies dogma misunderstood dissent became fully

developed through outlining its political implications, and ultimately demonstrated his sense

of obfuscation as cultural studies aligned with what he saw as conservative market logics.

For Frank, the role of dissent within cultural analysis operated around the notions of

populism, agency, and elitism. The proponents of cultural studies, or the "cult-studs" as

Frank dismissively referred to them, adopted a more populist approach where they treated

the public as having a degree of agency in what they consumed, how they applied it, and

ultimately what was produced, and as already noted, to suggest otherwise, was to embrace

elitism, as what resonated with the public had value.[125] For Frank and cultural studies, value

was partially derived from the level of dissent and the extent of the challenge towards the

establishment that a cultural artifact possessed.

Frank began 'New Consensus for Old' by drawing attention to the sociologist Herbert Gans,

and treated his work as antecedent to the likes of Stuart Hall, John Fiske, and Lawrence

Grossberg and that underpinning them was how "the debate over high culture and mass

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[125] 'New Consensus for Old', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/new-consensus-for-old.

culture nearly always concealed a broader clash between elitism and populism" and that

> the cult-stud community wastes no opportunity to marvel at the myriad sites
>
> of 'resistance' found in TV talk shows, rock videos, shopping malls, comic
>
> books, and the like. Cultural studies tracts describe the most innocent-looking
>
> forms of entertainment as hotly contested battlegrounds of social conflict,
>
> wrested from their producers by freedom-minded audiences.[126]

However, in adopting such an approach, cultural studies belied that its "particular species of

transgression transgresses a lot less than all their talk of 'radical politics of difference' would

imply."[127] This dissent was inauthentic as the "active-audience theorizing" contained the

same logic as "most undiluted sort of free-market orthodoxy" and this reduced cultural

studies to "a sort of apologetics for existing economic arrangements."[128] Cultural studies

contained a market logic as it understood value as arising through a lens of popularity and

for Frank this mirrored a capitalist logic of production where what sells in the market was

considered the best product. This was exemplified through cultural studies' "'cultural

optimists'" who "recognize popular intelligence" and who "believe in letting people and the

market make their decisions without interference."[129]

Additionally, Frank cited the similarity between the hostility cultural studies had towards

'elitists' and how the financial industry were hostile to regulation, and that both therefore

wanted their respective spheres to embrace a libertarian ethos, as "both arise from a form

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[126] *Ibid*.
[127] *Ibid*.
[128] *Ibid*.
[129] *Ibid*.

of populism that celebrates critical audiences but that has zero tolerance for critics themselves."[130] Crucially, in Frank's 1994 'Dark Age' essay he argued that cultural studies aligned with the establishment as it was "a pedagogy that seems tailor-made for the intellectual needs of the Culture Trust."[131] Consequently, through this interpretation of popularity and agency, cultural studies echoed defenders of a capitalist market where value and the optimal product was derived from what sold. Naturally, Frank's critique had ideational roots, and 'New Consensus for Old' was peppered with mentions of the Frankfurt School being unfairly attacked for their critique of how popular culture and the culture industry suppressed the public. Furthermore, the content centric aspect of cultural studies that Frank challenged had been traced by Jim McGuigan in 1992, a figure Frank referenced, and who referred to it as cultural populism. For McGuigan the likes of John Fiske represented a strand of thinking within cultural studies termed "new revisionism," as under Fiske's analysis the relationship between "interpretative cultural studies and the political economy of culture is obliterated," with this analysis representing "a kind of neo-Benthamite radicalism, combining utilitarian-pleasure seeking implicitly and, and in fact quite consistently, with *laissez-faire* economics".[132] In this sense McGuigan pre-empted Frank's understanding of cultural studies carrying a market logic, as McGuigan argued that the new revisionists embraced themes of "audience empowerment, pleasure, and 'popular discrimination'" and they rejected the elitism of the Frankfurt School.[133]

Frank's method of resisting this market logic, where popularity equalled value, was to

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[130] *Ibid*.
[131] 'Dark Age', accessed: 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/dark-age.
[132] Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 73.
[133] *Ibid*., 74.

essentially advocate for cultural gatekeepers, as he disagreed with hostility towards the 'checks and balances' that critics could provide. Nevertheless, in attempting to critique cultural studies, rather than outlining his own understanding of authentic dissent, Frank only defended the notion of having cultural gatekeepers and that a laissez-faire environment was not necessarily the optimal one, rather than outlining what they would stand for. This hesitancy to assume the agency of the consumer constituted the heart of Frank's elitism, but it was an elitism that arose from Frank distancing himself from his interpretation of cultural studies, as its dissent was inauthentic by it aligning with a market logic, rather than from defending the sanctity of high culture.

Right Wing Populism

From the commodification of dissent and the market logic of cultural studies representing inauthentic forms of dissent, Frank also directly engaged with the advancements of the right itself through the prominence of anti-intellectualism and the internalisation of the market — further challenging the notion of a leftward cultural shift. This approach was reflected in his 1995 essay, 'The Cultural Miracle' and his 1999 essay 'Legionnaires Disease.' The 'cultural miracle' arose through the widespread faith in the market leading to an "unprecedented unlinking of economic cause and social effect: a parting of impoverishment and action, of social reality from political consequences."[134] This unlinking was demonstrated by the "the spectacle of both parties in free-fall to the right," the continuation of Cold War military policies into the 1990s, and the raft of both white and

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[134] 'The Cultural Miracle', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-cultural-miracle.

blue-collar workers "who imagine that the correct response to their own newfound

economic precariousness is to smash what's left of the welfare state."[135]

The impact of the cultural miracle was an increasing in the intensity of obfuscation, as

people embraced the myopia of insular paradigms of thought: "Notions of 'objective social

reality' have themselves become objects of easy retro derision, as distant and cliché as the

strange impulses that once prompted our ancestors to attempt to control the world around

them."[136] This fracturing of the consensus of reality went beyond right wing populism for

Frank, as it was caused by "a different and far more powerful ideological fuel, an anti-

intellectualism that is almost metaphysically resolute in its hostility to ideas."[137] This anti-

intellectualism was therefore a hostility towards narratives that contravened a focus on the

market, as its advocates targeted "particular kinds of thought" as they were devotes to the

"omnipotent market" which was "synonymous with democracy: since it gives the People

what the People want, the market is, by definition, the incarnation of the People's will."[138]

Therefore, to challenge the market was to embrace elitism, making the market a protected

arena as the charge of elitism was used to defend the 'popular will.' The implication that

followed was that "For Gingrich and Co. the elitist enemy is not mental ability per se but

Enlightenment itself, portrayed now as the exclusive affectation of bureaucrats and

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[135] *Ibid*.
[136] *Ibid*.
[137] *Ibid*.
[138] *Ibid*.

professors, as an intolerable affront to Nature and the omnipotent market."[139]

Frank grappled with this contradictory approach to the market by framing it in terms of a merger between Jeffersonian democracy that focused on the will of the people and a Hamiltonian aristocracy that focused on an economic elite, as the cultural miracle was a time where "the accomplishment of the ugliest of Hamilton's aristocratic fantasies is legitimated with the purest of Jeffersonian principles."[140] Consequently, Frank argued that the 1990s was a time of contradiction. However, his argument illustrated how narratives, in this case those stemming from Jeffersonian principles, were interlinked with the mechanics of power and not just a distraction, as a mood of obfuscation itself was necessary to sustain the contradiction. A right-wing cultural climate thrived in the 1990s for Frank as the narrative of the market as a democratic arena had been enshrined and this contradiction facilitated and heightened obfuscation as it was protected by the implication that those who appeared to undermine the market, be it directly or indirectly, were elitist and therefore and an acceptable target of attack. Moreover, those who defended the market could then position themselves as dissidents attacking the ruling elite, but for Frank this represented a form of inauthentic dissent, as he grasped that the market would be dominated by 'Hamiltonians' as in the 1990s "the majestic will of The People is summoned constantly to endorse the entrenchment of the overclass".[141]

Whilst in 'Miracle' Frank separated his argument from notions of right-wing populism in

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[139] *Ibid*.
[140] *Ibid*.
[141] *Ibid*.

order to extenuate the influence and newness of the market, in 'Legionnaires Disease' he picked up the label of right-wing populism, and strove to answer "How did the bunch of privileged former frat boys, lawyers, and corporate officers who staffed the Nixon, Reagan, and Gingrich revolutions ever come to convince themselves, let alone an entire nation, that they spoke on behalf of the People and that they were the victims of some kind of elitist conspiracy?"[142] In this sense Frank operated in a similar manner to Gore Vidal, as both queried the relationship between society's elite and the wider public and how the elite manged to simultaneously align themselves with and distance themselves from the demos. In answering this question Frank began to separate economics and culture, leaning towards the former as the more significant driver of change but without fully relegating the latter. This was exemplified by Frank's interpretation of how the right appeared to lose in the culture wars but still wielded cultural power. This was possible as the public who backed these right-wing populist officials "were members of the universal and hard-bitten proletariat of taxpayers, they imagined, and they understood their fight with the world as an oddly jiggered sort of class war, a battle in which class was a cultural issue rather than a material one, a question of right thinking rather than of ownership, a confrontation with pretentiousness and permissiveness rather than poverty."[143]

Frank thus echoed Willis's notion of class having a cultural component but found that the trend of conceptualising class in this manner was a means of generating obfuscation and reflected a rightward shift: it detracted from the material circumstances of class, as those in

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[142] 'Legionnaire's Disease', accessed 21.8.20, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/legionnaires-disease.
[143] *Ibid.*

a superior material position could don cultural trappings and inauthentically dissent. Frank again gestured towards the majoritarian line, although cognizant of the interaction of culture and class. Frank argued that

> the series of culture warriors they helped elect turned out to care far more
> about freeing the corporations than bringing back the Fifties or abolishing art.
> As it turned out, culture war was always more about *managing* the beloved
> blue-collar class than *appealing* to it. The further back one looks in the history
> of right-wing populism, the more layers of varnish that are stripped away, the
> clearer this becomes.[144]

Culture was secondary for Frank, but he still appreciated the role it had in influencing conceptions of reality. For Frank there was a significant right-wing cultural climate during the 1990s. The market was treated as the dominant arena and this was achieved through an anti-intellectualism which embraced myopic paradigms of thought, as narratives that suggested otherwise were controlled through charges of elitism. The market itself was treated as having a democratic function – a contradictory state that was sustained through the production of obfuscation – and which had the effect of distancing reality and facilitating popular right-wing support. Despite Frank's ambivalence over the prominence of right-wing populism, right-wing culture played a role as class was conceptualised as cultural state and relationship, rather than an interdependent material one.

Thomas Frank's sense of obfuscation arose through his perception of dissent and rebellion

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[144] *Ibid*.

comfortably existing within the ethos of the establishment, thus leading to a proliferation of supposed radicals who, in fact, aligned with those in power. Ultimately, this sense of obfuscation was filtered through an attempt to reveal the myopia of the establishment's paradigm of thought, rather than attempting to construct and advance an alternative one. Frank distanced himself from the establishment and the faux dissidents through committing to a production-centric mode of cultural analysis, with the narratives a cultural artifact advanced being secondary. This led Frank to observe a commodification of dissent as the rebel was enshrined to facilitate a turn-over between hip and square that created a pressure to buy new products.

Frank's production side critique did not offer an understanding of what authentic dissent would look like beyond independent production, an omission that reflected both his underappreciation of how people engage with the production and content of cultural artifacts, and the difficulty of dissent in the 1990s. Frank challenged cultural studies for embracing a content-centric approach that was based upon people having a high degree of agency regarding what they consume. For Frank, such a line of thinking contained a market-centric logic that was maintained by charging those who rejected the agency of the consumer and advanced the production side as elitist. Frank wanted cultural gatekeepers and queried the validity of a laissez-faire approach to culture but was unclear about what these gatekeepers would stand for, although by taking such a stance he rejected the logic of the marketplace and found the dissent of cultural studies inauthentic. Finally, Frank outlined the cultural influence of the right through his notion of a 'cultural miracle,' where there was a disconnection between attitudes and reality as the market was enshrined above all, as it

was seen as a democratic arena. This contradiction was sustained through an anti-intellectualism that undermined those who appeared to contravene the market. By doing so, Frank argued that the market process generated obfuscation, and that it enabled right-wing populists to position themselves as attuned to the public and challenging elites who disregarded the democratic market, a stance that Frank considered inauthentic.

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Willis and Frank differed in their focus and approach to cultural criticism, but both still sensed a climate and mood of obfuscation through an aspect of the establishment narrative which advanced inauthentic dissent. In taking this approach they challenged the notion of a leftward cultural shift during the 1980s and 1990s. Willis's focus on liberty, and pleasure being a component within it, led her to argue that the production of guilt limited pleasure and liberty, and this made pleasure a vital component within dissent. She argued that cultural feminism aligned with conservative sexual norms, the restrictions on drugs undermined the potential for collective transcendence and with this dissent, the majoritarian position and identity politics were insufficiently radical as neither fully appreciated cultural freedom, and that the left failed to respond to the right's cultural narrative and only offered guilt rather than their own commitment to freedom.

Frank, on the other hand, pursued inauthenticity by observing how dissent had been commodified and enshrined and placed within the establishment's ethos as it enabled cultural obsolescence to facilitate further sales. This production side critique clashed with

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cultural studies as Frank deemed it a discipline which overly focused on the content side and was built upon an assumption of agency in consumption that echoed the logic of the marketplace as a democratic arena, whilst also using the charge of elitism to attack those who challenged their understanding of agency. Frank directly probed a climate of obfuscation in the 'cultural miracle' and argued that a sense of anti-intellectualism was used to defend the market and sustain the contradictory narrative of the market being democratic.

Willis and Frank both queried the accepted versions of dissent, demonstrating how it lacked a radical edge and in fact bolstered the establishment and consequently bolstered a climate and mood of obfuscation — reflecting the increased intensity of obfuscation during the 1980s and 1990s. Willis's politics contained a utopian element that affirmed the width of her political imagination as she challenged the restrictions that guilt enabled, while Frank was more overtly motivated by invective and tackling commodification. However, they were unified in finding obfuscation present within the ebbs and flows of the culture war, as well as in their shared argument that an authentic left-wing culture was not a prominent force during the 1980s and 1990s. With Willis and Frank outlining just how far-reaching the mood of obfuscation was, it becomes pertinent to examine the experience of existing under obfuscation, a point that was illustrated through the fiction of Bret Easton Ellis and Octavia Butler.

Chapter Four
Deconstructing Obfuscation and Grim Reality:
Bret Easton Ellis's Satire and Octavia Butler's Science Fiction

During the 1980s and 1990s, Bret Easton Ellis and Octavia E. Butler both critiqued a climate of obfuscation in their fiction. There were pronounced differences between them in terms of background and approach, and yet, crucially, stark points of alignment. They both contrasted the myopia that arose from obfuscation against an underlying 'grim reality', as they depicted a brutal and unforgiving world that was masked by establishment narratives that offered a sense of autonomy and comfort. Ellis produced satire that was sincerely ironic, and Butler was a science fiction writer with an appreciation for dystopia and utopia. Neither writer was driven solely by a desire to resist the establishment narrative, as whilst they offered nuanced, if also somewhat esoteric challenges to the status quo, their work also embodied and outlined precise anxieties regarding societal progress and cohesion. These efforts elucidated the impact of neoliberal obfuscation on conceptions of selfhood, and through this provided an insight into the destabilising minutiae of actual existence during the 1980s and 1990s.

Ellis was born in 1964 and Butler in 1947. Ellis was white and upper-middle class. Butler was Black and working class. Ellis found literary success early and published his first novel at 20 years old whilst still in college. Butler published her first novel at 29 after spending years working a variety of low paying jobs. Ellis quickly received critical and popular attention whilst Butler's reputation slowly developed. Butler was further to the left than Ellis, and whilst neither were committed socialists, they still challenged the impact of neoliberal

excess. Both grew up in California and wrote novels that undercut utopian perceptions of the Golden State, and continued the tradition identified by Mike Davis in his work on the state's "ecologies of fear".[1] They both depicted unsafe and unhappy worlds filled with unsparing illustrations of violence and depravity where their characters struggle against narratives that offer a false sense of security or salvation.

A central component of their writing was the view that the human experience was one of pain and that human nature was prone towards selfishness and savagery. For Ellis and Butler these states were encouraged by competition and its resultant obfuscation, as it facilitated societal fracture and collapse rather than unity and utopia. Their pessimism did not lead to nihilism or misanthropy, instead it focused their awareness of the pain and instability that obfuscation and neoliberal market logics could produce. Their approaches to this shared subject were starkly different, and yet both still used their fiction to express their sense of obfuscation around the grimness of reality. Beyond these thematic similarities, the two were unified through the underlying mechanics of satire and science fiction, although they produced different ends. These genres afforded Ellis and Butler the capacity to twist and subvert the narratives they engaged with — Ellis through his use of hyperbole and Butler through crafting visions of the future — as they were approaches to writing that encouraged recreating aspects of reality in a new manner in order to draw attention to a neglected undercurrent. The value of examining Ellis and Butler in tandem is due to the obvious differences and subtle similarities between them They differed in

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[1] See Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 2000) for further insight into negative depictions of California.

background — be it in terms of their identity, class, or the ease through which they managed to become published — and they both worked within different genres. Yet, they delicately used the common foundations of their respective genres to outline similar conclusions, as they both felt that inaccurate narratives of security and salvation were supplanting cognizance of reality's grimness. This chapter will now work to outline how they expressed this point.

In their fiction, then, Ellis and Butler managed to demonstrate just how ingrained obfuscation was. The medium enabled them to recreate the feeling and experience of neoliberal subjecthood. To get at this shared sense of obfuscation, this chapter examines Ellis's debut novel *Less Than Zero* (1985), his third novel, *American Psycho* (1991), and his fourth novel, *Glamorama* (1998), alongside Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998).[2] Ellis deconstructed the establishment narrative's conception of success and aspiration by portraying hedonism, consumer culture, and celebrity as decadent and debauched. Butler explored societal cohesion and how the desire for safety and the narratives that supposedly offered it facilitated a mood of obfuscation, as she deconstructed the role and impact of nostalgia, religion, and community.

There is a notable amount of scholarship on neoliberalism and literature, Ellis, and Butler

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[2] Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), in this chapter the 2019 Picador version is consulted, Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York, New York: Vintage, 1991), in this chapter the 2006 Picador version is consulted, Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorma* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), in this chapter the 2000 Picador version is consulted, Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York, New York: Four Wall Eight Windows, 1993), in this chapter the 2019 Headline Publishing version is consulted, Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), in this chapter the 2019 Headline Publishing version is consulted.

respectively, offering a foundation to understand their critiques. Mitchum Huehls and

Rachel Greenwald Smith draw parallels between neoliberalism's development and the

trajectory of post-Cold War literature, arguing that the former can be divided into four

phases: the economic, the political-ideological, the sociocultural, and the ontological.[3] The

first two align with the prominence of postmodern literature of the 1970s and 1980s which,

they have argued, can be read as attempting to comprehend neoliberalism's economic and

political shifts. In the 1990s and 2000s, neoliberalism expanded "more granularly into the

sociological and ontological fabric of everyday life" and this coincided with the decline of

postmodernism and the emergence of works that orientated around market logics and

which offered an uneven challenge towards them.[4]

In relation to this periodization, Ellis and Butler bridged the two halves and even pre-

empted the ontological stage, as Ellis's work across the 1980s and 1990s and Butler's

Parables series attempted to understand obfuscation and to connect it to a material grim

reality, balancing the economic and ontological impact of neoliberalism. Within this context

sits Greenwald Smith's work on affect, neoliberalism, and American literature, and Paul

Crosthwaite's work on the market logics of contemporary fiction.[5] Greenwald Smith focuses

on how value is attributed to literature, arguing that authors have developed narratives that

position emotions and the "emotional specificity of personal experience" as tools to be

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[3] Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature', *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literature Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 1-18.
[4] *Ibid*., 3.
[5] Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

acquired and managed, and ultimately optimised.[6] Crosthwaite charts the impact of

neoliberalism and financialization on the Anglo-US publishing industry itself and how

authors responded to it, finding that market logics have seeped into their writing as their

novels reflected a concern of where they would sit within the literary marketplace.[7] Both

Greenwald Smith and Crosthwaite find that authors have attempted to comprehend and

challenge the market logic of neoliberalism but have also inadvertently aligned with it. In

this regard Ellis and Butler were relatively successful at distancing themselves from

neoliberalism's market logic, as they critiqued obfuscation through interlinking it with the

marketplace of narratives, however, both faced difficulties when extending past that.

The scholarship on Ellis himself has struggled with categorising his work, prompting

disagreement regarding whether his novels act as effective forms of critique or if they in fact

buttress their targets. In 1992 Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney provided the first

substantial effort to analyse Ellis and his contemporaries, which included the likes of Jay

McInerney and Tama Janowitz, labelling them a "Blank Generation" and classifying them as

postmodern writers who wielded ironic prose that blurred the line between high and low

culture, as their intertextual approach incorporated aspects of film, pop music, and

advertising and was an exercise in "reporting from within a lived reality, not dissecting its

constituents from the academic perimeters."[8] Whilst this framing of Ellis's work as blank

fiction has largely remained, viewing his writing as predominately postmodern has been

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[6] Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 1.
[7] Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*, 2.
[8] Elizabeth Young, 'Children of the Revolution Fiction Takes to the Streets', *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*, ed. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London: Serpent's Tail, 1994), 14.

challenged, a trajectory that this chapter continues. In 1998 James Annesley approached

blank fiction through a materialist lens, arguing that it "does not just depict its own period,

it speaks in the commodified language *of* its own period."[9] This approach and focus on

commodities was designed to allow Annesley to focus on the aesthetic, linguistic, and

metaphorical impact of then contemporary capitalism. 2011 saw the release of three

volumes of Ellis scholarship, and all of them furthered Annesley's effort to position Ellis

within a wider context. Sonia Baelo-Allué's monograph and Naomi Mandel's edited

collection both took into account the wider reception towards Ellis's work, gaining an insight

into its development and the wider state of American literature.[10] Georgina Colby perhaps

offers the most cogent analysis of Ellis's work itself, framing him as an "underwriter of the

contemporary" as a means to comprehend his "duplicity" as he reproduced and cut against

the branding that had defined him and the wider culture since the 1980s — an approach

that was deftly able to dissect how Ellis's work was able to subvert or expose various trends

and dynamics within US culture and politics.[11] Aiming to build off these attempts to

contextualise Ellis and which see his work as hyperbolically representing the wider culture,

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[9] James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 7.

[10] Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing Between High and Low Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011), and *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel. (London: Continuum, 2011).

[11] Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 1-2.

this chapter approaches Ellis as an intellectual who felt obfuscation and tried to challenge it, a framing that requires a focus on his work, his own comprehension of it, and its reception.

Butler has received a notable amount of analysis, much of which has mapped her relationship to science fiction and the value of her approach towards dystopia and utopia. The *Parables* series is dystopian science fiction with a utopian element. Tom Moylan provides a salient analysis of these subgenres, arguing that there was a surge of dystopian writing in the 1980s and 1990s in response to the economic and cultural shift rightward. Moylan outlined an interplay between obfuscation and grim reality when he argued that dystopian fiction can enable authors and readers to comprehend and critique "the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live."[12] Furthermore, Moylan identifies the "utopian-dystopia" novel where a dystopian setting is created and which the characters survive and resist against it, and it is this approach that the *Parables* novels embody.[13] Butler is also included within the 'Afrofuturism' approach to science fiction, a term coined by Mark Dery in 1993 to encapsulate speculative fiction that engages with African American themes and concerns in relation to technoculture and the future. Alex Zamalin has analysed the *Parables* series in relation to Black utopian thought, ultimately arguing that Butler did offer transformative ideas but her ideas of escape were not totally detached from the ideas that perpetuated inequality.[14] Beyond the

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[12] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), xii.

[13] *Ibid*., xiii.

[14] Mark Dery, 'Black to the Future: Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose', *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994) 180, and Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 135.

methodologies of science fiction, Gerry Canavan's critical biography and analysis of Butler's

writing refers to her as a "public intellectual," although one whose output reflected a

"deeply ambiguous thinker", a standard drawn out by Claire Curtis's argument that she was

a Hobbesian revisionist, as in the *Parables* novels she depicted a "realist utopia" where fear

and the need for security is present but it is challenged and managed without advocating for

authoritarianism.[15] These conceptions of utopian and dystopian science fiction,

Afrofuturism, and Butler's relationship to them frame her as an intellectual driven by her

political imagination, and this chapter will expand on this approach by outlining how Butler's

sense of obfuscation was central to her depiction of dystopia and utopia.

By writing satirical and science fiction novels Ellis and Butler critiqued the internalised

surface details and foundational undercurrents of neoliberal existence. They outlined a grim

reality that was brutal, depraved, and unjust lying beneath a film of obfuscation. For Ellis,

the narratives that positioned wealth, celebrity, and even beauty as aspirational states

generated obfuscation. Butler was concerned with survival and cohesion, namely the

limitations of certain forms of cohesion that only obfuscated grim reality rather than trying

to make it more tolerable.

Bret Easton Ellis – Aspiration and Obfuscation

Bret Easton Ellis was born in Los Angeles, California and would craft a career critiquing

celebrity, wealth, and commodification. Ellis's fiction was characterised by its flat, affectless

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[15] Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 2-3, and Claire Curtis, 'Theorizing Fear: Octavia Butler and the Realist Utopia', *Utopia Studies*, 19, no.3 (2008), 411.

prose that created sparsely detailed characters and environments that were placed within

loose episodic 'plots' replete with brand names, drug use, graphic sex, and violence that

were designed to interweave wealth and beauty with brutality and depravity. A powerful

sense of dread, ennui, apathy, and disconnection ran throughout Ellis's fiction in the 1980s

and 1990s. *Zero* was published whilst Ellis was still at the east-coast liberal arts college,

Bennington College, and offered an insider's tear down of Hollywood and the narrative that

its youthful and rich residents were aspirational, when in fact their lifestyles instead

produced apathy and depravity. After its release Ellis would quickly become a celebrity as he

joined the ranks of the "Literary Brat Pack," an informal media invention rather than an

artistic collective or literary movement, as the press categorised, placed together, and drew

attention to a selection of newly minted writers who all chronicled urban youth.

Alongside Ellis in the Brat Pack were Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz, and their success

was deemed by R.Z. Sheppard in *Time* to be a "para-publishing phenomenon" as the authors

were "from the vantage of their handlers, basic parts of an entertainment package."[16]

Furthermore, gesturing towards the satirical and deconstructionist element within Ellis's

work, Sheppard remarked:

> Ellis was proof that a best-selling writer can be downbeat as long as he is
>
> upscale. Had his subject been the degrading activities of East Los Angeles
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> Chicanos or Newark blacks, he would have been branded an unfeeling racist

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[16] R.Z Sheppard, 'Yuppie Lit: Publicize or Perish', *Time*, October 19, 1987.

and would have forfeited the privilege of being seen by millions on the Today show.[17]

To an extent, Ellis's approach functioned as he targeted his own social group and aimed to lampoon society's winners. However, that Ellis received the degree of attention with the relative ease that he did demonstrated that there was space for his critique, even though that space constricted as Ellis faced controversy at points across his career. *American Psycho* was Ellis's most controversial novel. It satirised the yuppie lifestyle, critiquing commodification by taking its presence to an absurd degree and combining it with hyper-graphic illustrations of murder and sexual violence. Controversy arose after extracts of the novel leaked, launching a raft of discussions on censorship and cultural decency. With the release of *Glamorama* seven years later, Ellis's sense of obfuscation became most pronounced, as the novel's unstable conspiracy plot interlinked with celebrity and a fixation on image to outline a loss of reality. In more recent years Ellis has drifted away from novel writing, launching a podcast, writing film scripts, and publishing a collection of essays in which he ruminated on his own history and contemporary culture, rambling against "millennial snowflakes" and identity politics.[18] Ellis has never won any major literary awards, but he always generated attention and admirers of his work, he was the subject of a documentary, and four of his books have been adapted into films. During the 1980s and 1990s Ellis was, on a certain level, a moralist who was driven by a desire to explore his own individual emotional reaction to the spheres he found himself within, rather than wanting to advance a specific political position. Nevertheless, his critiques of success and excess lent

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[17] *Ibid*.

[18] Bret Easton Ellis, *White* (London: Picador, 2019). For cogent reviews see: Andrea Long Chu, 'Psycho Analysis', *Bookforum*, April/May, 2019, and James Wolcott, 'Mr Trendy Sicko', *London Review of Books*, 41, no. 19 (23 May, 2019).

him a left-wing edge as he consistently explored and challenged a climate and mood of obfuscation.

Less Than Zero

Ellis's debut novel, *Less Than Zero* centred around the experiences of Clay, his staggeringly passive teenage main character, who has returned to Los Angeles for Christmas break after his first term at college. The novel is structured through a series of loosely connected scenes featuring Clay drifting aimlessly through sex and drug-fuelled clubs, parties, and restaurants, populated by a range of sparsely detailed friends and acquaintances who are often the children of Hollywood's professional class. There are a series of flashbacks that add only minimal context to Clay's life and the sense of dread that Ellis creates: Clay plays the role of a witness who takes in society's depravity. Around three-quarters of the way through the novel, a plot takes shape, as Clay's friend, Julian, who had borrowed money from Clay earlier, reveals that he is in debt to a drug dealer and pimp and the only way he can pay Clay back is through prostitution. Julian is coerced into sleeping with a man for cash by his pimp whilst Clay watches, a turning point that Ellis uses to increase the level of decadence, culminating in Clay witnessing the gang rape of a drugged twelve-year-old girl. The novel concludes with Clay returning to college: little has changed and less has been learnt.

Reviews of the novel were mixed, noting Ellis's ability to create mood, but also considering him immature and shallow. Terry Teachout, a conservative critic in the *National Review*, called the writing "accomplished" but "relentlessly adolescent" and argued that "anyone

convinced that America's youth are lining up squarely and unanimously behind the Reagan

Revolution should read this book and shudder" especially as its editor was Bob Asahina — a

neoconservative and supposed ally of Teachout — published Ellis, a point that was "more

terrifying than *anything* in *Less Than Zero*."[19] Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times*

deemed Ellis to be talented and able to create an "unnerving air of documentary reality" but

this led *Zero* to read like an episode of '60 Minutes' rather than a "full-fledged novel."[20]

Published in May 1985, *Zero* sold out its initial 10,000 copy print run and by the autumn had

sold 69,000 copies and was a surprise hit for Asahina and publishers Simon & Schuster.[21]

Passivity

Zero subverted the notion that affluent California youth culture was aspirational. By

depicting Clay as inherently passive, Ellis demonstrated the alienating impact of wealth and

that the 'pleasure' it enabled resulted in decadence rather than joy, and crucially that the

wealthy themselves had reality obfuscated from them, such was the extent of their

attenuation. The interaction between wealth and passivity, mediated through debauchery,

was demonstrated through the present opening on Christmas morning for Clay and his

family:

> It's Christmas morning and I'm high on coke, and one of my sisters has given
>
> me this pretty expensive leather-bound datebook, the pages are big and white
>
> and the dates elegantly printed on top of them, in gold and silver lettering. I

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[19] Terry Teachout, 'Are These Your Children' *National Review*, 14 February, 1986.
[20] Michiko Kakutani, 'Books of the Times; The Young and Ugly' *The New York Times*, 8 June 1985.
[21] 'S & S's Newest Vice-President, Bob Asahina, Rides the Crest of a New Bestseller - Less Than Zero', *Publishers Weekly*, September 13, 1985.

thank her and kiss her and all that and she smiles and pours herself another

glass of champagne. I tried to keep a datebook one summer, but it didn't work

out. I'd get confused and write down things just to write them down and I

came to this realization that I didn't do enough things to keep a datebook. I

know that I won't use this one and I'll probably take it back to New Hampshire

with me and it'll just lie on my desk for three or four months, unused, blank.[22]

The present is both expensive and superfluous. Wealth and chemical stimulation had not

provided fulfilment and the datebook demonstrated that Clay's existence was so passive, so

unpressurised and disconnected, that he had no need to organise his future.

In a 1998 documentary, Ellis reflected on *Less Than Zero*, and noted:

It captured the sense of what it was like to be that age in Los Angeles at that

time. My friends and I actually lived a much milder existence than the

characters in the book did and I wouldn't say it sensationalised but I think the

feel of the book was something that we were feeling, all of us collectively even

though we weren't having orgies and mainlining drugs but there was that

sense that that was what the community was about, there was a sense of

decadence there that even if we didn't partake in it - it veiled everything.[23]

Essentially, Ellis positioned himself as tapping into the wider structure of feeling within "the

community" of rich adolescents in 1980s Los Angeles, and it was a feeling of decadence that

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[22] Ellis, *Zero*, 63.
[23] Gerald Fox, *This is Not an Exit: The Fictional World of Bret Easton Ellis* (London: Marquee Film Production, 1998).

led to obfuscation, as it "veiled" reality. This sense of 'authenticity' continued over into

Ellis's reflections on his own readers, as he has argued that *Zero* "seemed to confirm

something for many people, as if it were a news bulletin from the front lines — this is what

the kids are like today!"[24] Ellis provided a representation that felt authentic as it interacted

with the image and narrative of Californian youth culture that was being launched across

the globalised marketplace, as Ellis felt that he had potentially offered an answer to "what

would it *really* be like to live in this Beverly Hills fantasy" and that according to his fan letters

this was "the takeaway from young readers in Indiana, in the UK, in New Delhi."[25]

In adopting such a role, Ellis ultimately took on a negative view of his own generation

although crucially without totally condemning it by falling to moral righteousness, or by

being clumsily didactic, and instead attempted to faithfully recreate its affective undertone

— this negativity allowed Ellis to subvert the narrative of Hollywood being aspirational and

to demonstrate the reality of pain that actually existed with the structure of feeling within

his generation. His depiction was far from an unequivocal endorsement or censure of it,

even if he himself claimed in a 1985 interview with the *Chicago Tribune* that *Zero* was an

"indictment, for sure" of his own generation.[26]

In an interview in 1999, when asked if he considered his novels period pieces, in part due to

his use of brand names, Ellis demonstrated the limitations of his political and intellectual

ambitions, and that his focus ultimately collapsed around the emotive and cultural elements

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[24] Ellis, *White*, 39.
[25] *Ibid*., 40.
[26] Mark Muro, 'Lost in La La Land Child of Affluence Zeros in on his Own' *Chicago Tribune*, 29 July, 1985.

he engaged with, whilst still acknowledging that it was this focus that enabled the political

aspect of his work, as he argued:

> though I might be writing about a specific time and a specific place, hopefully
>
> it's in such a way that a reader can connect it to a larger metaphor —
>
> alienation, pain, America, the overall tone of the culture. My novels might be
>
> period pieces now, but I think the scope of the books is larger than that and I
>
> think they touch upon more universal themes.[27]

Ellis pushed towards what he viewed as the emotional core of the culture and accessed this

through engaging with and 'recreating' his then contemporary political reality. Ultimately,

this effort was an attempt to demonstrate the culture's structure of feeling, and from this to

then cut against the establishment narrative. In the case of *Zero* this attempt to grapple

with universal themes is explored through the positioning of Clay and his friends as winners,

as well the way in which this status pushes them towards attenuation and depravity. Clay's

state of obfuscation was accentuated by moments where grim reality began to cut through,

contrasting his previous state of moral stupor. These scenes of discrepancy, where Clay's

narratives failed to hold back reality, contained a logic of competition which Ellis used to

challenge the status of society's winners. Towards the end of the novel, when Clay's descent

into moral decline has reached its nadir, and as he witnesses the rape, the character is

moved from his obfuscated passivity, but in such a tepid manner that it illustrates the

distance between him and grim reality. Clay challenges his friend and drug-dealer, Rip by

just asking "Why?" and which Rip responds to by saying "Why not? What the hell?" and by

claiming that he is not "some sort of scumbag or something", a point that Clay hesitates to

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[27] Jaime Clarke, 'Interview with Bret Easton Ellis', *Mississippi Review*, 27, no.3 (Spring-Summer, 1999), 87.

rebuff, but is finally able to take a moral stand by limply asserting "It's…I don't think it's right."[28] Rip meets Clay's argument and justifies his action through the logic of competition by saying "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it."[29] Winners, by Rip's logic, are allowed to extend their advantage, and his status as a societal victor is clarified when Clay responds by saying "But you don't need anything. You have everything," a point which Rip challenges by claiming that he doesn't have everything, as "I don't have anything to lose."[30] The conversation ends, but Clay and Rip socialise together later in the novel, and they do not mention their argument and there are no repercussions.

The attenuation that Clay and Rip feel is a product of their affluence. They have deeply internalised the notion that they are societal winners, due to their level of material security being so pronounced, that baseline morality is barely comprehensible. Their solution to try and feel consequences and autonomy, and therefore reality, is to gamble and play more and more dangerous games with higher and higher stakes so that they might actually lose — they test society's moral limits through depravity — which can either validate their status as winners or finally bring them into contact with reality if they face consequences. As noted, Ellis was discontented with his own generation, but he was 'sympathetic' enough to argue that their behaviour was the product of their lifestyle and its obfuscating abundance of opportunities and resources. Thus, by 'sympathising' with society's winners, Ellis was able to

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[28] Ellis, *Zero*, 176.
[29] *Ibid*., 177.
[30] *Ibid*., 177.

subvert the narrative that the lifestyle was aspirational and undermined its accompanying logic of competition.

American Psycho

Ellis began writing *American Psycho* in 1986 and it was published in 1991. It was predominately an attempt to outline, deconstruct, and subvert the effects of commodification and consumer capitalism that shaped the lives of young urban mobile professionals — yuppies. *Psycho* is told from the first person perspective of Patrick Bateman, an executive on Wall Street in his mid-twenties, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of brands and products, fashion rules and trends, is obsessed with eating at the latest restaurants, and is violently insane. The novel is relentlessly repetitive, to the point that it becomes humorous. Chapter after chapter contains disparate scenes of yuppies obsessing over what they own, where they eat, who they are sleeping with, and where they can obtain cocaine. However, this miasma of materialism is repeatedly interrupted by Bateman's bouts of violence, murder, and torture that are often interlinked with sex, and are covered in the same flat hyper-realistic and detail-oriented prose as the scenes of endless commodification — that is as if they are actually happening, and Bateman can be treated as a reliable narrator.

The novel resulted in significant controversy, launching a panic around decency and censorship after extracts of the novel leaked and prompted outrage. In response, its original publisher, Simon & Schuster, reneged on their contract with Ellis — though he kept his

$300,000 advance. The novel was quickly picked up by Vintage, there were calls for boycott, and Ellis received death threats.[31] In initial reviews, the satirical impulse was dismissed, with Roger Rosenblatt in *The New York Times* finding *Psycho* an affront to literature as it was "so pointless, so themeless" and called for people not to buy as "it would show that we can tell the real books from the fakes."[32] Sonia Baelo-Allué argued that such reactions around *American Psycho* were partly due to how Ellis and previously been perceived as a serious author, and that *Psycho* was therefore perceived as sullying the standards of American literature.[33] Ultimately, Ellis illustrated the alienating and disassociating effects of an obsession with wealth, status, and consumption as Bateman pursues control and processes reality through consumer culture, commodifying those he deems beneath him, with his violence and depravity becoming the grim reality that existed beneath obfuscating commodification.

Commodification

Ellis placed commodification as a central component of yuppiedom and prised apart its logic through repetitive and hyperbolic depictions. Bateman's internalisation of the logic of commodification, where what one owned led to status and everything became a commodity, reflected the descent of neoliberal economisation and obfuscation, as worth became totally attached to financial value and a focus on commodities led the yuppies only comprehending reality at surface level — commodification was the film of obfuscation

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[31] For analysis of the controversy around *American Psycho's* publication see: Carla Freccero, 'Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of American Psycho', *Diacritics*, 27, no.2 (1997), 44-58.
[32] Roger Rosenblatt, 'Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder', *The New York Times*, 16 December, 1990.
[33] Baelo-Allué, *Controversial Fiction*, 87.

covering grim reality for Ellis. In one chapter, Bateman rattles off what his apartment

contains and the products used in his morning routine and this takes the form of a single

paragraph that runs for five pages. For example, "Next to the Salton Sonata toaster the

Cuisnart Little Pro food processor and the Acme Supreme Juicerator and the Cordially Yours

liqueur maker stands the heavy-gauge stainless-steel two-and-one-half-quart teakettle,

which whistles 'Tea for Two' when the water is boiling, and with it I make another small cup

of the decaffeinated apple-cinnamon tea."[34]

The impression here is that Bateman has memorised the selling points and manufacturing

details, mimicking advertising rhetoric, implying that his sense of validation stemmed from

what he owned, and therefore, his level of wealth — Donald Trump is even Bateman's hero.

Bateman processes reality though various sets of rules that he uses to divine the quality and

acceptability of what he consumes, elucidating his internalisation of commodification and

competition. On an evening out with his Wall Street colleagues, after one of them has

repeatedly made efforts to share a red snapper pizza with the table, Bateman booms:

> No one wants the fucking *red snapper pizza*! A pizza should be *yeasty* and
>
> slightly *bready* and have a *cheesy crust*! The crusts here are too fucking thin
>
> because the shithead chef who cooks here overbakes everything! The pizza is
>
> dried out and brittle![35]

This explosion of technical details forms rules that give Bateman a sense of control as he can

then delineate what is the 'correct' approach, but they consequently narrow his awareness

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[34] Ellis, *Psycho*, 27-28.
[35] *Ibid.*, 45.

of reality as it becomes impossible for an alternative to actually be acceptable, and to suggest otherwise prompts a disproportionate reaction.

Ellis extended this portrayal of obfuscation, framing it as a central aspect of the wider yuppie milieu, exemplified by how the yuppies constantly misidentified each other, such was their uniformity. In a scene at a bar, Paul Owen, Bateman's social rival, mistakes Bateman for fellow yuppie, Marcus Halberstam. Bateman excuses this because he and Halberstam dress so similarly, "he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses".[36] This uniformity, where all the yuppies adopted similar symbols, tools, and methods of consumption to win a sense of prestige combined with Bateman being an unreliable narrator and therefore emblematic of a wider climate of obfuscation. After an especially violent rampage Bateman becomes so unsettled that he leaves an answerphone message for his lawyer, Harold Carnes, confessing his atrocities, including the murder of Owen.[37] Later, Bateman confronts Carnes about his message but Carnes mistakes Bateman for someone else, thinking the message was a joke.[38]

Regardless of who is correct in this particular instance, a state of obfuscation is present. The yuppies frequently mistake each other, meaning it is possible that Carnes has mistaken Owen for someone else and is so detached that he can ignore Bateman's violence, or it is possible that Bateman suffers from the same condition and has been driven insane by commodification and has hallucinated a series of violent episodes. Essentially, Ellis's

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[36] *Ibid.*, 86.
[37] *Ibid.*, 338-339.
[38] *Ibid.*, 372-373.

hyperbolic depiction of Bateman's fixation on commodities allowed him to outline how the wealthy used commodities to divine value and wield a sense of control, but that the repercussions for this was that it pushed them towards a state of obfuscation.

Violence and Sex

If yuppies operated on a surface level due to their materialistic fixations, Ellis outlined a grim reality operating beneath the obfuscating film of commodification through his depiction of violence and sex. They emphasised Bateman's desire to consume, as the level of commodification had intensified to the stage where the body and life itself were included, and Ellis therefore satirised the validity of commodification. Tonally and stylistically, there is no distinction between the novel's graphic sections and the excerpts that outline Bateman's commodified existence. For example, Bateman describes one of his murders by stating:

> I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest
> by someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the
> girl's brain gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the pink,
> fleshy meat.[39]

This blurring is continued as Bateman sees himself as predator whose actions were inevitable, such was his sense of superiority, and that he, in his violent mode, was the constant grim reality that undercut the obfuscated yuppie lifestyle. After torturing a woman Bateman declares:

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[39] *Ibid.*, 315.

I'm hoping she realizes that this would have happened to her no matter what.

That she would have ended up lying here, on the floor in my apartment, hands

nailed to posts, cheese and broken glass pushed up into her cunt, her head

cracked and bleeding purple, no matter what other choice she might have

made; that if she had gone to Nell's or Indochine, or Mars or Au Bar instead of

M.K., if she had simply not taken the cab with me to the Upper West Side, that

this all would have happened anyway. *I would have found her.* This is the way

the earth works.[40]

Bateman thus positions himself as a societal victor free to consume whatever he desires.

Norman Mailer, in a less than positive review of *Psycho* for *Vanity Fair*, took umbrage with

the lack of explanation behind Bateman's emotional drive and resultingly demonstrated,

although without endorsing, the hollowness of competition that Ellis illustrated, arguing:

No, the greater horror, the real intellectual damage this novel may cause is

that it will reinforce Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. It is the

banality of Patrick Bateman that creates his hold over the reader and gives

this ugly work its force. For if Hannah Arendt is correct, and evil is banal, then

that is vastly worse than the opposed possibility that evil is satanic. The

extension of Arendt's thesis is that we are absurd, and God and the Devil do

not wage war with each other over the human outcome. I would rather

believe that the Holocaust was the worst defeat God ever suffered at the

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[40] *Ibid.*, 315.

hands of the Devil. That thought offers more life than to assume that many of

us are nothing but dangerous, distorted, and no damn good.[41]

Essentially, Mailer was unsettled by Ellis's pessimism and the potential of a constant grim

reality.

Ellis has also discussed Arendt in relation to Bateman and claimed "I'm a believer that

Patrick Bateman can exist at any time. Patrick Bateman is an example of what Hannah

Arendt called the 'banality of evil'", as "he's just an example of the constantness of evil" and

was just a "a creature of the eighties with all the trappings that implies" and that ultimately,

for Ellis, "Man doesn't necessarily change for the better depending upon the decade", as "I

think man is born and is corrupted and is always capable of badness. Capable of goodness,

too, but badness gets more attention. We notice it more. It makes more of an impact on

us."[42] Ellis's pessimism here framed his banal and violent creation as an effort to outline the

constant evil that ultimately made reality grim, subverting the notion that a positive state

with legitimate pleasure could ever be obtained. Consequently, more optimistic narratives,

such as the ones around commodities, had the potential to obfuscate and by Ellis

interlinking commodification and obfuscation he reflected the increased intensity of the

latter during the 1980s.

This combination of entitlement and control through competition, commodification, and

depravity were further drawn out through Bateman's approach to sex. The flat hyper-

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[41] Norman Mailer, 'Children of the Pied Piper Mailer on 'American Psycho', *Vanity Fair*, March, 1991.
[42] Clarke, 'Interview with Bret', 102.

graphic prose style continues into the sex scenes, and they verge into pornography.

Bateman is entranced by commodification, and he approaches sex as pornography, he even

remarks that "pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this

lack of complication, so much more pleasurable."[43] Actual sex and intimacy, actual reality, is

too complex for Bateman. He is alienated and entitled to the extent that he prefers the

commodified form of pornography that is imbued with narrative and is concentrated on his

own pleasure. However, he is also violently misogynistic, and this interlinked with his pursuit

of control. In a short single paragraph long chapter entitled 'Working Out' Bateman

narcissistically admires his own body and describes his collection of three dismembered

vaginas in his gym locker: "a barette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermès tied

around my favourite."[44] For Colby, this treatment was a reductive process, where female

sexuality was made physical and "reduced to fetishized artifacts of desublimated culture."[45]

For Bateman, these trophies were another commodity, another status symbol,

demonstrated by the ribbon that he had added to one. Bateman saw himself as at the apex

of male physical condition, and this contrasted the female physical condition that he had

reduced by his acts of mutilation, and resultingly, for him, the vaginas become a 'prize for

victory' that affirmed his control. However, as Colby notes, "the vaginas represent the

anticlimax implicit in commodity fetishism. Once attained, the object loses all value."[46]

Therefore, with Colby elucidating the pointlessness of commodity fetishism, in terms of

competition and control, Bateman's pursuits are also deemed pointless, as they become

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[43] Ellis, *Psycho*, 254.
[44] *Ibid.*, 356.
[45] Colby, *Underwriting the Contemporary*, 88.
[46] *Ibid.*, 88.

competition without end.

This depiction of violence, especially towards women, charged much of the novel's initial condemnation. Andrea Dworkin would indirectly weigh in on the *Psycho* controversy after she responded to John Irving's defence of it, and she stated: "Over and over, male writers consider prostituted women 'speech' — their speech, their right. Without this exploitation, published for profit, the male writer feels censored."[47] Tammy Bruce, president of the Los Angeles National Organisation of Women chapter, called for a boycott and created an answerphone message that played recordings of the violent sections of the novel and encouraged people to write to the publishers.[48] Ellis himself would claim, in 1991, that he was not "on the side" of Bateman, and that

> There seems to be a notion that when you are writing about someone killing
>
> and torturing people, especially women, you have to do it in a very earnest
>
> and politically correct way … But the murder sequences are so over the top, so
>
> baroque in their violence, it seems hard to take them in a literal context. And
>
> there are dozens more hints that direct the reader toward the realization that
>
> for all the book's surface reality, it is still satirical, semi-comic and — dare I say
>
> it? — playful in a way.[49]

Ellis's defence was a limited one that hung on treating *Psycho* in a vacuum, and his detractors saw the novel in the context of reinforcing a pre-existing trend of male violence

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[47] Andrea Dworkin, 'Pornography and the New Puritans: Letters From Andrea Dworkin and Others', *The New York Times*, 3 May, 1992, and John Irving, 'Pornography and the New Puritans', *The New York Times*, 29 March, 1992.

[48] Edwin McDowell, 'NOW Chapter Seeks Boycott of 'Psycho' Novel', *The New York Times*, 6 December, 1990.

[49] Roger Cohen, 'Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of American Psycho', *The New York Times*, 6 March, 1991.

towards women and male depictions of violence towards women. Ellis produced his

hyperbolic reproduction by stripping everything else back: there is no sense of intimacy,

kindness, or even basic warmth, and then by fixating on the narratives being satirised,

namely the material and social power that Bateman held, he placed them in a surreal

position that attempted to undermine commitments towards them.

Masculinity

The portrayal of white heterosexual masculinity in *Psycho* interlinked with commodification,

allowing Ellis to detail a critique where social status, bigotry, and entitlement mediated the

interplay between grim reality and obfuscation. Commodities, due to status stemming from

them, allowed Bateman and his male colleagues to channel their masculinity and compete

amongst themselves. The capacity to socially spar through commodities was demonstrated

through a conversation about bottled water between Bateman, his colleague Craig

McDermott, and Courtney, a woman with whom Bateman was cheating on his girlfriend.

McDermott and Bateman duel with water-related factoids and Courtney takes a more

passive role. Bateman narrates that he is "nonplussed by McDermott's ridiculous, incessant

one-upmanship" and he condescendingly crushes McDermott's suggestion of Gatorade as a

rehydration drink after exercise, as Bateman states: "But don't you think water is the best

fluid replacer since it enters the bloodstream faster than *any* other liquid?" I can't help but

add, *'Buddy?'*"[50] Ellis's male characters approach commodities, and knowledge of them, as a

means to improve themselves and as a medium to compete with each other. Consequently,

he pushed a portrayal of how neoliberal competition in the 1980s had proliferated, as the

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[50] Ellis, *Psycho*, 241.

faces of the neoliberal economy, the Wall Street yuppie, had internalised market logics into

their social relations as they guided their masculinity through it.

For Raewyn Connell, the 'entrepreneur' benefitted under neoliberalism and this was a

masculine-coded role typically filled by men, with it requiring hyper competitiveness and a

focus on results.[51] Berthold Schoene elaborates, arguing that Ellis's portrayal of Bateman

reflected a period where masculine strength was doubted, and this had prompted "a

relentless hardening of the mind and body" amongst men to assure their position.[52] The

hyperbole of *Psycho* reflected the fragility of masculinity under neoliberalism, and this

unstable condition, exemplified by Bateman's insanity and the fixation on commodities, cut

against the entitlement and supposed winning status of Bateman and yuppiedom.

Beyond water, the men gave fashion and clothing rules that enabled them to judge each

other: in one scene they send questions into *GQ* over how certain pieces of clothing should

be worn.[53] Ellis noted that during his initial research, which partially consisted of just

socialising with Wall Street yuppies, he "began to realize that the standard hallmarks of gay

male culture had been appropriated by straight male culture with the emergence of the

heterosexual male dandy".[54] This entwinement between straight and gay masculinity was

elucidated by Bateman's relationship with Luis Carruthers. Across the novel, Carruthers is

marked out as possessing a low social status and Bateman eventually attempts to strangle

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[51] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, California: 2005), 255.
[52] Berthold Schoene, 'Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54, no. 2 (Summer 2008), 384.
[53] Ellis, *Psycho*, 30-31.
[54] Ellis, *White*, 65.

him in a bathroom, but Carruthers defuses the situation by kissing Bateman's wrist. Carruthers reads Bateman as gay, mistaking his aggression as a sign of affection, and this sends Bateman into a panic that overrides his murderous intent, his heterosexuality and associated masculinity undermined.

Notably, after Bateman storms out of the bathroom, he is asked about how to properly wear a tie bar or clasp and gives a detailed and calm answer.[55] The rules of commodification not only stabilised Bateman as he could find solace in his obfuscating lifestyle, but they also demonstrated the lack of friction between his homophobia and his adoption of gay male cultural traits. Therefore, Ellis's depiction found that yuppies, as a cultural phenomenon, did not represent a progressive shift despite, on a certain level, departing from traditional masculinity. Mark Storey elaborates here, arguing that *Psycho* was a novel that engaged with the instability around masculinity during the 1980s, and that Bateman anxiously attempted to embody a form of it that was eroding, and that he responded to this shift with violence and fear.[56] The yuppies' casual bigotry furthered this unstable dynamic and demonstrated that their sense of victorious entitlement resulted in obfuscation. For example, they believe they are near invulnerable to HIV/AIDS, regardless of the "what kind of scumbag, slutbucket, horndog chick we end up boffing" as "'Guys just can*not* get it.' 'Well, not *white* guys.'"[57] With the fixation on commodities illustrating the obfuscated yuppie lifestyle, and the scenes of violent depravity exemplifying the grim reality that commodification obscured, white yuppie heterosexual masculinity was a field that mediated

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[55] Ellis, *Psycho*, 150-154.
[56] Mark Storey, "And as things fell apart": The Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho and Dennis Cooper's Frisk, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47, no.1 (2005), 63-64.
[57] *Ibid.*, 33.

obfuscation and grim reality for Ellis, as their entitlement reflected a competitive logic

filtered through commodification and a 'disregard' for those beneath them that was

hyperbolically demonstrated through the violent scenes.

Glamorama

Glamorama, published in 1998, was a mediation on the value attributed to fame and beauty

that was combined with a Robert Ludlum style political thriller. The reviews were not

especially positive: Michiko Kakutani argued that the potential she had once seen in Ellis

had curdled as he had now produced "mindless *W*-like recitations of guest lists and celebrity

sightings, gussied up with some heavy-metal horror and pages and pages of crashingly awful

dialogue".[58] The narrator, Victor Ward/Johnson, is a model, actor, musician, socialite, and

club-opener who, over the course of the novel, becomes lost within an international

conspiracy that is never fully explained. *Glamorama* thus operated on three interlinked

levels: as a critique of celebrity, as a conspiracy thriller, and as a postmodern text. The novel

begins with Victor fully immersed within the celebrity lifestyle: its first section, which forms

nearly half of the novel's length, focuses on him opening a nightclub. Ellis outlined a state of

extreme vapidity, with his flat realistic style continuing, although there was now a focus on

celebrity names along with the traditional use of brand names, graphic sex, violence, and

drug use. Victor's descent and decrease in his level of control, where Ellis subverted

celebrity and worked to portray it as obfuscating a grim reality, begins when he leaves for

Europe after the paparazzi release salacious photos of him, and from this he becomes lost

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[58] Michiko Kakutani, 'Fashion Victims Take Terrorist Chic Seriously', *The New York Times*, 5 January, 1999.

within the conspiracy as he ultimately joins, and then attempts to leave, a terrorist cell run

by models.

Celebrity

In *Glamorama* Ellis subverted the view that celebrity was an aspirational or valuable state.

The prominence of celebrity within American culture existed prior to the 1990s, and Ellis's

view of it as vapid echoed Daniel Boorstin in the 1960s, who viewed celebrity as a "human

pseudo-event" and led to a celebrity being someone "who is known for his well-knowness",

a point that Joshua Gamson in his 1994 analysis of American celebrity culture summarised

as arguing that "Americans may fetishize competition, but they have allowed the

commercial cultural enterprise to render competition meaningless."[59] However, despite

echoing Boorstin and Gamon, Ellis portrayed celebrity and fame as a competitive pursuit

and arena, and he critiqued the prominence and dynamic of this game, in relation to both its

players and its spectators, under neoliberalism. Victor is a painfully vapid, selfish, and naïve

narrator who is unable to comprehend his transition from an obfuscated celebrity lifestyle

to involvement in international terrorism and its accompanying grim reality. Ellis himself

remarked:

> the point of the book is: just be aware in general. The book is criticizing being
>
> obsessed with the wrong things. It's saying: be careful. It's saying: hey-don't
>
> be an asshole. I don't think that if Victor was more politically aware this whole
>
> terrible thing wouldn't have happened to him. His flaw is that he's so focused
>
> on the things that are really useless — hipness, coolness, trendiness, cuteness

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[59] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America (*New York, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1964), and Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994), 9.

— that he doesn't realize it when dark forces swirl around him and prey on

that weakness.[60]

Celebrity and its accompanying lifestyle are immediately framed as obfuscating reality. The novel begins with Victor preparing for the opening of a nightclub, and he is fixated on there being "specks" in a bar panel where there should not be, he and his friends shift away from the panel and discuss the opening having "a cause" — Victor nixes AIDS as he deems it "passé" — they then move to security which is met by Victor shouting "What? I'm gonna have Donna Karan frisked? I'm gonna have Marky Mark frisked? I'm gonna have fucking Diana Von Furstenberg frisked?" Then the evening's entertainment is mulled over, and Victor's contribution is to claim that "in is out. Out is in."[61] However, the crescendo that emphasised their vapidity, myopia, and misplaced focus arose through the last point in the chapter where Victor only just recognises the "massive red swastika painted onto the domed ceiling above us."[62] That such an obvious point needs correcting is the hammer that Ellis uses to signal Victor's obfuscation — specks were prioritised over a large hate symbol.

Beyond Victor's own myopia, Ellis portrayed fame itself as an obfuscating condition. For example, in an interview that Victor gave to MTV he is asked how it feels "to be the It Boy of the moment" and he responds by saying "Fame has a price tag but reality's still a friend of mine" which obviously implies that fame has the potential to obfuscate.[63] Moreover, celebrity is positioned as a replacing politics, as when asked "what really pisses Victor Ward off" he offers a series of vapid points and is unable to grasp that the interviewers wanted a

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[60] Clarke, 'Interview with Bret', 96.
[61] Ellis, Glamorama, 5-15.
[62] *Ibid*., 16.
[63] *Ibid*., 140.

more serious answer, and when this is made explicit he struggles but eventually think he has

a pithy response and offers up lyrics from Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' — "A mulatto,

an albino, a mosquito, my libido" — a band and a song that represented the radical angst

and apathy of youth and alternative culture in the 1990s and its debilitating

contradictions.[64] Politics is incomprehensible to Victor — at best he can offer hollow

references towards the apathy of his generation. Instead, fame, as a social condition, an

arena, and as a competition has replaced politics with it dominating Victor's conceptions of

success and failure, mirroring the neoliberal condition where the capacity for political

selfhood has been replaced with an economic one. Victor cares about celebrity, he is aware

it is a form of competition where trends need to be followed and deference needs to be

paid to those with a superior status, and resultingly Ellis interlinked competition with

obfuscation.

The Price of Fame

To contrast Victor's myopic commitment to celebrity, Ellis placed him into situations that

forced him to perceive grim reality. After the compromising pictures of Victor leak, he flees

to Europe to find Jamie Fields — a woman he went to Camden with and who is now an

actress and model — after being offered $300,000 to do so by a mysterious man called

Frank Palakon. However, after Victor finds Fields and begins to live with her and her model

friends, it becomes apparent that they are part of a terrorist cell, and Victor becomes

involved with them. A significant inflection point within the plot that marks Victor's descent,

as the veneer of celebrity obfuscating grim reality begins to be removed, arises after Victor

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[64] Ellis, Glamorama, 141-142, and Ryan Moore, *Sells like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* (New York, Nork: NYU Press, 2010), 115-116.

witnesses Sam Ho, another model, being tortured and murdered by the terrorist cell. After

discovering Victor, Bobby, the leader of the terrorists, blackmails him by claiming that he

will be framed for Ho's murder if he attempts to leave, but he also claims, "We like you

because you don't have an agenda. … We like you because you don't have any answers."[65]

Victor's vacuity and lack of politics, his obfuscated state that arose through his commitment

to celebrity, made him exploitable by terrorists — this is the grim reality beneath celebrity.

This negative depiction of celebrity is continued explicitly through the reasons why Bobby

recruited models as terrorists, as "He would use the fact as a model all you do all day is

stand around and do what other people tell you to do" and that "everyone wanted to be

around us…everyone wanted to be movie stars…and in the end, basically, everyone was a

sociopath…"[66] Ellis himself has outlined that he drew parallels between models and

terrorists as

> Well, there's a tyranny to the fashion world in the way it extols an ideal
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> beauty above all else that I think damages us. That has been a form of torture
>
> for women for decades and now it's increasingly happening to men. This
>
> obsession, with looks that the fashion and photography worlds have taken to
>
> an extreme, psychically damages the culture. Period. That's a fact. I know
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> we're not talking about actual violence — which is the terrorist's goal — but
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> emotional violence. Both worlds want you to be emotionally violated in the
>
> end. When I began planning Glamorama, the culture's fascination with models

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[65] Ellis, *Glamorama*, 287.
[66] *Ibid., 309*.

had reached a fever pitch and at the same time there was this terrible

reckoning with terrorism, and the connection I made seemed plausible.[67]

Models and terrorists caused psychic harm, with them both operating through fear for Ellis,

fear of certain bodies for fashion and fear of physical violence for terrorists, and so by

equating the two together Ellis subverted the former and resultingly satirised the notion of

celebrity and beauty being aspirational. When committed to celebrity Victor is vacuous and

ignorant, but this commitment is slowly undermined as the plot of the novel unravels and

celebrity becomes positioned as an obfuscating veneer that prevents comprehension of

grim reality.

Conspiracy

Victor's transition between celebrity and grim reality operated via a conspiracy plot that Ellis

used to convey an unstable sense of reality, as Victor was unable to grasp what was real.

Conspiracy, as a literary device and as a discursive phenomenon, synergised with the

neoliberal marketplace of narratives model. Conspiracy operates by suggesting that there is

an alternative narrative that actually explains reality rather than the dominant one being

sold. The conspiracy within *Glamorama* is never fully explained and appears to contradict

and destabilise itself, a process that allowed the affect that arises when there is a

discrepancy between narrative and reality, namely a sense of obfuscation, to be

emphasised. This uncertainty, which reinforced Victor's lack of control, was reflected in how

he was repeatedly told that "what I didn't know was what mattered most", implying that his

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[67] Clarke, 'Interview with Bret', 95.

paradigm of thought had a tenuous connection to reality and that there were other more

accurate narratives in circulation.[68]

Whilst the conspiracy is never fully unravelled, and the sincerity of anything Victor is told is

unclear, Victor's father, a US Senator considering a run for President, is involved — he

seemed to have wanted Victor out of the US to hide his son's celebrity lifestyle, but this was

used by his opponents as a means to ingratiate Victor with the terrorists in order to

embarrass his Father. We are also told that Palakon is both working for and against Victor's

Father and that "Everything's…connected…to the Japanese" and that "they want

your…father elected."[69] There is no grand reveal to Ellis's conspiracy, and Victor never

manages to take a side or oppose both and rise above it. Instead, Victor ultimately dies and

is replaced with a doppelgänger. Obfuscation is a banal state for Ellis and more shocking for

it, fame and its elevation above normality — Victor at one-point remarks "I was just

becoming famous and my whole relationship to the world was about to change" — only led

to obfuscation, and even the 'true explanation' in the conspiracy cannot offer salvation as

that is ultimately unending and unclear.[70]

This depiction led Colby to note that Ellis consequently parodied Francis Fukuyama's

idealistic notion of the end of history in the 1990s, as he essentially demonstrated that there

was a grim reality beneath the 'political consensus' as hidden forces manipulated

proceedings and they were unaccountable and incomprehensible.[71] However, Ellis did not

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[68] Ellis, *Glamorama*, 341.
[69] *Ibid*., 422.
[70] *Ibid*., 480.
[71] Colby, *Underwriting the Contemporary*, 114.

fall to nihilism, and the significance of his destabilising reality was elaborated upon by David

Schmid, who argued that *Glamorama* managed to appreciate how conceptions of reality

incorporate both the real and representations of the real and did so without celebrating

undecidability in and of itself.[72] By placing celebrity and conspiracy in relation to each other

Ellis accentuated how the former, through the latter, was warped by obfuscation. By using

conspiracy in this manner Ellis illustrated just how remote reality had become whilst also

appreciating that obfuscation had become an integral part in making reality grim.

Postmodern Devices

As a novel, *Glamorama* contained postmodern literary devices that Ellis used to enhance the

obfuscating and disorientating effects of fame and conspiracy. The most significant device is

the presence and use of a film crew and script that destabilised the level of reality that the

plot was operating on. The crew appear to follow Victor and be providing a script from

which he and the other characters read. Yet it is unclear if the events in the novel were

orchestrated, partially or entirely, by this overarching crew, or if the crew and script are a

figment of Victor's imagination and he is totally absorbed within a cinematic logic.

The film crews and script are effortlessly integrated into the plot. They often just appear and

are mentioned at an aside by Victor and the other characters, making their first appearance

a third of the way through the novel after Victor's club opening has gone awry and its

mafioso owner has tracked him down. Victor simply narrates that one of the goons "was

recast after we shot yesterday's breakfast".[73] Later, shortly before he arrives in Europe,

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[72] David Schmid, 'The Unusual Suspects: Celebrity, Conspiracy, and Objective Violence in *Glamorama*', *Bret Easton Ellis* ed. Naomi Mandel, 81.
[73] Ellis, *Glamorama*, 169.

Victor has a lengthy conversation with the crew's cinematographer, Felix, who tells Victor

that "I think the script keeps changing" and that "I don't think this is what I signed on for"

and significantly that he does not know who Palakon is and that they never filmed a scene

involving him.[74] However, Victor is later shown a video by a second film crew of Palakon

meeting Bobby, indicating that Felix was not necessarily truthful when he said he was

unaware of Palakon.[75] Ellis never clarifies the relationship between the film crew and the

conspiracy. They can be read as an effort by Ellis to illustrate the extent of Victor's

commitment to the entertainment industry as he can only process the conspiracy through a

cinematic logic, meaning that the crew is coping device for Victor. The film crew first emerge

after Victor flees his club opening, which is the first moment where his celebrity paradigm

begins to collapse. Moreover, and crucially, the crew are not present for the torture and

murder of Sam Ho, and Victor notes that "There is, I'm noticing, no camera crew around"

and multiple times afterwards the crew ask what happened to Ho.[76]

On one level this suggests that the murder of Ho was not in the script and that the

conspiracy superseded the crew, but it also suggests that the depravity was so foreign to

Victor and so outside his paradigm that his coping device became overwhelmed and could

not manifest. Therefore, the crew, as a coping device, facilitated Victor's transition between

his obfuscated celebrity lifestyle to grim reality, whilst also reflecting his lack of control, with

Ellis resultingly portraying the entertainment industry and its production of fame as

anarchic. Furthermore, through the crew and script Ellis recreated and satirised the logic of

semi-scripted reality television, such as MTV's 'The Real World' (1992-2008) — a point that

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[74] *Ibid.*, 231-232.
[75] *Ibid.*, 395.
[76] *Ibid.*, 284.

is reinforced by it being mentioned that Victor attempted to appear on it. These programmes blended scripted elements with more real moments, and, therefore, by Ellis incorporating and interlinking reality television with conspiracy he found the former to warp reality. More directly, Ellis remarked that the relationship between celebrities and their audiences was built on the premise of the image being a site of manipulation and projection:

> Well, if your whole basis for being is just as an image, or as a surface, then you're not flesh and blood to people — and that's what celebrity does to people: it flattens them out, and we never know what they're really like because it's not their job to tell us. So we do a lot of guesswork and we project a lot of our own fantasies onto them.[77]

The film crews were a device that disrupted the level of reality of the plot of *Glamorama*, as they accentuated the discrepancy between celebrity and grim reality as Ellis used television, the medium of celebrity production itself, to communicate Victor's detachment from reality in order to discourage investing in celebrity.

Bret Easton Ellis found literary success early as his moralising satires cut against his interpretation of society's winners, although he has always had his critics. He produced hyperbolic texts that attempted to reproduce and expose the underlying logics and affect that was governing the lifestyles of those winners, consistently doing so through a flat atonal prose that was filtered through hyper-realistic depictions of depravity and decadence. *Less Than Zero* began this path with the affluent youth of 1980s Los Angeles,

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[77] Clarke, 'Interview with Bret', 95.

marked by a stifling passivity and alienation. In *American Psycho* Ellis pursued the commodification that governed the yuppie lifestyle. Then in *Glamorama* he subverted the celebrity paradigm of thought. Clay's passivity made reality intangible to him. Bateman's commitment to commodification interlinked with his violent depravity, as his desire for consumption was constant and the unreliability around this reflected an obfuscated society. Victor's entrancement by celebrity produced a vacuous individual open to exploitation as he became lost within a conspiracy plot. Mediating this approach was the sense that those lost within obfuscation strove for control and autonomy, and that underlying the narratives that generated obfuscation was an unfair, cruel, and bleak reality. On a certain level, the reader can sympathise with Clay, Bateman, and Victor as their respective lifestyles brought them little real solace and caused them pain and damage, partly prompting their inability to express a commitment towards moral justice, basic kindness, and in Bateman's case drove him towards horrific violence and abuse. On another level, this focus reflected the limitations of Ellis's approach as all he offered was a correction of what is not worth aspiring towards, there is little sense of the broader and long-term damage winners cause 'losers' on a societal level, as he did not attempt to explore or explain the experiences of those who suffered at their hands. Ellis's writing was not solely driven by a desire to shift the culture in a specific direction. Indeed, his own pessimism and moralism spurred his reproduction and critique of the affect underlying these various 'winning paradigms', and through these conscious efforts to outline and emphasise aspects of the structure of feeling in the 1980s and 1990s he consistently found a climate and mood of obfuscation.

Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler was born in 1947 in Pasadena, California. She grew up as a working-class Baptist and was raised by her mother after her father died when she was young. In 1968 she earned an associate's degree from Pasadena City College, and a year later she enrolled in the Screen Writers Guild Open Door Program at California State University, Los Angeles where she met Harlan Ellison, a science fiction writer who encouraged her to attend the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy writing workshop.[78] This experience developed her interest in science fiction, and Butler published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976, before going on to publish eleven more novels and a host of short stories before her death in 2006. She consistently engaged with themes of utopia and dystopia, race, gender, sexuality, biological metamorphosis, faith, survival, family and community, and produced science-fiction that ranged in just how fantastical it was and how much it departed from her contemporary moment. Buter received science-fiction's two premier awards twice: the Hugo (in 1984 and 1985) and the Nebula (in 1984 and 1999). Beyond science fiction, Butler's intellectual contributions were recognised in 1995 when she received a MacArthur 'Genius' Fellowship, becoming the first science fiction writer to do so.

During the 1980s and the 1990s Butler was part of the small number of Black science fiction writers and, at least during the 1980s, was the only prominent Black woman. Her self-described "science fiction family" of African American writers would eventually consist of Samuel Delaney, Tananarive Due, Steven Barnes, and Nalo Hopkins.[79] Butler had a

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[78] For details on the Clarion workshop see: Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 395-396.

[79] *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler* (Seattle, Washington: Aqueduct Press, 2013), ed. Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl, 102.

pessimistic streak, although without collapsing into nihilism, as she viewed human nature as driven by a twin capacity for hierarchy and intelligence. In an interview in 1997 she stated: "I don't really have much hope for us as a species, especially if we become more technologically aware and if we all stay here on earth. Just talking through problems isn't an adequate solution."[80] In addition, she argued that the capacity for hierarchy and intelligence are innate traits that have evolved within humanity: "So the simple hierarchical behaviour goes all the way, I suspect, to the beginning of life. And intelligence has not made us better."[81] However, in that same interview, in relation to sociobiology and biological determinism, Butler remarked that what needed to be challenged was "what people make of it. Worry about social Darwinism" and that "What we have to do is learn to work *with* it and to work *against* people who see it as a good reason to let the poor be poor, that kind of thing - the social Darwinism: 'They must be poor because of their genes,' that kind of foolishness."[82]

Butler saw her work as political and an opportunity to demonstrate her capacity for political imagination, as it was a genre that resonated with people who were "bored with the present" and that she partially saw science fiction as "a way of disseminating the fact that we don't have only one kind of people, namely white males, in this world."[83] This desire to engage with and influence her readership continued into her claiming that "My first effort is to tell a good story" and that whilst she did "preach" at her readers "I first have to hook

[80] Marilyn Mehaffy, and AnaLouise Keating, '"Radio Imagination": Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment', *MELUS*, 26, no. 1 (2001), 63.

[81] *Ibid*., 55.

[82] *Ibid*., 57.

[83] Rosalie G. Harrison, 'Sci-Fi Visions: An Interview with Octavia Butler' *Equal Opportunity Forum Magazine*, November, 1980, consulted in *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Conseula Francis, (Jackson, Mississippi: The University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 4 and 6.

them with a good story otherwise they won't be around for the preaching" as she was in competition with all the other distractions people faced.[84] Butler saw science fiction as a genre that would afford her a high level of engagement and influence over her readers, whilst also giving her the space to tap into and reposition the themes and ideas she was interested in.

Butler's idiosyncratic approach, which contained an expansive political imagination that melded with science fiction, her negative but not fatalistic view of human nature, and her desire to influence the reader, coalesced whilst critiquing a climate of obfuscation in the two novels in her incomplete *Parables* series: *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). *Parable of the Sower* focuses on Lauren Olamina, a Black teenager growing up in a middle class multicultural walled community in southern California in the 2020s following the onset of climate change where society has largely collapsed — food and water are scarce and there is no centralised system to provide them, employment and employments rights have largely disappeared, privatisation is dominant, homelessness, crime, and violence have massively proliferated, the education system has largely collapsed, and swathes of people are migrating north towards Canada and Alaska in search of a better future. Olamina is the daughter of a preacher, and she is preoccupied with survival and being able to exist outside of the walled community. She 'discovers' Earthseed and begins to slowly outline its tenets as it becomes a religion that aims to comprehend and acknowledge the chaos around her and to eventually focus humanity towards space travel.

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[84] H. Jerome Jackson, 'Sci-Fi Tales from Octavia E. Butler', *The Crisis*, April, 1994, consulted in *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 44.

Earthseed's central tenet is "God is change" and this directed its follower's faith and worship away from a specific static deity and towards the concept of change itself — ultimately as a means for Olamina and her followers to comprehend and accept the chaos of grim reality. Eventually, Olamina's community is ransacked and burnt, with most of her family and friends being killed, leaving her to join with the few survivors and head north where they eventually build the first Earthseed community, Acorn. The *Parables* novels exist towards the more grounded end of the science fiction spectrum, a stark departure from the likes of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), with its far future intergalactic feudal society, or William Gibson's cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer* (1984) and its disorientating hyper technological world.[85] Butler's works contain only minimal fantastical elements, the most pronounced being the "hyperempathy" disability, a psychological condition where individuals, including Olamina, react to the pain and pleasure of those around them and their own minds reproduce that sensation. Butler framed the *Parables* novels as cautionary tales for the 1990s, as they were an effort to reflect the potential dangers of ignoring climate change and its causes, whilst also recreating and examining the forces that inhibited the necessary societal cohesion to react appropriately, and, through Earthseed, exploring a path towards potential salvation.

Parable of the Talents picks up five years after the establishment of Acorn at the end of *Sower*, a time when the community has expanded and somewhat stabilised. However, a right-wing Christian fundamentalist, Andrew Steele Jarret, has become President, launching the US into a losing war with Canada and the now independent Alaska, denying freedom of

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[85] Frank Herbert, *Dune* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Chilton Books, 1965), and William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York, New York: Ace Books, 1984).

religion, and militarising his Christian America denomination and using them to attack and

enslave people who challenge or deviate from their interpretation of Christianity. Acorn is

attacked and destroyed by Christian America, the adults are separated from their children,

including Olamina from her own daughter, Larkin, that she had with her husband, Bankole, a

man that she met whilst travelling north following the destruction of the walled community

she grew up in. Olamina and the adults are enslaved under the pretence of religious reform,

Bankole dies in immediate destruction of Acorn, and the survivors are divided by gender,

forced to wear electric shock-collars, and Olamina and the women are repeatedly raped.

Eventually, Olamina and the survivors of Acorn manage to escape and kill their captors. They

subsequently go into hiding and Olamina begins to search for Larkin, which brings her back

into contact with her previously assumed dead stepbrother, Marc, who is now a preacher

for Christian America after he had fled Acorn. As an adult Larkin encounters Marc and

develops a familial relationship with him, despite him never telling Larkin or Olamina that he

had been in contact with the other. Olamina begins to focus on expanding Earthseed and

manages to sue Christian America for a substantial sum after Jarrett leaves office after a

single term. Eventually Olamina is reunited with Larkin, but she feels betrayed by how her

mother focused on Earthseed rather than finding her. The novel ends with Olamina, now in

her eighties, watching the first Earthseed ships leaving Earth to colonise an unknown planet.

The *Parables* novels are bleak: Olamina's life is hard and dangerous, depravity is

everywhere. Butler framed these conditions as a consistent undertone that was obfuscated

through a veneer of safety and comfort, and through this she also outlined an interplay

between obfuscation and grim reality that synergised with her negative view of human

nature. Relating to the myopia that safety induced is Butler's outline of religion, which she

frames in three separate forms. Firstly, as a form of psychic comfort. Secondly, as a medium to legitimise reactionary attitudes and abusive forms of control. Thirdly, as a means through which to focus society in order to provide a positive form of social cohesion. This state of societal decline which Butler depicted as a grim reality served to enhance the cautionary tale of the *Parables* novels, as it allowed her to adopt a nuanced stance towards multiculturalism that appreciated both its values and limitations, and to outline how privatisation and racism were points that needed to be overcome for societal cohesion. Across the *Parables* novels, Butler offered the view that comfort, and the exploitation that often enabled it, or the mere pursuit of comfort, resulted in obfuscation. The alternative that Butler composed, which elucidated her conception of the problem as much as her own answer, was to adopt to a form of realism that acknowledged the grim reality that existed, as it offered a means through to focus the best aspects of human nature and hinder the climate of obfuscation that enabled the worst aspects.

Comfort and Survival

Sower begins with the residents of Olamina's walled community inhabiting a state of obfuscation as they have become to accustomed to their relative safety, consequently failing to acknowledge the grim reality that surrounds them. Olamina's drive to survive, and to change the attitudes of her neighbours, enabled Butler to engage with the role of ideational shifts in facilitating societal change. Olamina's frustrations and ambitions were expressed through an early conversation between herself and her friend, Jo, who exemplified the residents' capacity to be aware of their instability but simultaneously neglect it. Jo remarks "Rape, robbery, and now murder. Of course I think about it. Everyone

thinks about it. Everyone worries. I wish I could get out of here."[86] However, she also remarks, "Why do you want to talk about this stuff … We can't do anything about it."[87] Olamina rejects Jo's claims of powerlessness, claiming:

> We can get ready. That's what we've got to do now. Get ready for what's going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterwards. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don't know what they're doing![88]

Butler framed Jo's fear and sense of powerlessness as preventing her from engaging with reality, a point accentuated by Olamina's reaction. In terms of *Sower* being a cautionary tale, Butler added weight to her critique through actualising contemporary suburban fears — a point observed in *The Village Voice* review of *Sower*, which noted that "Even middle-class suburban existence now requires - not in paranoid imagination but in fact - walls and alarms, and plenty of ammunition."[89] In an interview with Jelani Cobb in 1994, Butler herself remarked that she was drawn to the idea of walled communities as

> the idea of people walling themselves in to keep from getting torched and then finally getting torched anyway, that's something that I see happening a lot now in the L.A. area. People — even poor people — are wanting to build walls or traffic barriers around their neighbourhood either to keep the poor people out or to keep the druggies out. Because, I mean, the idea is that if you have an area that has traffic barriers or walls, that the drug dealers will

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[86] Butler, *Sower*, 48.
[87] *Ibid*., 50.
[88] *Ibid*., 50.
[89] 'L.A.'s Burning', *The Village Voice*, 15 February, 1994.

perhaps go somewhere else because they don't like the idea of having only

one way in and out. So, there's a lot of that right now. That was the reason by

the way that I was willing to extend it to people who are middle class. They

should be doing very well because they're professional but they're obviously

not doing very well because of the way things have gone.[90]

This notion of being able to recognise a problem but being unable to comprehend its actual

solutions is furthered through Olamina's view of President Charles Donner, whose

administration proceeded Jarret's, as she described him as a "human banister" whose

victory had hinged on him being "a symbol of the past for us to hold on to as we're pushed

into the future…that we'll get through these bad times and get back to normal."[91] Nostalgia

became a source of solace as reality was too harsh to comprehend. Jo offers some support

for the idea that normality may return but Olamina narrates that Jo "was too bright to take

anything but the most superficial comfort from her denial. But even superficial comfort is

better than none, I guess."[92]

Olamina's solution, or at least her process to find a solution, involved cultivating knowledge,

specifically how to survive in the wilderness, and through this advocacy Butler depicted a

climate of obfuscation, as Olamina states:

> I realise I don't know very much. None of us knows very much. But we can all
>
> learn more. Then we can teach one another. We can stop denying reality or
>
> hoping it will all go away by magic.[93]

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[90] 'Interview with Octavia Butler', accessed: 23.01.21,
https://web.archive.org/web/20060905021648/http://www.jelanicobb.com/portfolio/obutler.html.
[91] Butler, *Sower*, 51.
[92] *Ibid*., 51.
[93] *Ibid*., 53.

For Butler, comfort encouraged the denial of grim reality, and therefore, as *Sower* was a cautionary tale, Butler 'preached' to readers whose grim reality was less severe than Olamina's, to overcome their fear and obfuscation, and to prevent or ameliorate the brutality that produces grim reality.

Religion as Comfort

Religion, in Butler's portrayal, specifically Christianity and Olamina's Earthseed, offered narratives to comprehend reality and which could create or challenge obfuscation. Christianity was portrayed as either a form of comfort that engendered a state of obfuscation, or as a force that legitimised reactionary attitudes and brutality that also failed to connect with reality. In contrast, Earthseed was a theology that allowed for flexibility and critique that could potentially be used to connect with reality. Earthseed was essentially Butler's medium to critique traditional religion, especially the religious right, and to offer an alternative approach that was grounded in her pessimistic view of human nature. However, Earthseed still attempted to offer a means to create cohesion and focus humanity.

Christianity, as a form of obfuscating comfort, combined with the nostalgia present within the walled community. For example, *Sower* begins with Olamina being baptised and remarking that the adults "never miss a chance to relieve the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back."[94] This social component of Christianity combined with the theological when Olamina outlined the difference in how people conceptualised God, including viewing him as an

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[94] *Ibid.*, 8.

omnipotent figure of authority — "They believe in a kind of super-person."[95] This conception became a means to make tolerable the effects of chaos and change, as Olamina stressed that: "Everyone knows that change is inevitable" but that "We give lip service to acceptance, as though acceptance were enough. Then we go on to create super-people — super-parents, super-kings and queens, super-cops – to be our gods and to look after us – to stand between us and God."[96]

Butler appreciated that inserting religion into science fiction was somewhat novel, noting that "Science fiction seems more interested in machines than in people. It tends to dismiss religion."[97] In a 1993 interview, while discussing how she framed Christianity within the walled community, she remarked that "I didn't want to make fun of religion. Lauren's father, a Baptist minister, is neither a fool nor a hypocrite. He's a decent man who can't cope with the situation he's in."[98] Nevertheless, in 1980, pre-empting her portrayal in the *Parables* series, she remarked: "I wish we were able to depend on ethical systems that did not involve the Big Policeman in the sky" and that "The kind of religion that I'm seeing now is not the religion of love and it scares me. We need to outgrow it."[99] Butler valued the solace that a religion of love could grant but she took issue with the capacity to delegate responsibility to the divine, ultimately suggesting that it could engender obfuscation, although she did so without chastising those who were compelled into taking such a stance.

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[95] *Ibid.*, 14
[96] *Ibid.*, 25.
[97] Harrison, 'Sci-Fi Visions', *Conversations with Butler*, 9.
[98] Lisa See, 'PW Interviews: Octavia Butler', *Publishers Weekly*, 13 December, 1993.
[99] Harrison, 'Sci-Fi Visions', *Conversations with Butler*, 9.

Religion and Reactionary Thought

Adjacent to this framing of deified authority was the acceptance of Reverend Andrew Steele Jarret, a figure who wanted to "help us make America great again."[100] Butler used Jarret to demonstrate the dangers of accepting authority rather than engaging with reality. Jarret's desire for revival is compared to ushering back in the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazis; religious tolerance is anathema to him; he unsuccessfully launched wars of aggression to restore national pride; alcohol and drugs are points of corrupting temptation; he endorses bigotry; and his hardcore supporters form para-military religious sects that attack and enslave their opponents. One review of *Talents* compared Jarret to Pat Robertson, a televangelist and who attempted to win the Republican presidential candidacy in 1988, but there were also strong parallels with Pat Buchanan and his Culture Wars speech at the 1992 Republican convention.[101] Jarret and his supporters represent a backlash against the grim reality that has developed — "*Now* does not suit him" — as he offers easy emotional solace through hatred.[102]

Jarret and his fundamentalist denomination, Christian America, served one term, and Butler used them to reaffirm the cautionary tale aspect of the *Parables* series and to outline how capitulating to authority and denying reality spurred hatred. Larkin, Olamina's daughter, narrates that "Christian America was, at first, much more a refuge for the ignorant and the intolerant than it should have been. Even people who would never beat or burn another person could treat suddenly orphaned or abducted children with cold, self-righteous

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[100] Butler, *Talents*, 18.
[101] 'Parable of the Talents', *Publishers Weekly*, 19 October, 1998.
[102] Butler, *Talents*, 18.

cruelty."[103] The appeal of Christian America was that it justified base human instincts in Butler's depiction, facilitating a sense of certainty, and with it control. From this, Butler went on to outline a condition of obfuscation present within Jarret's supporters, including his less committed ones, and did so through suggesting that Jarret's demagoguery and religion was an opiate for the masses that alleviated grim reality. For example, Olamina narrates:

> The working poor who love Jarret want to be fooled, need to be fooled. They scratch a living, working long, hard hours at dangerous dirty jobs, and they need a savior. Poor women, in particular, tend to be deeply religious and more than willing to see Jarret as the second coming. Religion is all they have. Their employers and their men abuse them. They bear more children than they can feed. They bear everyone's contempt.[104]

Butler framed material desperation and fear as prompting a willingness to turn to draconian forms of control, and to depart from reality as those forms of control failed to legitimately empower Jarret's more vulnerable supporters. This reflected her sense of a climate of obfuscation emerging through inaccurate narratives being offered, in this instance via religion, and that this film sat on the surface of a grim reality.

Religion as Unity

Nevertheless, Butler had an appreciation for religion: she felt that it held a significant weight within contemporary US society and human development more generally, but she also argued that it had strong limitations, especially in relation to challenging obfuscation, and

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[103] *Ibid*., 252.
[104] *Ibid*., 269.

Earthseed was an attempt to overcome them. This approach towards religion arose as

Butler noted:

> certain historical populations have used religion to focus a group toward long-
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> term goals — such as building cathedrals or the pyramids. I wanted Lauren to
>
> envision, but then also to focus the Earthseed group toward, the goal of
>
> changing human attitudes about and treatment of the Earth and of each
>
> other.[105]

Earthseed is ultimately a narrative to comprehend reality, especially in its grim form, with

Olamina interpreting and defending it as "the literal truth."[106] By having Olamina approach

Earthseed as actual truth, Butler used it as a medium to challenge obfuscation. Its central

tenets, which were presented as verse, were:

<div align="center">

God is Power –

Infinite,

Irresistible,

Inexorable,

Indifferent.

And yet, God is Pliable –

Trickster,

Teacher,

Chaos,

Clay.

</div>

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[105] Mehaffy and Keating, '"Radio Imagination'", 74-75.

[106] Butler, *Sower*, 24.

God exists to be shaped.

God is change.[107]

Essentially, provoked by the instability in her life, Olamina accepted the constant chaos and change and found it to be God's power. Moreover, by recognising and accepting that it is the process of change itself that needed to be engaged with and which is 'divine,' reality could be accurately comprehended and the negative effects of change dulled — Olamina even added: "But we can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, will be shaped with or without our forethought, with or without our intent."[108] Larkin notes that Olamina portrayed Earthseed as offering little comfort, and through this it became a process to acknowledge grim reality, as "Its promise is not of mansions to live, milk and honey to drink, or eternal oblivion in some vast whole of nirvana. Its promise is of hard work and brand-new possibilities, problems challenges and changes."[109] Therefore, with Earthseed being true, with God conceptualised as the process of change itself, and with the encouragement to recognise and shape change itself rather than focusing on a promised nirvana, Earthseed became a narrative designed to focus on reality and overcome the mood of obfuscation.

The salvation that Earthseed could provide came through its focus on human space travel and colonisation. When arguing about this focus, which was referred to as "Destiny", with her husband, Bankole, Olamina remarks: "We need the stars, Bankole. *We need purpose!*…If we're to be anything other than smooth dinosaurs who evolve, specialize, and die, we need the stars.…When we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each

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107 *Ibid*., 24.
108 *Ibid*., 24.
109 Butler, *Talents*, 45.

other. We destroy ourselves."[110] The Destiny component of Earthseed arose from Butler's

negative view of human nature and elucidated a means through which to achieve positive

societal cohesion, as the pressure of a collective project could overwhelm the hierarchical

and brutal aspects of human nature. As noted, Earthseed was an effort to comprehend and

process grim reality and contrast against Christian America. Yet it underemphasised the

particular patterns that 'chaos' and grim reality took. Butler did stress how women and the

poor took the brunt of this unpredictability, but Earthseed itself was only a limited

departure from neoliberalism, as it continued a 'phobia' of the state, and the enshrinement

of change, a diffuse process, mirrored the neoliberal fixation on the unregulated market.[111]

This is a point Peter Stillman elaborates upon by noting that Butler is too "theological,

abstract, and apolitical" and that she approached conflict through transcending it rather

than direct opposition.[112] Nevertheless, Butler's intellectual contribution was still significant,

as she still managed to identify obfuscation as playing an integral role within the 1990s

political culture: she interrogated how grim reality was distorted, and attempted to directly

challenge that, if not neoliberalism as political economic system itself.

This challenge to obfuscation was most saliently developed via Butler's portrayal of a

Earthseed's commitment to rationality. Olamina does note that the Destiny component of

Earthseed requires a degree of faith and that to sustain such an ambition something "as

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[110] *Ibid.*, 172.
[111] For further elaboration on how Earthseed aligns with neoliberalism see: Vincent Lloyd, 'Post-Racial, Post-Apocalyptic Love: Octavia Butler as Political Theologian', Political Theology, 17, no.5 (2016), 449-464.
[112] Peter Stillman, 'Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's Parables', *Utopian Studies*, 14, no.1 (2003), 32.

essentially irrational as religion" was needed.[113] However, critical thinking and learning were central to attempting to negotiate change for Earthseed. For example, one verse claims:

A victim of God may,

Through learning and adaption,

Become a partner of God,

A victim of God may,

Through forethought and planning,

Become a shaper of God.

Or a victim of God may,

Through shortsightedness and fear,

Remain God's victim,

God's plaything,

God's prey.[114]

Earthseed found learning and forethought — efforts to connect to actual reality by Butler's framing — as necessary processes to survive grim reality. In summation, religion within the *Parables* series operated on three levels. First, it served to demonstrate how grim reality was obfuscated, as religion offered a form of authority to defer towards. Secondly, through the hard-line Christian America and President Jarret, it further demonstrated a sense of obfuscation as material destitution and desire to wield control over others led to people willingly capitulating towards brutality, as religion gave permission for the worst aspects of human nature to flourish. Thirdly, Earthseed, by embracing change and committing to rationality, aimed to overcome obfuscation and focus human nature through aspiring

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[113] Butler, Talents, 173 for faith in Earthseed, and 344 for religion as irrational.
[114] Butler, Sower, 29.

towards Destiny. Butler's approach towards religion demonstrated both a scepticism and an appreciation for it, as she interpreted religion as having the potential to offer misleading narratives but concurrently argued that religion could imbue narratives with enough weight that they could stymie the aggressive aspects of human nature and push towards flourishing.

Community and Privatisation

This capacity to influence and focus human nature was reflected in Butler's depiction of Acorn, the first Earthseed community. Acorn was a multicultural and democratic community, and enabled Buter to inject a utopian element into an otherwise dystopian series. However, it was not without limitations, as Acorn is eventually destroyed by Christian America, and consequently Butler demonstrated the limitations of a neoliberal multiculturalism, where difference and diversity rather than structural reorganisation were seen as sufficient.[115] Additionally, Butler's depiction of dystopian grim reality saw an increase in privatisation and declining labour standards that was facilitated by the economic and cultural dimensions of racism. Ultimately, multiculturalism's insufficiency, racism, and privatisation were not framed as obfuscating, but were rather parts of grim reality and which consequently enhanced the cautionary tale at the heart of Butler's narrative.

Racial oppression serves as another layer of hierarchy and aspect of grim reality in the *Parables* series. Butler portrayed it as containing both an economic and cultural dimension,

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[115] For discussions on the relationship between multiculturalism and neoliberalism, see: Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (London: Zed Books, 2011), especially chapter 5, Will Kymlicka, 'Neoliberal Multiculturalism?', *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*, ed. Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

as she extended the inequality of the 1990s into the future and illustrated how it was maintained and aligned with societal collapse. As already noted, Butler's approach towards science fiction and her goals within it had a racial dimension, and whilst they continued into *Parables* her focus was directed on hierarchy itself, as she noted:

> Race was not my characters' huge problem: because they had so many other problems, racial problems were just a kind of subset! I don't think we will get over racial problems, because they're just one more version of dominance games, and human beings unfortunately spend enormous amounts of time playing dominance games. When they don't have race, they divide themselves in other ways, like a small Texas town where the teenagers are either Freaks or Jocks.[116]

As Patricia Melzer argues, Butler did not centre racial oppression in her critique of social injustice, but she did still destabilise racial discourses grounded in a self/other approach as diversity became an integral part of her utopian narrative.[117]

Acorn is a community of some sixty residents: they debate and vote on issues; they grow food and trade with nearby towns and farms, and they share the profits amongst themselves; there is an emphasis on learning and teaching; the residents are multilingual; and they were far more racially diverse than the surrounding towns. Olamina stated:

> We're you name it: Black, White and Latino, Asian, and any mixture at all – the kind of thing you'd expect to find in a city. The kids we've adopted and the

[116] Charles Brown, 'Octavia E. Butler: Persistence' *Locus Magazine*, June 2000, consulted in *Conversations with Butler*, 184.
[117] Patricia Melzer, '"All that you touch you change": Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change in Octavia Butler's *Parables of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*', *Femspec*, 3, no 2. (2002), 41.

ones who have been born to us think all the mixing and matching as normal.

Imagine that.[118]

Acorn was the liberal metropolis recreated, its diversity and integration demonstrating a collectivist drive. In terms of technological development, Earthseed is described as "nineteenth century" but as Larkin explains:

Here at least was a semblance of security. Here was the comfort of ritual and routine and the emotional satisfaction of belonging to a 'team' that stood together to meet challenge when they came. And for families here was a place to raise children, to teach them basic skills that they might not learn elsewhere and to keep them as safe as possible from the harsh, ugly lessons of the world outside.[119]

Again, then, Butler positioned comfort and security as containing the potential to obfuscate grim reality, but she found that comfort that arose from interdependence and collectivism was less obfuscating as it gave people the support to actually engage with the harshness of their surroundings. Olamina led Acorn: her title was "Shaper" as she 'shaped change', and Butler herself noted that one of the difficulties she faced in creating her was "believing that a Black woman could be convincing as not just a power-seeker but a power-holder over people who were not necessarily Black and not necessarily female."[120] Acorn was essentially an enclave that attempted to acknowledge and focus the negative aspects of human nature: it reflected the utopian element of the *Parables* series, with diversity and collectivism

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[118] Butler, *Talents*, 40.
[119] *Ibid*., 61.
[120] 'Interview with Octavia Butler', accessed: 23.01.21, https://web.archive.org/web/20060905021648/http://www.jelanicobb.com/portfolio/obutler.html.

playing central roles within that.

Nevertheless, this utopia does not last. Acorn is destroyed by Christian America and its residents are either killed or enslaved. In Butler's representation, a diverse and isolated enclave of willing participants was insufficient, as it was still vulnerable to reactionary powers. This insufficiency was compounded by how Christian America contained a multicultural element — they declare "Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind, and become one of us" — and Hee-Jung Serenity Joo reads this points as reflecting a form of "multicultural assimilation" that demonstrated how the "late capitalist state understands well the potential surplus value of including racialized bodies, not excluding them".[121] Multiculturalism was not just insufficient because it remained vulnerable, but also because it also had a degree of compatibility with regressive and violent regimes. This depiction, in which a focus on difference fell short, reinforced Marxist intellectual Adolph Reed, Jr.'s critique of a focus on community within progressive politics, especially Black politics, which he argued in 1996 was a "mystification". Because as social groups are made from distinct individuals, Reed went on, "the less attention is paid to cultivating and protecting the sphere of negotiation, the more the balance shifts to coercion. The rhetoric of community is impatient with the former, and its myth of authenticity rationalizes the latter."[122] For both Butler and Reed, a fuller critique that went beyond inclusion was needed.

Butler appreciated the value of diversity and its limitations, an approach further developed

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[121] Butler, *Talents*, 18, and Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, 'Old and New Slavery, Old and New Racisms: Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler's Parables Series', *Extrapolation*, 52, 3 (2011), 293-294.
[122] Adolph Reed Jr., 'The Curse of 'Community'', *The Village Voice*, 16 January, 1996.

via her depiction of privatisation and the economic and cultural dimensions of racism. A logic of inclusion and exclusion was maintained through both the vestiges of neoliberal capital and the increased levels of poverty. Whilst still within the walled community, Olamina's family considers joining Olivar, a nearby town that, in its totality, has been "taken over, bought out, privatised" by a transnational corporation who want to monopolise farming, water, and alternative energy across the US southwest. This accelerated model of neoliberal privatization, where not just individual utilities or services were privatised but entire towns and their people, was accepted because it was seen as offering a modicum of security, even though it came at the expense of freedom.

Even within this race towards the bottom for security, people of colour were excluded. Olamina's Father calls Olivar a "white enclave" and argues that capital's allocation of its meagre benefits still operated through racial lines, as the town which Olamina's walled community was within was "too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone".[123] Slavery has also re-emerged within Butler's dystopia, exemplified by the 're-education' pushed by Christian America, and the enslavement by corporations that arose from workers falling into debt, and a racial hierarchy was still present here as it was noted that "they like white men to be drivers."[124] However, slavery was not just a component of large-scale production. It was also part of the informal lawless economy, and the slave trader introduced to directly exemplify this process is described as "so neutral-colored that he could have been a pale-skinned Black man, a Latino, or a dark-skinned White."[125] Slavery contained a racial component within the *Parables* series, but Butler portrayed the violence

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[123] Butler, *Sower*, 112-113.
[124] *Ibid.*, 306.
[125] Butler, *Talents*, 95.

behind it as a part of the wider human condition, with Sarah Outterson noting that for

Butler "violence is inevitable" because it was a fundamental part of humanity's survival

instinct.[126] Violence, and fear of it, thus unified the economic and cultural dynamics of race

and racism within the *Parables* novels. Overall, Butler rejected the notion of neoliberal

multiculturalism, finding that difference was insufficient to overcome the inherent problems

of human nature. Racism and privatisation were a component of Butler's grim reality, as

they served to facilitate violence within her near future dystopia and thus turned the

Parables novels into cautionary tales.

Butler's novels subverted trends within science fiction, using the genre to outline her sense

of obfuscation, and, ultimately, offered an idea of how to challenge it. She outlined her

Parables series as cautionary tales, as she imagined the dystopia that would emerge if

climate change and the neoliberal excess that accelerated it were not diverted from. The

solution that Butler offered was Earthseed, a religion based upon acknowledging and

focusing the negativity that was within human nature towards productive ends. Butler

produced a nuanced analysis of religion, viewing it as capable of offering a false sense of

comfort and enabling authoritarianism, but she also portrayed it as able to provide the focus

to overcome the hierarchical impulse within human nature.

The development of Earthseed and Acorn enabled Butler to offer an alternative narrative

that was explicitly designed to challenge obfuscation. Through Acorn, Butler demonstrated

the potential of Earthseed and the limitations of neoliberal multiculturalism and its focus on

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[126] Sarah Outterson, 'Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy', *Utopian Studies*, 19, no.3 (2008), 448.

difference, as her enclave is still destroyed. The reality within the *Parables* novels is harsh

and dangerous: racism continues and has an economic and cultural aspect to it that

enhances the cautionary tale of the novels. Ultimately, Butler was a pessimist but not to the

point of nihilism: she argued that human nature was often self-destructive, and that

obfuscation enhanced this feature. However, her novels suggested, by acknowledging this

reality and directly engaging with it, the negative aspects of human nature could be

overcome.

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Bret Easton Ellis and Octavia Butler differed in approach and background and yet their

fiction probed similar affective undercurrents, as their negative conception of human nature

led them to illustrate a grim reality being obfuscated by narratives that offered a sense of

pleasure or comfort. Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama* all attempted

to challenge narratives of success and aspiration, as he cut through affluent California

youth, yuppiedom, and celebrity. His method involved a combination of flat affectless prose

and hyperbolic reproductions of the groups he was satirising to ultimately portray them as

decadent and depraved. Ellis thus espoused a moralising critique rather than advocating for

a specific alternative, a process that he achieved by emphasising the corrupting effects of

competition and by disconnecting his narrators from reality through passivity, their

relentless desire for consumption, or their vapidity.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* were depictions of a near future

dystopia that had been produced via climate change, and within this landscape danger and

brutality are a constant and yet people are unable to comprehend this, and they accept

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obfuscation as an alternative. Butler, through Earthseed, offered an idiosyncratic alternative that attempted to acknowledge and focus the negative impulses within human nature so that they could be directed in a beneficial direction and away from neoliberal excess. Within this portrayal Butler offered a sophisticated account of religion that was able to outline how it was able to obfuscate and enable violence, whilst still also being a vitally important medium for social cohesion. Additionally, Butler subverted neoliberal multiculturalism and found that its focus on difference was insufficient. Nevertheless, she still appreciated the value of diversity and found that racism and its resulting violence formed an aspect of grim reality.

Ellis and Butler were both authors that sensed obfuscation and interpreted it not just as a disorientating condition that destabilised an individual's ability to connect to reality, but as a sign that obfuscation formed a wider climate and mood that enabled exploitation and harm through facilitating the continuance of a grim reality. From this, their work attempted to challenge narratives that offered a false sense of success or comfort, as these narratives inhibited society's ability to recognise the dangers it was creating.

Conclusion
Losing Intellectually, Politically, and Culturally under Neoliberalism

The disparate group of public intellectuals discussed within this dissertation all felt a sense of obfuscation, and this point, and their analysis itself, suggested that the left was not in a moment of ascendancy during the 1980s and 1990s, whether politically, culturally, or economically. Essentially, they were all losers: society was not magnetised in the direction of their critiques. Instead, they tried to pierce the film of obfuscation over society, an effort that needed to be accomplished before they could attempt to outline and contribute towards the creation of an alternative material reality. This barrier of obfuscation inhibited the left, and it was driven by neoliberalism's logic of competition. Neoliberal rationale spanned the political spectrum, and its marketisation of narratives allowed power, in terms of either physical coercion or implicit influence, and change, be it in terms of evolution or revolution, to operate as detached and obscured, as the narratives used to explain these modes and mechanics were at least one step removed from the actual practises and shifts that were occurring. Neoliberal rationality inhibited the knowability of reality, impeding left intellectuals' ability to 'get to the root' of issues.[1] As a result, neoliberalism was sustained

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[1] For the interpretation of radicals as pushing towards the root of issues see: Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The US Left Since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5-6.

through a process of abstraction and inaccurate clarification and its capacity to shift and detach added an additional layer of difficulty for left thought and action.

Through its examination of seven writers and public intellectuals, this dissertation has analysed various strands of left-wing thought during the 1980s and 1990s and how they consistently identified a climate, mood, and tone obfuscation, as the public intellectuals launching these critiques interpreted the public and the establishment as disconnected from reality. In this sense, they found themselves living through and using their writing to diagnose an age of obfuscation. These efforts were not ontological theories. Instead, they were attempts to challenge obfuscation and were built on the assumption that there was a shared, collective, and knowable reality, even though there was debate about its precise nature. Chomsky, Vidal, Didion, Willis, Frank, Ellis, and Butler all outlined their commitment towards a knowable reality through attempts to debunk the inaccurate or suboptimal aspects of the establishment narrative that engendered obfuscation.

In light of this shared perspective, these public intellectuals can be drawn together via Raymond Williams's structure of feeling concept, as their analysis attempted to capture, and in turn reflected, on both micro and macro levels, a sensation that was consistently present within politics and culture during the 1980s and 1990s. This sense of obfuscation, in terms of how the intellectuals analysed its production and maintenance, and how they themselves operated, mirrored and demonstrated a neoliberal marketplace of narratives model where narratives across society were interacted with and placed in competition with each other, as they were bought, sold, and invested in. This enabled a departure from reality, as individuals

subscribed to narratives that either affirmed their status as winners or which were pushed down from above. Within both the scholarly analysis of neoliberalism and the logics identified by the intellectuals analysed here, there is the sense that for society's losers, acceptance or rejection of narratives that departed from their material reality could lead towards obfuscation or alienation, and winners could fall into obfuscation if they committed to a winning narrative that did not actually offer salvation.

Left wing intellectuals during the 1980s and 1990s affirmed the existence of neoliberal economisation, where economic logic dominated, as they consistently found that what was true was what sold. Moreover, the left were losers in this period, their analysis consistently suggested that politics, economics, and culture all shifted away from them and that they perceived themselves and their ideas to wield little influence. It was this alienation that allowed the left to sense the climate, mood, and tone of obfuscation that was operating at a feverish intensity. Ultimately, the public intellectuals under analysis here outlined, operated through, and challenged a neoliberal mode of discourse that was based upon a market logic that placed narratives in competition with each other and which consequently prioritised winning over reality — elevating obfuscation to one of the central affects of the period.

Disconnected Intellectuals

Whilst all the intellectuals discussed here existed within specific traditions (i.e., Chomsky's place within anarchism or Willis's embeddedness within feminist thought) they were all largely unaffiliated with a specific movement or institution, and none were strict adherents

to an established ideology during the 1980s and 1990s. They rarely called for specific policies or outlined specific political visions and the means through which to achieve them — they were generally too idiosyncratic or independent. Moreover, their 'untethered' approaches allowed them to cover a range of subjects without frontloading an intellectual tradition and all its baggage. Resultingly, they crafted space for themselves to find new angles and to retain a degree of style and accessibility. Regarding this latter point, none of the intellectuals explored here held strong connections to the Old Left, none of them were communists, and Marxist rhetoric was sparsely used or was totally absent. There were also a range of differences between them, encapsulating the variety of avenues that left-wing thought could explore. Chomsky, Vidal, and Didion all paid substantial attention to the establishment's empirical record and tried to draw attention to it, be it in regard to foreign policy, media practice, or electoral politics. Part of their critiques were designed to speak to an audience who did not consider themselves radical, or even political in general, and to spark a change within them. On the other hand, Willis, Frank, Ellis, and Butler were all prepared to engage in the murky world of cultural politics, as they tried to articulate the emotional core of life under neoliberalism whilst also speaking to more specialised audiences, be it how Willis and Frank waded into intra-left debates, or how Ellis invoked the style and tone of affluent California youth culture, and how Butler developed and revised what could be expected from science fiction. Furthermore, this dichotomy of public and specialised audiences was crossed by discussions of human nature. Chomsky and Willis both adopted positive interpretations, whilst Ellis and Butler were more negative. Willis's specialist approach and positive interpretation makes her distinctly valuable, as her critique transcended the need to use positivity as a way to resonate with the public, and it avoided suggestions of fatalism or nihilism as it attempted to redirect and galvanise leftist thought.

At this final juncture, then, it is worth briefly reclarifying how each of them operated, the significance of their ideas in and of themselves and for their relationship to neoliberal obfuscation, and to then make some broader remarks about how they are perceived today and the contemporary relevancy of their critiques.

Noam Chomsky is still alive, now into his nineties, and little has changed. He still writes and gives speeches and lectures and his approach towards politics and the media is still consistent with the lines he drew in the 1980s and 1990s — his 'belligerent' commitment towards the empirical record, and with this a knowable reality, remains unwavering. He views the post-2016 rise of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Democratic Socialism more generally as a positive, as they represented an attempt to correct to the rightward shift and return to a New Deal-style order. However, he does not think they constitute an embrace of socialism, as by his understanding that would require greater calls for society and the economy to depend upon democratic control.[2] Despite the rise of the internet and social media, Chomsky argues that the propaganda model is still applicable, and with this his sense of obfuscation, as the news content on social media is still predominately produced by major media institutions.[3] Chomsky's division between goals and visions still remains in place, as he advocated voting for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020, maintaining his argument that voting was but one tool that activists had to

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[2] Noam Chomsky and John Nichols, 'There are reasons for optimism', *Catalyst*, 3, no.1 (Spring 2019).
[3] Alan MacLeod and Noam Chomsky, 'Still Manufacturing Consent, an interview with Noam Chomsky', *Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent*, ed. by Andrew MacLeod (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 14 -15.

draw upon and that it was not a fatal compromise to support the Democratic party.[4] This

was especially the case in the face of Trump, a man Chomsky labelled a "disgusting

creature" who had reached the status of the "worst criminal in human history" as his

administration's climate policies threatened to push humanity towards destruction.[5] The

stakes have never been higher for Chomsky, yet he still refuses to capitulate to nihilism and

does so without offering mollifying platitudes or banal distractions. This relentless

commitment sees Chomsky maintain his position as a public intellectual whose approach

was designed to resonate with the general public and pre-empt his establishment critics —

he makes explicit the problem and its cause and then tightly ties this to an empirical record.

It is for this reason that Chomsky's sense of obfuscation in the 1980s and 1990s was

significant — he positioned it as a force and sensation that mediated the relationship

between the establishment and the public, and that understanding obfuscation was part of

the process of developing positive shifts within society.

Gore Vidal died in 2012. He did not attempt to win office again after his defeat in the 1982

California Democratic Senatorial primaries, but he did continue writing, and as noted earlier,

he became increasingly notorious — including delving into 9/11 conspiracy theories.[6]

However, in the 1980s Vidal's combination of a patrician sensibility, actual connections to

the American political and cultural establishment, and a sharp criticism of them allowed

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[4] 'Chomsky: I'd 'absolutely' vote for Hillary Clinton', accessed 10.3.21,
https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/noam-chomsky-supports-hillary-clinton-218192, and 'Mehdi Hasan
and Noam Chomsky on Biden vs. Trump', accessed 10.3.21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39902cn5lX8.
[5] 'Noam Chomsky Believes Trump Is "the Worst Criminal in Human History"', accessed 10.3.21,
https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/noam-chomsky-believes-trump-is-the-worst-criminal-in-human-history.
[6] Gore Vidal, 'The Enemy Within', *The Observer*, 27 October, 2002.

him, especially during his election campaign, to act as a competitor in the marketplace of narratives. He outlined a discrepancy between the establishment's narratives, which he framed as bolstering their position, and reality and willingly used his own connection to further his critique. To an extent, there are parallels between Vidal and Trump: both were celebrity politicians, both embraced forms of populism, and both had a penchant for insults. Vidal was not a progenitor to Trump, as the differences in their politics were too broad, but Vidal's efforts did represent an earlier attempt to merge celebrity with populism and to disrupt a self-serving political class. This desire for disruption directly relates to obfuscation, as those affected by it search for narratives to rectify their disconnection. The logic of the marketplace of narratives affords space for attempts to challenge, and crucially in relation to Vidal and Trump, position oneself as challenging, the establishment. Consequently, Vidal's 1982 election campaign acted as a pertinent case study that exemplified both his own sense of obfuscation and how the marketplace of narratives operated.

In late 2021 Joan Didion died, but in the years before her position as a literary icon was cemented. During the 2000s Didion lost her husband and daughter within two years of each other and catalogued her experiences of grief in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011). Then, in 2012, her lifetime of writing was formally recognised when President Obama presented her with the National Humanities medal. Didion's status as America's premier personal essayist remains: challengers to the crown, such as Jia Tolentino, have risen but have never managed to balance the combination of subtlety and scathing wit that marked Didion's writing, even though she leant towards solipsism and self-

indulgence rather than explanation and analysis.[7] Didion's writing during the 1980s and

1990s outlined the workings and logics of the marketplace of narratives as it modulated

political discourse, and she analysed the role of the political class within it — efforts that

ultimately contextualised the environment that Vidal was competing within. Didion's

'finding' of an insular, myopic, and self-serving political class that was driven by insider

baseball rather than informing and acting in the interests of the public continues to ring

true. Corey Robin, in a 2019 essay for *Dissent* that reviewed the memoirs of various Obama

administration staffers — echoing Didion's own 'In the Realm of the Fisher King' essay in

which she reviewed the memoirs from the Reagan era — claimed that the Aaron Sorkin's

West Wing television programme was the cultural touchstone for the "Obamanauts" — an

obsequious programme that relentlessly extols the intelligence and integrity of its fictional

White House staffers. Robin noted that Obama himself held a vision that was "less of power

than of process, the culmination of twenty years of political theory journals where

democracy was deliberation and deliberation was democracy" and that his aides "live in

that sweet spot where Hollywood is history and history is Hollywood, where celebrities are

the secret sauce of social policy and producers are aides-de-camp to politicians."[8] This

analysis suggests that Vidal and Didion's view of the political class as self-serving is still

applicable. They were writers whose critique was influenced by their own liminal status, as

their efforts represented attempts to explain the establishment from the inside to those

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[7] For collection of Tolentino's writing see: Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror* (London: 4th Estate, 2020), and for an astute critique of Tolentino's collection see: Lauren Oyler, 'Ha Ha! Ha Ha!', *London Review of Books*, 23 January, 2020. See the following for where Tolentino is compared to Didion: '12 Books We Can't Wait to Read This Summer', accessed 10.3.21, https://www.vulture.com/2019/05/best-books-summer-2019.html.
[8] Corey Robin, 'The Obamanauts', *Dissent*, Autumn 2019.

outside of it, and in doing so they expressed their sense of obfuscation and that it was operating through a marketplace of narratives.

Ellen Willis and Thomas Frank were both cultural critics whose analysis of faux dissent represented an exploration, driven by their radical attitudes, of the barriers that existed between paradigms of thought and the myopia of the establishment. For Willis, this arose through her analysis of pleasure and the necessity of a psychological shift to achieve progressive change, be it in relation to sex or drugs, and her nuanced critique of identity politics. She died in 2006 and the issues and tensions she identified in the 1980s and 1990s are still present. The advent of internet pornography and online dating can hardly be said to have transformed sexual psychology, and her identification of guilt as hindering left politics and activism is still relevant, as the performance of it has arguably spread. Moreover, Willis's focus on pleasure itself being legitimate has been complicated: it has interlinked with the neoliberal ethos of 'wellness' as a means for optimisation and has extended the logic of commodification, and despite the legalisation of marijuana the war on drugs has continued and the opioid crisis has developed, points that hardly suggest that the relationship to drugs has gone through a fundamental shift. However, Willis's approach towards pleasure was embedded within collectivism, rather than the individualism of optimisation. Willis managed to track the flow of the culture wars and offered a critique that was grounded in her capacious political imagination, as she focused on the psychological impact of politics, the lines drawn around pleasure, and the value of culture to creating

change. Ultimately, her critique interlinked neoliberal obfuscation with her commitment towards authenticity and a radical alternative society.

Frank's writing in *The Baffler* in the 1980s and 1990s reflected a certain kind of anger as he, and the 'punk' sensibility of the publication, railed against commodification and its capacity to close potential avenues for dissent. Frank, unlike Willis, saw the 1960s as a period of failure that had hollowed out American culture, as it was the admen who were the true inheritors of the decade's churn. In contemporary terms, there are parallels between Frank's interpretation of the advertising industry positioning itself as subversive and the cult of 'disruption' within Silicon Valley, as billionaire app developers in fleece vests tremble with excitement at the thought of digitising another basic social interaction or utility. Moreover, corporations have continued to position themselves as vehicles of dissent, implying that buying their products leads to rebellion. The phenomenon of 'woke capitalism' has led to the ice-cream company, Ben and Jerry's, to launch the 'Pecan Resist' flavour of ice-cream which calls for customers to "pass the Pecan Resist and join the movement."[9] Or there is the infamous Pepsi advert that was released in the spring of 2017, in which reality TV star and model Kendall Jenner takes part in a photo shoot when she sees a protest march past her with signs emblazoned with "Join the Conversation" and the peace symbol. She abandons the photo shoot and strides to the front of the protest and on her way picks up a can of Pepsi which she proceeds to give to a police officer who is part of a barrier stopping the march, he takes it and drinks it, the protesters burst into applause and hug each other and

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[9] 'We Can Resist! Introducing Pecan Resist | Ben & Jerry's', accessed 10.3.21,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rJ_X1tKwAQ.

the officer smiles approvingly to his colleague.[10] Why bother defunding the police when we have sugar water that is loved by all? Frank's anger towards the "commodification of dissent" in the 1980s and 1990s was ultimately a point that he could not see beyond, as it provoked his hostility towards the establishment despite this same anger also, by his own logic, endearing him towards, and making him compatible with them. Nevertheless, his efforts elucidated how the establishment had constricted the left at the end of the twentieth century.

Bret Easton Ellis is still writing: since the appearance of *Glamorama* in 1998 he has published two more novels and a collection of essays. The first novel, *Lunar Park* (2005) was a pseudo-memoir cum horror novel that he used to dissect suburban existence, his own history, and his reputation. The second, *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010) was a loose sequel to *Less Than Zero*. The collection of essays, *White* (2019), saw Ellis wade into cultural and political analysis and shift towards the right. Ellis's critique of wealth and the narratives that position its resulting lifestyles as aspirational, which he produced in *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama* is still relevant. For example, the 'Rich Kids of Instagram' social media account that has over 350,000 followers and shares photos of wealthy teenagers and young adults, often on private planes wearing luxury clothing brands, offers a merger between *Less Than Zero*, *American Psycho*, and *Glamorama* as it sincerely recreates and mirrors all that Ellis was trying to satirise.[11] The account carriers forward the focus on youth from *Zero*, the focus of clothing, brands, and wealth from *Psycho*, and through the use

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[10] 'Full Pepsi Commercial Starring Kendal Jenner', accessed 10.3.21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwvAgDCOdU4.

[11] 'rkoi', accessed 10.3.21, https://www.instagram.com/rkoi/?hl=en.

of Instagram and its disassociating reproductions, edits, and fixation upon images echoes

Glamorama. Ellis's writing is both outward and inward looking, his satirical impulse

grounded in his own emotional reaction to the environments and cultural logics he found

himself within, and he approached obfuscation as both an individual emotional condition

and as a wider mood. Despite the economic and cultural shifts that have occurred since

Zero's first publication in 1985, the sense of ennui that Ellis produced and his critique of

aspiring towards wealth and its trappings are still cutting.

Octavia Butler died in 2006. Whilst she never finished the *Parables* series, she did continue

to write, and published *Fledgling*, a vampire novel, in 2005. In more recent years Butler's

popularity has increased: in 2020, for the first time, she reached the *New York Times's*

bestseller list, a lifetime personal goal.[12] The tradition of Black speculative fiction and

Afrofuturism has continued and has pushed into the mainstream, such as with the 2018

blockbuster film, *Black Panther* or the albums of the artist Janelle Monáe. In literature, 2020

saw the speculative fiction author and Black woman, NK Jemisin also receive a MacArthur

fellowship. Jemisin penned an introduction to *Parable of the Talents* where she outlined her

own history with Butler's series and her experiences as a Black science fiction writer. She

noted that the genre has been resistant to change, but the marginalised authors writing

within it have pushed it to and have managed to achieve some success, in part, as "Butler's

memory demanded no less."[13] Butler set the *Parables* novels in the 2020s, and whilst the

full-scale societal collapse has yet to break out, the effects of climate change are more than

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[12] 'Octavia Butler has finally made the *New York Times* Best Seller list', accessed 11.3.21,
https://lithub.com/octavia-butler-has-finally-made-the-new-york-times-best-seller-list/.
[13] 'Exclusive preview: Octavia E. Butler's prescient Parable books get gorgeous reissue', accessed 11.3.21,
https://ew.com/books/2019/02/25/parable-octavia-butler-reissue/.

already here, within the US alone the frequency and intensity of dramatic weather events has increased, be it forest fires in California or ice storms in Texas. Moreover, whilst Butler's prediction may have been slightly early, her observation and critique of the fear that hinders people from engaging with reality is still applicable, be it climate change denial or conspiracies based around a deep state, as problems are dismissed or refocused through incomprehensible lenses. The *Parables* series was concerned with survival and salvation in a dystopian setting, and whilst the full magnitude of disaster differs between what Butler imagined and present reality, her sense of what might stymie action seems to have been accurate.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

If neoliberalism, the marketplace of narratives, and obfuscation is as deeply ingrained and widespread as I have suggested, it needs to be reckoned with. There needs to be a relentless focus on reality and not insider baseball. No matter how grim reality is, the self-serving political class need to be confronted. This can be achieved via a commitment to overturning brutality and focusing on authenticity and ultimately compassion, as it is the latter which holds the potential to undermine the logic of competition that is bolstered by neoliberalism. A paradigm of thought needs to form that can hold together idealism and a capacious imagination with an unwavering awareness of material reality. Chomsky, Vidal, Didion, Willis, Frank, Ellis, and Butler embodied aspects of this, as they ultimately managed to stretch the film of obfuscation even though they did not manage to fully pierce through it. Doing so now seems unlikely: the climate crisis has begun – dystopia appears more likely than utopia. The remaining task for the intellectual class is to leave a record that

demonstrates that there were attempts to breed cohesion and find salvation, and to prove

that there was a requiem for reality. More than that is owed, but a renewed commitment to

accuracy and the explanation of reality is, at the very least, their minimal responsibility.

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