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The Post-Industrial Imagination:
A Media-Philosophical Inquiry into a Post-Capitalist Future

by

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Abstract

This doctoral dissertation investigates potential political shifts introduced by the post-industrialization of Western societies. After a genealogical analysis that explains why the dimension of the technological has become an increasingly important site of politics for Marxist theory in the post-industrial age, the dissertation examines the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in order to demonstrate the contradictory way in which these theorists argue that the rise of new information and communication *media* has actually resulted in a lack or absence of *mediation* in a political sense. This dissertation asserts that this contradictory formulation of the politics of the post-industrial society is demonstrative of a conceptual incompatibility between contemporary media theory and political philosophy, and, accordingly, the remainder of the dissertation attempts to reconstruct the relationship between these otherwise disparate fields of thought, through a practice described within as *comparative political mediaolgy*. This combined media and politico-philosophical approach begins with a reading of Plato's *Republic*, in which it is argued that Plato's famous expulsion of the poets from his ideal republic is evidence that media theory and political philosophy in fact share a common genealogical root. Through a close reading of the *Republic*, this dissertation argues that Plato's philosophical critique of poetry was not in fact designed to limit discourse within the city-state but was rather an attempt to push the epistemological field of Greek culture beyond the confines of mere handed-down tradition. The final chapter of the dissertation then narrows the object inquiry from the larger field of

epistemology to more focused object of political philosophy by theorizing

Immanuel Kant's political theory in conjunction with print technology. Building

on Benedict Anderson's concept of "print capitalism," this chapter argues that

print technology is not merely part of the historical background of Kant's political

thought, but in fact fulfils an important categorical function within his political

theory itself: specifically, print technology is proffered by Kant as a solution to

the liberal-republican dilemma of how to politicize the modern liberal subject

without cancelling out its underlying privatized ontology, which is necessary for

the continued reproduction of market society. The dissertation then concludes

with some reflections on the historical interconnectedness between print

capitalism and liberal political philosophy and argues that the decline of print

technology in the post-industrial age offers an opportunity to move beyond the

negative freedom characteristic of modern political thought.

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Introduction

The overall aim or end of this PhD dissertation is to attempt to construct a combined theoretical approach in which the discourses of media theory and political philosophy are used in a new and different fashion, in order to generate a more cogent articulation of the ways in which the saturation of Western societies with digital information and communications media are altering, perhaps fundamentally, the contemporary political landscape. The original impetus for this project issued from my exposure to the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri during my time as a graduate student in Departments of English at McMaster University and the University of Alberta. I was drawn to their work not only as result of the overall explanatory power of their account of the transition to a post-industrial, "knowledge" or "information" society, but also because of the theoretical novelty through which they articulated the emancipatory political potential inhering in the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial mode of production and accumulation. As George Caffentzis suggests, and which was true in my experience, the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri has "proven so attractive" because "they present a collection of new concepts or new approaches to old ones, (e.g., cognitive capitalism, the General Intellect, immaterial labour, affective labour, biopower, common, Empire, multitude, rent, capture, singularity, formal and real subsumption, living knowledge) appropriate to the conditions of post-post-Keynesian or post-post-Fordist capitalism, with a chance of providing a theory that might, finally, 'grip the masses,'

or, in their terminology, the 'multitude.'"[1] Yet if the initial genesis of the project

began with my interest and excitement in reading Hardt and Negri's work,

particularly with respect to their optimistic insistence that the conditions for altering

capitalist society already exist within the technological framework of post-industrial

or post-Fordist capitalism itself, what ultimately sustained this project over the past

two years has been my dissatisfaction with what seemed to me to be a substantial

conceptual contradiction or lacunae in their work centered around the concept of

mediation, and the inability to develop a cogent account of how the rise of new

information and communication technologies are re-shaping the post-industrial

political landscape that issues from this conceptual contradiction at the heart of their

work. While Chapter Two of this dissertation provides a more sustained and

thorough discussion of this conceptual problem, the importance of this problematic

for orienting the dissertation as a whole merits some brief and introductory remarks.

The work of Hardt and Negri can, generally speaking, be understood as part

of a general trend in Deleuzian-inspired cultural theory that, over the past decade, has

attempted to move beyond the older linguistic-structural framework of cultural

theory, in which concepts like ideology, hegemony, and signification played a

defining role, in order to generate an account of power that is increasingly *immediate*

in character. One strain of thought within this more general trend has approached the

problem through reference to the concept of *affect*, which is rightly considered to be

an increasingly important category for understanding the function of power under

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[1] George Caffentzis, "Critique of 'Cognitive Capitalism.'" *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work,*

post-industrial conditions.[2] Brian Massumi's work, for instance, which can be taken

as paradigmatic of this trend, argues that the older linguistic-structural model of

analysis, from which the field of cultural studies was effectively born in the 1980s

and 1990s, produces what he calls "the thoroughly mediated or discursive body,"

which is a body that "makes sense," as he puts it, but doesn't itself *sense*.[3] This older

model, for Massumi, operates by using a kind of cultural geography or positionality

that "catches a body in a cultural freeze-frame" and therefore, as it is often put,

prioritizes *being* over *becoming* (or prioritizes static positions to bodies in motion).[4]

In an effort avoid this problematic reification in cultural analysis, Massumi asserts

what he calls the "autonomy of affect," in which affect is not manifest through

processes of signification but is rather embodied in purely autonomic reactions that

are disconnected from meaningful sequencing and narration. And for Massumi, the

centrality of affect as a category of cultural theory for understanding how power

functions is made possible by the rise of information and communication

technologies driving the larger process of post-industrialization itself. "Affect,"

writes Massumi, "is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based

late capitalist culture."[5]

      Whereas Massumi's account of the increasing immediacy of power under

post-industrial conditions is centered around the concept of affect, Hardt and

Negri's work involves a much more expansive or macro-account of the structural

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[2] For a more thorough discussion of the importance of affect as theoretical category in contemporary cultural and political theory, see Patricia Ticineto Clough, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[3] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

[4] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 3.

[5] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.

alterations that mark the emergence of the post-industrial economy and society itself, specifically the rise of cognitive or intellectual labour as the post-industrial economy's principle productive force, the immaterial nature of the commodities produced by cognitive labour, and the general diffusion of communication and information technologies that supports these economic processes. For Hardt and Negri, then, contemporary economic reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by the communicative relationships that characterize the conditions of cognitive labour within what they call a biopolitical production regime of production. Extrapolating from this basic economic and sociological dynamic, Hardt and Negri move on to theorize a much grander scenario in which the compartmentalized spheres of Western modernity – politics, economics, culture, etc. – have been or are being collapsed and fused together, forming an all-encompassing or immanent system, a capitalist axiomatic, in which, as they put it, "the social conflicts that constitute the political confront one another directly, without *mediations* of any sort."[6]

While it is not the aim or intention of this dissertation to critique the overall narrative Hardt and Negri offer concerning the growing immediacy of power under post-industrial conditions *per se*, what I am interested in is the way in which this narrative suffers from what seems to me to be a significant conceptual contradiction or inadequacy concerning their respective accounts about the contemporary irrelevancy or inapplicability of the concept of mediation as a result of the shift to a post-industrial, post-Fordist or biopolitical society. For

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[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 393, emphasis added.

insofar as the rise of new information and communications technologies are considered to be the infrastructural condition necessary for facilitating the transition to a biopolitical regime of production, then the narrative Hardt and Negri articulate is one in which a contemporary condition of political *immediacy* is understood to be an effect of a larger surfeit of *media* that defines the post-industrial environment. In other words, Hardt and Negri offer a strange conceptual scenario in which the exponential increase in new forms of technological *media* is paradoxically articulated as producing a lack of *mediation* in political terms.

What is most striking about this conceptual contradiction, however, is the degree to which it reveals, as this dissertation suggests, the contemporary dysfunctionality of media theory and political philosophy under post-industrial conditions. For while the assertion that mediation declines as media increases is, at a surface level, contradictory outright, I do not think the underlying premises that lead to the formulation of this assertion are themselves erroneous. On the one hand, there has undoubtedly been an exponential rise in new digital information and communications media over the past two decades and, on the other hand, the intensification of neoliberalism and globalization during this same period has permitted capital to invest in the social field in an increasingly direct or immanent fashion, such that political mediation has declined. Thus the fact that this assertion concerning the decline of mediation amidst an exponential increase of actual media is both accurate and utterly contradictory is most indicative, I argue, of a larger conceptual failure issuing from the increasingly out-dated character of our political discourse, and the way in which media technologies are rendered – or not

rendered – into political concepts themselves. The contradictory articulation of the changing character of political power under post-industrial conditions thus demands, as this project argues, a new theoretical approach with respect to the concept of *mediation* (and *media*) in which the fields of media theory and political philosophy enter in a new and more productive mode of intercourse or dialogue. For while these two fields of thought have both traditionally used the concept of mediation within their respective domains, the application of the concept of mediation in these fields have had, up until this point, very little to do with each other. Media theory, on the one hand, predominately uses the concept of mediation to analyze the changing shape and character of artistic or informational contents as they are stored, processed and disseminated according to different material media. And political philosophy, on the other hand, has generally had recourse to the concept of mediation in order to describe the ways in which power operates within societies that are increasingly compartmentalized; mediation speaks to the way in political power has tended to be, over the course of Western modernity, mostly *representative* in character, whereby power continually passes through various political "media" or societal sectors in the course of its exercise. Mediation, for political philosophy, thus describes the ebb and flow of power as it circulates amongst different strata or sectors of society that often espouse very different political ends. However, while the concept of mediation in the fields of media theory and political philosophy has tended to operate within very discrete categorical domains, it is precisely the underlying premise of Hardt and Negri, and many others, that the shift to a post-industrial, post-Fordist or biopolitical

regime has effectively rendered these processes simultaneous or overdetermined.

As Hardt and Negri assert throughout their work, "mediation is increasingly

absorbed into the productive machine itself [and] the political synthesis of social

space is now fixed in the space of communications."[7] Indeed, the central thesis

that Hardt and Negri advance in their work is that the information and

communications media driving post-industrialization as a whole are displacing

nothing less than the *state* as the prime locale or arena of contemporary politics:

where once the institutions of the nation-state housed and managed the web of

political subjectivities competing for power under the conditions of Western

modernity, it is now the "space of communications," as Hardt and Negri put it,

from which new post-industrial political subjectivities arise and exert themselves.

Effectively, then, this thesis implies that the new media technologies driving post-

industrialization demands as much attention from the field of political philosophy

as was once, for instance, given to the institution of the state over the past several

centuries. Yet the scenario that characterizes Hardt and Negri's account is one in

which the *multitude*, the prime political subject of the post-industrial age, is

characterized as simply devoid of mediation in political terms. How are we to

properly assess the changing political conditions introduced by new information

and communications media without being able to theorize the ways in which these

new technologies re-mediate the political relations and categories characteristic of

the post-industrial society? Are the previously dominant political categories and

processes of liberal modernity simply melting into a confused postmodern present

as new media technologies saturate the social landscape, or are new and emerging

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[7] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 33.

political patterns and associations forming within the post-industrial society that suggest new and different modes of political subjectivity or even political ontology?

The intent or end of this dissertation is thus to begin the work of putting media theory and political philosophy into a new kind of dialogue or interchange in such a way that makes it possible to theorize the politics of post-industrialism beyond the contradictory formulation in which a highly mediated political sphere is devoid of mediation. Chapter One begins the project by taking a step back from the work of Hardt and Negri in order to first demonstrate more generally why technology, or the dimension of the technological, has become an increasingly important site of politics for Marxist theory in the 21st century. After some opening remarks about the concept of technology in Aristotle, Heidegger and Marx, this chapter argues that there is a demonstrable trend or transition in Marx's thought in which technology is initially theorized as a source of social transformation, specifically in the *Grundrisse*, but is then discounted in *Capital* as a means of facilitating proletarian revolution, an event that is now considered to be a strictly political affair in Marx's view. Yet if Marx's thought on the topic of revolution demonstrates a transition from the *technological* to the *political*, Marxist theory during the twentieth century moves in the opposite direction, namely from the *political* to the *technological*. With special attention given to Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze, this chapter argues that the Autonomist Marxism of Hardt and Negri can be understood as a culmination of this trend in

Marxist thought in which the dimension of the technology is increasingly theorized as source of politics and political transformation.

After placing the work of Hardt and Negri at the forefront of this genealogical trajectory, Chapter Two then deals more directly with the contradictory account of mediation at the core of Hardt and Negri's theory of post-industrial politics. After an opening section that documents why, more generally speaking, that the media technologies associated with the rise of the Internet in the 1990s have been more favourably received in terms of their democratic potential than the mass media technologies of the twentieth century, this chapter provides a close reading of the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in order to more clearly articulate the contradictory way in which these two theorists argue that the rise of new information and communication *media* has resulted in a lack or absence of *mediation* in a political sense. After an analysis that demonstrates that Hardt and Negri's conception of political mediation is inextricably tied to the notion of "civil society" in Western political philosophy and that their narrative of the obsolescence of political mediation is a function of the demise of the civil society or public sphere under conditions of post-industrialization, the chapter concludes by arguing that Hardt and Negri's work demonstrates the degree to which media theory and political philosophy necessitate a new and combined theoretical approach in order to adequately theorize the alteration of political categories and subjectivities in an intensifying post-industrial context.

Whereas the first two chapters of this dissertation are mostly concerned with contemporary trends in cultural theory, media theory and political philosophy, the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation depart from the synchronic dimension in order to begin the work of re-constructing the relationship between media theory and political philosophy through an approach that this dissertation calls *comparative political medialogy*. The principle aim of these two chapters, then, is an attempt to understand how media theory and political philosophy can more usefully interact in the present conjuncture by more closely examining the relationship between media technologies and political categories, or political epistemology, in different socio-historical contexts and different media environments. Chapter Three begins the work of constructing this combined theoretical approach through a media-philosophical analysis of one of the founding texts in Western political philosophy, Plato's *Republic*. Focusing primarily on Plato's famous censorship of poetry and expulsion of the poets in this founding text, this chapter argues that despite the current impasse, media theory and political philosophy in fact share a common genealogical root in Plato. Through a close reading of the *Republic,* in which I argue that Plato's philosophical critique was not in fact designed to limit discourse within his city-state but was rather an attempt to push the epistemological field of Greek culture beyond the narrow confines of mere handed-down tradition, this chapter offers a powerful case study for theorizing the radical degree to which a shift in media technology can profoundly alter not only the political but also the epistemological

and ontological categories that structure and order a given social formation at a deep level.

And in Chapter Four, the final chapter of the dissertation, I build on the comparative approach used in Chapter Three by theorizing the liberal political philosophies of Hobbes, Locke and Kant in conjunction with the infrastructural tendencies of print technology. By expanding on Benedict Anderson's synthetic concept of "print capitalism," which he used to great effect to theorize the genesis of modern nationalism or national consciousness in relationship to print technology, this chapter argues the combination of economic capitalism and print technology can also be theorized as producing one of the principle hegemonic political categories of Western modernity: namely the individual, or political individualism more precisely. After documenting some of the ways in which print culture can by understood as a unique media form in terms of its individualizing tendencies, the chapter concludes with a theoretical analysis of the important role that print technology, and its associated institutions, plays in the political philosophy of Immanuel Kant. More than merely constituting part of the socio-historical background of Kant's work, this chapter specifically argues that print technology permits a space or mechanism whereby Kant is able to politicize the modern liberal subject in such a why that does not undermine the fundamentally privative and individualistic ontology of the liberal subject as per the imperatives of capitalist production and accumulation. In other words, this chapter demonstrates that print technology is proffered by Kant as a solution to the liberal-republican dilemma of how to politicize the modern liberal subject without

cancelling out its underlying privatized ontology necessary for capitalist accumulation. Thus whereas print technology is often theorized as means of expanding democratic agency, this chapter argues that print technology, as a category of modern political philosophy, provides an indispensible means for the continued reproduction of capitalist society as a whole. And, lastly, the fourth and final chapter is followed by a brief conclusion that articulates how some of the underlying economic and political tendencies of post-industrialism run counter to the basic narrative presuppositions or axioms of both capitalist accumulation and political liberalism, and suggest how, with further research, these tendencies might be used produce a new conception of the political subject beyond the confines of the negative freedom that largely defines the modern liberal subject.

Chapter 1: The Post-Industrial Imagination:
              Technology, Politics, and Marxism in the Post-Industrial Era

Techne-Logos: Aristotle and Heidegger

While the ultimate aim of this chapter is to contextualize the dissertation as a whole by tracing a discursive trajectory in which technology – and specifically media technologies – has become an increasingly important site or figuration of politics for Marxist or post-Marxist thought in the post-industrial present, it is always useful to commence such an exercise by gaining a more precise genealogical understanding of the basic concepts being traced. Thus the analysis of technology as a site of politics, and the politics of post-industrialism more generally, will begin with a discussion of the etymological and philosophical significance of the concept of technology in classical Greek thought (the work of Aristotle, in particular), then describes the significance of technology or the technological for Heidegger and Marx before finally articulating the ascent of technology *as* politics in Marxist theory over the course of the twentieth century.

What is immediately apparent when tracing the concept of "technology" or the "technological" back to its Greek origins is the degree to which the two etymological roots that comprises the modern concept technology – namely *techne* and *logos* – resist synthesis into a single term, according the significance of each component in the minds of their Greek progenitors. For while *techne,* which is most often translated into "craft," refers to the activities of craftspeople or artisans and involves the fabrication of objects that do not already exist in nature, *logos* most

often denotes the combination of things entirely natural, and specifically references

the faculty of human speech and language, and the utility of language for both

reasoned thought and political action. Thus the compound notion of the

"technological," for the Greeks, would have constituted a tensed if not outright

contradictory amalgam of the artificial and the natural within a single concept.

"Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle," writes Darin Barney, "did not combine

techne and *logos* into a single compound, because, to their minds, these words had

distinctive meanings that should not be casually collapsed into one: *techne* makes

things that do not already exist and that are, therefore, artificial; *logos* attempts to

gather that which always-already exists in Nature and is wholly true."[8]

In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle defines *techne* or craft as an act of

production rather than *action*. As Aristotle argues in Book VI, titled "Virtues of

Thought," there are five ways in which the human soul, or *psyche*, "grasps the truth,"

which include "craft [knowledge], scientific knowledge, prudence, wisdom and

understanding."[9] And while each of these five means of grasping or approaching the

truth do so in their own fashion, what is most particular to craft knowledge is it that it

specializes in knowledge of things produced, or knowledge of *artificiality*. "Every

craft," writes Aristotle, "is concerned with *coming to be*":

> And [thus] the exercise of the craft is the study of how something that admits
>
> of being and not being comes to be, something whose principle is in the
>
> producer and not in the product. For craft is not concerned with things that

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[8] Darin Barney, *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 28.
[9] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 87-88 [Book VI, Section III, 1139b]

are or come to be by necessity; nor with things that are by nature, since these

have principles in themselves.[10]

Thus for Aristotle, what is most distinctive – or essential – of craft knowledge or

techne is its artificial character: *techne* is not concerned with things that already exist

as a result of nature or natural processes, nor things that come into existence by

necessity. Rather *techne* involves the production of things that are both unnatural

and, strictly speaking, unnecessary and thus exist beyond the realm of what is

considered most essentially natural and human. And it is for this reason that Aristotle

conjoins *techne* or craft knowledge to the notion of *production*, and not *action*.

"Since production and action are different, craft must be concerned with production,

not action."[11] Thus whereas production denotes an activity that involves the

fabrication of artifice, it is in conjunction with the concept of *logos* that action proper

is situated. For while *logos* generally denotes the human capacity for speech,

language and reason, and thus, as Barney puts it, signifies "a gathering [or] a

collection … [and] the one unifying the many,"[12] speech and language, arguably the

principle manifestation of the *logos*, was also for the Greeks both the fundamental

and defining feature of the human being, which Aristotle famous described as a

"political animal." As Aristotle argues in his *Politics,*

> It is thus clear that man is a political animal, in a higher degree than bees or
>
> other gregarious animals. Nature, according to our theory, makes nothing in
>
> vain; and man alone of the animals is furnished with the *faculty of language*
>
> … language serves to declare what is advantageous and what is the reverse,

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[10] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 88 [Book VI, Section IV, 1140a]
[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 89 [Book VI, Section IV, 1140a]
[12] Barney, *Prometheus Wired*, 28.

and it's the peculiarity of man, in comparison with other animals, that he

alone possesses a perception of good and evil, of the just and unjust, and

other similar qualities.[13]

For Aristotle, then, as for Greek political culture in general, the human being is a

"political animal" not merely because she is inextricably "social," but because she is

endowed with the capacity for speech, or reasoned dialogue, which, in the Greek

mind, is likewise the defining *action* of politics itself. "Speech and action," observes

Hannah Arendt on this topic "were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same

kind and rank" and thus "finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart

from the information or communication they convey, is action."[14] Thus for Aristotle,

as for Greek culture in general, the concept of *logos* encompasses not only speech,

language and reason, understood as the natural and essential properties of the human

subject, but *logos* is also the basis for all genuine action, which is always conceived

as explicitly *political* action rather than mere physical effort or achievement. "To be

political, to live in a *polis*," observes Arendt, "meant that everything was decided

through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-

understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were

pre-political ways to deal with people."[15] Thus the compound notion of "technology"

that synthesizes *techne* and *logos* is not only problematic for Aristotle, and for Greek

thought more generally, because it awkwardly conflates the artificial with the natural,

but also because it problematically renders a non-political activity, namely

production, effectively coequal with the prime activity of politics as such, namely

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[13] Aristotle, *Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10-11 [1253a7], emphasis added.
[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 26.
[15] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26-27.

reasoned speech, or that activity or faculty that warrants Aristotle's definition of the human as a "political animal." In short, then, the politics of technology would have been a compromised, if not nonsensical, notion for Greek ontology and politics.

The most influential re-interpretation of Aristotle's position on technology vis-à-vis human activity and ontology has been Martin Heidegger's famous essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," in which Heidegger, like Aristotle, argues that modern technology is in a certain sense distinctive from that which is inherent in nature. Heidegger begins with the commonplace conception that technology is mere instrumentality, that technology is a product of human effort or activity and is simply a neutral means to some human-defined end. "To posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them," writes Heidegger, "is a human activity," and accordingly the "manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, manufactured and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serve, all belong to what technology is."[16] This spontaneous-ideological view is what Heidegger describes as the "instrumental and anthropological definition of technology": technology is produced by human activity, if it is not an extension of the human body itself as both Sigmund Freud and Marshall McLuhan argued,[17] and the creation of technology is never an end in itself but is always a means to some other end. "The power plant with its turbines and generators is a man-made means to an end already established by man."[18] Thus so long as technology is understood in both anthropological and instrumental terms, the question concerning technology, according to Heidegger, will

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[16] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology." *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 2008), 312.
[17] See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 29-44, and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
[18] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 312.

always be one of *mastery*: "we will, as they say, 'get' technology 'intelligently in hand.' We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control."[19]

After suggesting, however, that the "correct" and the "essential" are not necessarily the same thing, Heidegger argues that perhaps the essence of technology is not its function as a mere means to ends but rather something fundamentally different. To make this argument, Heidegger recalls Aristotle's four classical principles of causality from his *Physics*: (1) *causa materialis,* or the material from which an object is made, (2) *causa formalis*, or the form or the shape the object takes or imitates (3) *causa finalis,* which is the telos or end to which the object is designed and (4) *causa efficiens* which references the agent that puts the object into effect. Unsatisfied with these four causes alone, however, Heidegger, drawing from a conversation in Plato's *Symposium*,[20] argues that the underlying cause or action that unites these four causes together is a general *poiesis*, or what Heidegger calls a "revealing" or "bringing forth." "Technology is therefore no mere means," writes Heidegger, "technology is a way of revealing."[21] For Heidegger, then, the essence of technology is related to its mode of revealing, its *poiesis*, which Heidegger characterises using the term *Gestell*, or "enframing," and can be understood as an extension Aristotle's *causa efficiens*: rather than discussing the effects caused by a single agent of technological utility alone, Heidegger's notion of "enframing" encompasses the entire web of relationships affected by a technology and the way in

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[19] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 313.
[20] Plato, *The Symposium* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 42 [205b]. In this translation, *poiesis* is rendered into English as "composition."
[21] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 318.

which humanity and nature relate to one another as a result of the larger

technological apparatus through which they encounter each other. Accordingly, then,

what is problematic for Heidegger with respect to *modern* technology specifically is

that it tends not to relate itself to nature as *poiesis*: in other words, it does not merely

reveal nature through a specific technology framework, but rather modern

technology is, for Heidegger, more of an imposition than a revealing. "The revealing

that rules throughout modern technology," writes Heidegger, "has the character of a

setting upon, in the sense of a challenging forth."[22] For Heidegger, then, this

relationship between modern technology and nature is one in which technology now

effectively mediates, and hence separates, the rootedness of humanity in nature.

Where once technology – or rather *techne* more generally speaking – was a means by

which humanity brought forth something inherent in nature, modern technology now

imposes itself upon nature and to the extent that nature is transformed into a kind of

raw material for human consumption, or what Heidegger calls a "standing-reserve."

As Heidegger thus presciently asserted, nature as standing-reserve occasions "a

completely new relation of man to the world and his place in it. The world now

appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is

believed able any longer to resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an

energy source for modern technology and industry."[23]

     Thus if the very notion of technology is, in theory, a problematic term for

Aristotle and classical Greek thought in general, insofar as it conflates the artificial

and the natural into a single confused term, modern technology is problematic for

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[22] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 321.
[23] Martin Heidegger, *Discourses on Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 50.

Heidegger because it renders or enframes nature itself as artifice, as a little more than

an inventory of raw fuel or material for endless human consumption. And for

Heidegger, this warped relationship between humanity and nature, mediated by

modern technology is not only problematic for the natural world, but it may very

well exert a degenerative effect on human beings as well. "The threat to man does

not come in the first place from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of

technology," writes Heidegger, but rather "the actual threat has already afflicted man

in his essence. The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could

be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the

call of a more primal truth."[24] Modern technology is thus most dangerous not in its

ontic effects, in its tendency to place humans in perilous environments or expose

them to toxic pollution, but rather in its capacity to *ontologically* degrade the human

condition as such by forever divorcing the essentially Being of humanity from its

rootedness in nature.[25] In short, Heidegger suggests that modern technology has the

capacity to so "captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking

may someday come to be accepted and practiced *as the only* way of thinking."[26]

Yet as foreboding and pessimistic as Heidegger's thought may seem with

respect to the effects of modern technology on both nature and humanity itself, he

concludes his reflections about modern technology by arguing that it is precisely by

ignoring, or setting aside, the ontic or empirical problems of modern technology that

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[24] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 333.
[25] As Heidegger has asserted elsewhere, "Human experience and history teach us, so far as I know, that everything essential, everything great arises from man's rootedness in his homeland and tradition." "Only God Can Save Us Now: An Interview with Martin Heidegger." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* (vol. 6, no. 1, 1977), 17.
[26] Martin Heidegger, *Discourses on Thinking,* 56.

it is possible to change technologies mode of revealing and thereby reunite humanity and nature. Drawing inspiration from two lines of a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin – *but where danger is, grows the saving power also* – Heidegger argues that "precisely the essence of technology" – its mode of enframing as challenging-forth, and its concomitant status as mere standing-reserve – "harbor[s] in itself the growth of the saving power."[27] As Heidegger continues, we must "[catch sight of the essential unfolding in technology, instead of merely gaping at the technological. So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain transfixed in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology."[28] For Heidegger, then, it is only in pushing past the instrumental and anthropological definitions of technology, and understanding technology as, in essence, a mode of revealing, that the saving power can be seen and accessed. And it is at this point that Heidegger returns to Aristotle and his definition of *techne*. As Heidegger observes, the Greek notion of *techne* was more expansive than mere instrumental technique, but also included all of what we would today call the arts and culture, and it is therefore as a kind of return to the Greek conception of *techne* as artistic revealing that Heidegger hopes the saving power might be found. "Whether art may be granted this highest possibility of its essence in the midst of extreme danger, no one can tell," concludes Heidegger, but in it lies the hope that "the frenziedness of technology may entrench itself everywhere to such an extent that someday, throughout everything technological, the essence of technology may unfold essentially in the propriative event of truth."[29]

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[27] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 334.
[28] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 337.
[29] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 340.

While there is no doubt that this Aristotelian-Heideggerian trajectory of thinking technology remains influential in the present day, it is a trajectory in which technology does not play a significant as a site or configuration for politics. For both Plato and Aristotle, technology as politics effectively demands a conflation of *techne* and *logos* that undermines the distinctiveness of political action in the polis. In the Greek self-conception, politics is the work of head – or of a combination of head (reason) and voice more accurately – while *techne* is the work of the hands and is, in this sense, extra-political. And for Heidegger, the problematic status of modern technology, as a challenging-forth in which nature becomes a standing-reserve for human consumption while humanity itself is confined to a mere calculative that separates humanity from its true Being, is not addressed in terms of politics or human action, but demands a reflective or contemplative posture through which technology is rendered commensurate with the Greek *techne* and thereby becomes an endeavour in which instrumental, utilitarian and calculative reasoning is expanded into a more open-ended process of creative production. The relationship between technology and politics, and even technology and humanity, is however framed in a very different fashion in the works of Karl Marx. For unlike both Aristotle and Heidegger, Marx's dialectical approach eschews essentialist thinking when it comes to the definitions of humanity, nature and technology, and rather understands the human and the technological to be in constant and ever-changing metabolic relationship, and it is for this reason that, for Marx, technology can more easily be rendered a site or source of politics.

From Technological Fix to Political Revolution: Marx

Karl's Marx's conception of the intersection of humanity, technology and politics differs markedly from the Aristotelian-Heideggerian strain discussed above insofar as the dialectical approach used by Marx eschews any notion of human essence that figures so prominently in the philosophy of Aristotle and Heidegger. For Aristotle, *techne* and *logos* are distinctive not only because they are identified with the artificial and the natural respectively, but also because *techne* is a mode of fabrication or production that is not considered an essentially human activity, and thus does not fall under the definition of *action* properly speaking. In this respect, then, the transformation of nature into artifice, for Aristotle, does not correspondingly alter the nature or essence of its human producer; rather, Aristotle's definition of the human as a political animal is grounded in the human faculty for speech, communication, reason and persuasion (or action), which is to say *logos*, and thus for Aristotle the world of politics and world of work and technology are categorically separate. Marx's dialectical approach, however, which is an adaptation of Hegel's imposing philosophical system in a materialist rather than idealist mode, explicitly undermines the kind of categorical separation of *techne* and *logos*, or the artificial and the natural, and the work of the hand and the action of the head (reason) characteristic of ancient and modern philosophy. Unlike the older materialism of ancient philosophers such Anaxagoras, Epicurus and Democritus, which understood human action or sensation as passive and thus subordinate to the more active and determinate material object(s), Marx's dialectical materialism involves a process in which the interaction between subject and object necessarily alters both, regardless

of whether this interaction begins with the work of the human hand or of human brain.[30] "Knowledge in the old sense of passive contemplation," writes Bertrand Russell, is for Marx "an unreal abstraction; the process that really takes place is one of *handling* things … both subject and object, the knower and the thing known, are in a continual process of mutual adaptation [which Marx calls] 'dialectical' because it is never fully completed."[31] For Marx, then, the Aristotelian distinction between *techne* and *logos*, or production and action, is a categorical reification that denies the process of mutual interaction and change that results from humanity's constant interaction with the natural world.

Yet despite the importance that Marx attaches to this dialectical method, some of his earlier writings bear a remarkable similarity to the kind of essentialist thinking characteristic of Aristotle and Heidegger. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a collection of notebooks that were not published during his lifetime but which function as a bridge between the young Marx's Hegelian orientation and the more scientific or economic writings in the three volumes of *Capital*, Marx indeed appears at subscribe to a notion of human essence, and its fixed and universal relationship to the natural world. As Étienne Balibar puts it, the *1844 Manuscripts* combines "the influences of Rousseau, Feuerbach, Proudhon and Hegel with his first readings of the economists (Adam Smith, Jean-Baptiste Say, Ricardo, Sismondi) to produce a humanist, naturalistic conception of communism, conceived as the reconciliation of man with his own labour and with

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[30] For a criticism of Marx's view of ancient materialism, see his doctoral dissertation, "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature." Karl Marx, *The First Writings of Karl Marx* (Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 2006).

[31] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2009), 626.

nature, and hence with his 'species-being,' which private property had abolished, leaving him, as a result, 'estranged from himself.'"[32] Thus the ideal end of human activity and its relationship to nature, i.e. communism, seems to involve a return to a prior state of balance in which the essence of humanity is harmonized with the natural world. "Communism," as Marx describes it, is the "positive transcendence of private property, or human self-estrangement, and therefore [is] the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man":

> Communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social
> (i.e. human) being … This communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals
> humanism, and as fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the
> genuine resolution of conflict between man and nature and between man and
> man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between
> objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity,
> between the individual and the species."[33]

The Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* thus seems to subscribe to a conception of communism that is grounded in an essentialist or transcendent ontology, or a conception of the human subject that is divorced or "outside" the historical process in which capitalist exploitation is considered to "have been experienced as a trauma" that damaged or fragmented a preexistent and otherwise healthy or whole subject. And it is according to this conception of the human being that communism is imagined as an "ethico-political project" that "rehabilitates and

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[32] Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2007), 14.
[33] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 84.

reconstitutes the postulated originary unity of the subject"[34] which involves a
return to a more essential configuration rather than the dialectical movement
toward something fundamentally new.

However, if the work of the younger and more Hegelian Marx is grounded
in concepts like nature and species-being and therefore produces a more
naturalistic and non-dialectical approach to the question of communism, the more
economistic work of the mature Marx increasingly rejects this humanistic
approach to the question of social transformation and, instead, examines the role
of modern industry and technology for facilitating the transition from capitalism
to communism. That is to say that if Louis Althusser is correct in identifying an
"epistemological break" in Marx's thought after the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The
German Ideology* (1846), in which Marx abandon's his earlier humanistic
Hegelianism and adopted a more genuinely dialectical approach to the question of
communism,[35] this epistemological break or transition is also one which redefined
how modern industry and technology are conceived by Marx. For rather than a
return to a more natural state of being, communism, for Marx, is now a matter of
how human beings might alter their relationship to their increasingly "natural"
industrial conditions. That said, the specific way in which Marx conceives of the
relationship between humanity and modern industry or technology in his latter
writings is by no means uniform. As I argue below, there is a demonstrable shift
in Marx's thinking about the utility of technology for achieving political
revolution, particularly in between his writings in the *Grundrisse* and the

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[34] Yahya Madra, "Questions of Communism: Ethics, Ontology, Subjectivity." *Rethinking Marxism,* vol.18, no. 2 (2006), 210-211.
[35] See Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009).

publication of the first volume of *Capital*. Whereas technology takes an explicitly

active role in the process of social transformation in the *Grundrisse*, the Marx of

Capital reverses his earlier view and consigns technology to the background in

favour of a more explicitly political revolution arising out of the genesis of

working-class consciousness itself.

The more – indeed most – generous reading of the possibilities of technology

for leading to political and social change in Marx is found in the *Grundrisse*, which

is essentially a collection of notebooks that constitute the draft notes for *Capital*. In

this text, Marx argues that there is a distinction, or that there is slippage, between the

application of industrial technology within capitalist relations of production and the

potential for this technology to be put to different ends. Situated in what has been

retroactively labelled the "Fragment on Machines," Marx argues that the progressive

improvement of technology inherent to capitalist society[36] will eventually reach a

point at which technology would be so advanced as to actually release the worker, or

the working class, from the necessity of performing any manual labour whatsoever,

and with this radical shift in the relations of production would necessarily come

large-scale social re-organization in favour of working class emancipation:

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[36] This is one of the three axioms of capitalist production and society as identified by David
Harvey: "capitalism is necessarily technologically and organizationally dynamic. This is so in part
because the coercive laws of competition push individual capitalists into leap-frogging innovations
in their search for profit. But organizational and technological change also play a key role in
modifying the dynamics of class struggle, waged from both sides, in the realm of labour markets
and labour control. Furthermore, if labour control is fundamental to the production of profits and
becomes a broader issue for the mode of regulation, so technological and organizational
innovation in the regulatory system (such as the state apparatus, political systems of incorporation
and representation, etc.) becomes crucial to the preservation of capitalism. The ideology that
'progress' is both inevitable and good derives in part from this necessity" (*The Condition of
Postmodernity*. London: Blackwell, 1990), 180.

To the degree to which large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose 'powerful effectiveness' is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of science to production … Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather the human being comes to relate more as a watchman and regulator to the production process itself … He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor … With that, production based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis. The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which the corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.[37]

In this passage, Marx imagines that technology – or what is defined in the above passage as "the application of science to production" – enjoys a certain degree of autonomy within the confines of the larger mode of production within which it is embedded. While the progressive advance of technology is initially used to extract further and further labour power from the worker by paradoxically shortening necessary labour time, eventually the quantitative rise in labour-saving potential by

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[37] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. Trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 704-706.

mechanical invention will eliminate the need for manual labour altogether. And yet

rather than confining the majority of the species to total obsolescence, insofar as

most workers will now be permanently without jobs, this transformation will also

manifest itself in, or produce, what Marx calls the "General Intellect:"[38] for Marx,

the technological advancements that have released the empirical or individual worker

from the squalid and monotonous conditions of industrial manual labour is

accompanied by a concomitant advance in social or collective consciousness that

releases the working class itself from the larger conditions of exploitation as such.

Having cut their tethers from the industrial machine, the working class now finds

itself in a position to assert themselves as a class and influence social and economic

policy, and accordingly the elimination of physical work does not, for Marx, destine

the majority of workers to starvation and poverty but is rather realized in terms of the

collective minimization of work, and the concomitant maximization of free time and

energy that can now be used for the free development of all, for the benefit of all.

If the *Grundrisse* offers a narrative in which technology is figured as the

prime mover of social and political transformation while the human agent quite

literally "stands to the side," the narrative concerning the role of technology and

politics in *Capital* is almost diametrically opposed: rather than acting as a force that

facilitates social transformation, technology, under the conditions of capitalist

production and accumulation, is now portrayed as little more than a weapon used by

the bourgeoisie to exert sovereign authority over the working class. While

comprehensively documenting Marx's discussion of technology in the even the first

volume of *Capital* would constitute a dissertation in its own right, Chapter 15,

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[38] Marx, Grundrisse, 706.

section 5, titled "The Struggle Between Worker and Machine," adequately convey

Marx's new attitude toward the relationship between technology and politics under

the conditions of industrial capitalism. Describing technology now as simply

"capital's material mode of existence," the narrative Marx weaves stresses the

importance of *bypassing* the dimension of the technological altogether in favour of

direct political confrontation. Following a lengthy description of various peasant and

guild revolts against new productive technologies between the fifteenth and the

seventeenth centuries, Marx argues that "it took both time and experience before the

workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and

therefore transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the

form of society which utilizes those instruments."[39] And as the section proceeds,

Marx's tone becomes more aggressively antagonistic as he describes the relationship

between technology, the worker and revolution:

> The instrument of labour, when it takes the form of a machine, immediately
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> becomes a competitor of the worker himself … The instrument of labour
>
> strikes down the worker … Machinery does not just act as a superior
>
> competitor to the worker, always on the point of making him superfluous. It
>
> is a power inimical to him, and capital proclaims this fact loudly and
>
> deliberately, as well as making use of it. It is the most powerful weapon for
>
> suppressing strikes, those periodic revolts of the working class against the
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> autocracy of capital. According to Gaskell, the steam-engine was from the
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> very first an antagonist of 'human power,' an antagonist that enabled the
>
> capitalists to tread underfoot the growing demands of the workers, which

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[39] Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*. Trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 554-555.

threated to drive the infant factory system into crisis. It would be possible to
write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose
of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt.[40]

While the narrative in the *Grundrisse* was one in which technology opened up the
possibility of creating a society that is not based on exchange values, the relationship
between technology and the worker in *Capital* is now fundamentally and irrevocably
antagonistic. According to this new Marxian narrative, it was some time before
workers in Europe (and elsewhere), who originally vented their rage at ribbon-looms,
sawmills and steam-engines, gained sufficient knowledge or consciousness to realize
that these technologies were merely the "particular form of the means of production,"
and while attacking these machines might have been strategic in the short term, such
actions had no real hope of stemming the tide of labour-saving devices so long as the
larger system still accumulated capital or surplus-value, and that surplus-value was
re-invested back into the system in an effort to reduce wages through technological
innovation. Thus while this section of *Capital* undoubtedly stresses the degree to
which modern technology is, for Marx, but a mere material extension of the capitalist
enterprise, the ultimate message Marx conveys is that machines must now be put to
the side, inasmuch as they acted as reified objectification that drew the attention of
workers away from the underlying system of exploitation and accumulation as such.
Accordingly then, in the 32nd chapter of *Capital*, "The Historical Tendency of
Capitalist Accumulation," in which Marx most explicitly articulates his narrative of
proletariat revolution, the post-capitalist rupture is now, for Marx, an almost
exclusive political event in which technology plays no significant role. While the

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[40] Marx, *Capital, vol. 1,* 555-565.

background setting or environment that makes revolution possible is what Marx calls "concentration of capitals," in which "one capitalist strikes down many others,"[41] this outcome is, for Marx, strictly the product of the market laws governing capitalist accumulation as such, and to this extent is an economic rather than technological phenomenon. For Marx of *Capital*, then, the post-capital age will be born through an incisive moment of political rupture and an intense flaring of revolutionary praxis in which an emancipatory subject becomes conscious of itself and its interests, and it is thus process in which working-class consciousness, rather than technology, is the prime catalyst for social transformation.

From Politics to Technology: Marxism and Post-Marxism

If the trajectory of Marx's thought concerning the post-capital is characterized by a shift from the *technological* to the *political*, then the trajectory of Marxist theory during the twentieth and early twenty-first century manifests a movement in the opposite direction: namely from the *political* to the *technological.* Beginning with the so-called "classical tradition" – a designation used by Perry Anderson to denote the first generation of theorist after Marx that includes Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Georgi Plekhanov, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxembourg, Rudolf Hilferding and Nikolai Bukharin, most prominently – the first and foremost task of this generation of Marxist theorists was to develop an explicitly political theory of proletarian revolution, and thus the principle object of concern for

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[41] Marx, *Capital, vol. 1*, 929. For an analysis of the importance of Marx's theory of capital concentration, and its relationship to technology, for twentieth-century economic theory, see Matthew MacLellan, "Capitalism's Many Futures: A Brief History of Theorizing Post-Capitalism Technologically." *Mediations*, vol. 26, no. 1-2, (Fall 2012-Spring 2013): 159-179.

these theorists, following Marx's conception of revolution in *Capital*, is the consciousness of the working class. "[While] Marx left behind him a coherent and developed *economic* theory of the capitalist mode of production," observes Anderson, he left "no comparable *political* theory of the structures of the bourgeois State, or of the strategy and tactics of revolutionary socialist struggle by a working-class party for its overthrow."[42] Thus insofar as economic conditions had sufficiently ripened to begin the transition from capitalism to either socialism or communism, according to this first generation of Marxist theorists after Marx, the principle obstacle to socialism or communism was the shroud of false consciousness that clouded the minds of the European proletariat. Indeed, so prominent was this focus on politics, and the elimination of false consciousness, that what most defined this generation of theorists, according to Anderson, was their collective "unity of theory and practice": all the of substantive and important work written between Marx's death in 1883 and the interwar years in Europe was produced by a collection of Marxist theorists that viewed the development of a political theory of proletarian strategy and revolution to be the primary concern of Marxism as a science to such an extent that they were all themselves members of revolutionary workers organizations of one form or another.

However, following the catastrophe of the First World War, the Stalinization of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of fascism as what Anderson describes as the "historical solution of capital to the dangers of labour in the region,"[43] Marxist theory in the capitalist West (which paradoxically now constituted the principle locale in

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[42] Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1987), 4.
[43] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism,* 20.

which Marxist thought was permitted to breathe and evolve)[44] gradually turned away

from the problem of an explicitly political approach and experienced "a basic shift in

the whole center of gravity of European Marxism toward philosophy."[45] The advent

of Western Marxism – specifically the work of Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci,

Jean-Paul Sartre, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin – which

involved a generalized shift in interest toward the study of superstructures, whether

philosophical or cultural-aesthetic in nature, can thus be interpreted as emerging out

of the traumatic rift that had opened between organic unity of theory and practice

within the field of classical Marxism, a rift that arose from the *non-event* of working-

class revolution in the industrialized West:

> From 1924 to 1968, Marxism did not 'stop,' as Sartre was later to claim; but
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> it advanced via an unending detour away from any revolutionary political
>
> practice. The divorce between the two was determined by the whole historical
>
> epoch. At its deepest level, the fate of Marxism in Europe was rooted in the
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> absence of any big revolutionary upsurge after 1920, except in the cultural
>
> periphery of Spain, Yugoslavia and Greece. It was also, and inseparably, a
>
> result of the Stalinization of the Communist Parties, the formal heirs of the
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> October Revolution, which rendered impossible any theoretical work within
>
> politics even in the absence of any revolutionary upheavals – which it in turn

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[44] As Anderson aptly observes on this point, "Marxism was reduced to a memento in Russia, as Stalin's rule reached its apogee. The most advanced country in the world in the development of historical materialism, which had outdone all Europe by the variety and vigour of its theorists, was turned within a decade into a semi-literate backwater, formidable only in the weight of its censorship and the crudity of its propaganda" (*Considerations on Western Marxism,* 20).

[45] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism,* 29, 49.

contributed to prevent. The hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole

is thus that it is a product of *defeat*.[46]

Yet even if the first generation of Western Marxists increasingly turned their

attention away from the study of politics and economics strictly speaking and re-

focused their attention at the various levels of the superstructure, their work was,

ultimately, still concerned with the problem of working-class consciousness, even if

only in the negative sense of its impossibility. For while the increasingly academic

and theoretical nature of the work meant that Western Marxism became a

predominately "esoteric discipline whose highly technical idiom measured its

distance from politics,"[47] the end or object of this second generation of Marxists was

still rooted in the problem of false consciousness insofar as Western Marxism was

itself born out of the traumatic *non-event* of proletarian revolution, and the shift from

the study of the base to the study of superstructures is viewed as coming at the same

problem that orientated the work of the classic generation of theorists, but from a

different trajectory and using a different theoretical orientation. The title of Lukács'

most influential work, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), bears this out

directly, even if Lukács' work probes much deeper than mere ideology and attempts

instead to construct a model of proletarian epistemology of a much more

fundamental sort. Gramsci's work, principally his expansion of the concept of

hegemony, in which a reductive and explicitly political notion of ideology is

fragmented, dispersed and nuanced across a wider field of that includes all the

elements of civil society and which is primarily concerned with the notion of popular

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[46] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 42.
[47] Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 53.

consent rather than the cruder idea of outright ideological mystification and oppression, is a further manifestation of this shift. And the collective work of the Frankfurt School theorists, particularly their theoretical analysis of aesthetic objects and popular culture, can likewise be viewed as attempt to dispense with cruder notions of ideology and false consciousness in favour a more theoretically advanced perspective that, as Max Horkheimer and Theordor Adorno put it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), attempts to understand how "public opinion [itself] has reached a state in which thought invariably becomes a commodity, and language a means of promoting that commodity."[48]

If the work of the second generation of Marxist theorists thus retained at least a minimal interest in studying the problem of ideology and class consciousness, arguably the defining character of Marxist research – which from a more classical view might be classified as "revisionist Marxism" – over the next decades is its increasingly rejection of the category of ideology or false consciousness in favour of a more immanent philosophy of society that understands human action and thought to be more directly, or *immediately,* grounded in the material or physical apparatuses that governs capitalist society as such. In this sense, then, the revisionist Marxism of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, for instance, works its way backwards along Marx's trajectory concerning the importance of technology vis-à-vis working-class consciousness. For rather than understanding the domination inherent to capitalist society to be facilitated by forms of false consciousness, understood as a collection of bad or incorrect ideas, and thus a predominantly mental

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[48] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1989), xi-xii.

or psychological problem that could be overcome by education, these theorists make increasing reference to the material or technological dimension as the prime source of social control.

Beginning with Althusser, this gradual move from the ideological to the technological was paradoxically facilitated by *universalizing* ideology itself. Whereas the older tradition of Marxism believed that the elimination of ideology would be co-terminus with the collapse of the capitalist mode of production, Althusser, who was highly influenced by psychoanalytic theory of both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, rather took the view that ideology was an unavoidable condition of human existence as such. In his most influential work on the topic, his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser argues that ideology is not an intellectual or psychological process strictly speaking, but rather ideology is in certain sense built into the physical environment of capitalist society itself. "[Althusser] broke with the tradition of viewing ideology as a body of ideas or thought," writes Göran Therborn, "conceiving it instead as a social process of address, or 'interpellations,' inscribed in material social matrices."[49] Althusser's conception of ideology thus involves a process of social address or "hailing," in which the physical or social environment in which we are embedded effectively constitutes us as subjects prior to any conscious recognition of ourselves as subjects. "The existence of ideology," writes Althusser, "and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as a subjects are one in the same thing."[50] For Althusser, then, attempts to

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[49] Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1980), 7.
[50] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 118.

produce working-class consciousness that do not alter the material, technological and institutional basis of capitalist society are doomed to failure.

If Althusser shifted the discourse of Marxist theory away from ideology and false consciousness, in the classical sense of fallacious mental representations of reality, by embedding the processes of subject formation as such within the material institutions of society itself, the work of Michel Foucault likewise argued that rather than conceive of power as an ideological mechanism of the ruling class, modern systems of power operate through what he called *apparatuses* or *dispositfs,* which can be defined as "technologies" of power in a broad sense. While a more detailed description of Foucault's conception of power, and the way in which power produces subjectivity, is offered in Chapter Two, it should be sufficient here to merely describe what Foucault means by his concept of *dispositif,* in which the problems of ideology are replaced by the material, technological, institutional and discursive matrices of capitalist society as such. In response to the question by an interviewer, "What is the meaning or methodological function for you for this term *apparatus* (*dispositif*)?," Foucault responds by stating the concept denotes "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administration measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions, in short – the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus."[51] To lend Foucault's expansive definition of a *dispositf* some concreteness, as well as imbue his conception of an apparatus as a form of technology, one need only examine his conception of what he

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[51] Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194.

views as perhaps the paradigmatic figuration of modern power, the Panopticon, or rather panopticism more generally. While Foucault takes the eponymous prison designed by Jeremy Bentham as an archetype for his analysis, he nonetheless constantly stresses that the prison, or the prison design, is merely a generalized social mechanism reduced to its "ideal form."[52] Panopticism, for Foucault, is rather what he calls a "figure of a *political technology* that may and must be detached from any specific use."[53] For Foucault, then, an apparatus, such as panopticism, is effectively a kind of machine or technology that organizes society politically but does so by bypassing the explicit field of politics and ideology traditionally understood. Rather than operating within a segregated political sphere proper in which autonomous and pre-figured individuals or subjects engage in agonistic struggle in one form or another, Foucault's conception of power exercised through a *dispositif* is one in which a technology of power is embedded in the material infrastructure and discursive fibre of the social environment and is responsible for the production of subjectivities themselves. "Discipline," as Foucault thus puts it with respect to the nature of the larger disciplinary society in which the panopticon is merely the pure form of a more generalized social power, "is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets: it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a *technology*."[54] For Foucault, then, the *dispositif* is characterized as both *physical* and *anatomical*, and it is in this sense that Foucault's conception of power and its exercise moves away from conceptions of ideology as ideas or mental representations and instead

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[52] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 205.
[53] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205, emphasis added.
[54] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 215, emphasis added.

underscores the physicality or materiality of power and its tendency to work in an immanent fashion directly through the form and organization of disciplinary technology itself.

And thirdly, the work of Gilles Deleuze – and more influentially the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – further compliments and reinforces this shift away from ideology in favour of an analysis of the material constitution of power, or rather the reduction of ideology to the immanent plane of the material social matrices of power itself, by characterizing the nature of modern and postmodern power as functioning through an endless series of machines – which, as Deleuze and Guattari stress at the outset of *Anti-Oedipus*, are "real [machines], not figurative [machines]: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections."[55] The theoretical concept that dominates the collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattri is thus the *assemblage*, which like Foucault's concept of the *dispositif,* attempts to reduce the functioning of power to a uni-dimensional or immanent plane of operation. As Beverly Best puts it, the entire discourse of Deleuze and Guattari's work, which is characterized by the endless concatenation of machines and codes, manifests a "systematic rejection of interpretive or 'depth models' of analysis (such as hermeneutics, [traditional] Marxism, the dialectic, psychoanalysis) in the move to conceptually 'flatten out' the social world through collapsing the distinction between symptom and trauma, manifest and latent material, appearance and essence, and so on."[56] This

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[55] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 1.
[56] Beverly Best, "Fredric Jameson Notwithstanding: The Dialectic of Affect." *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 23, no.1 (December, 2010), 61.

characterization of Deleuze and Guattari's work as dispensing with "depth models"

of analysis, is underscored by Deleuze in an interview on his and Guattari's

conception of relationship between capitalism and desire. "Ideology has no

importance," states Deleuze, "what matters is not ideology, and not even the

'economic/ideological' distinction or opposition; what matters is the *organization of*

power. Because the organization of power, i.e. the way in which desire is already in

the economic, the way libido invests the economic, haunts the economic and fosters

political forms of oppression."[57] For Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism is not a system

that is protected by an outer defense of ideological ideas preventing a clear view of

the real economic structure of society. Rather, ideology or desire, and the economic

undergarment of capitalist society, are already one and the same thing.

If the work of Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze is indicative of a shift in

emphasis in Marxist thought away from the concepts like false consciousness and

ideology in its classical formulation and a concomitant embrace of a more

technological and immanent conception of how power functions in capitalist

societies, then this shift should also be viewed in light of the contemporaneous

erosion of the classical Marxian narrative of an explicitly *political* proletarian

revolution, which was one of the major effects of poststructuralist thought for

Marxist theory. Less a result of an internal rift in Marxism than the result of the

cross-pollination between Marxism and a critical mass of Nietzschean-inspired

theoretical work (predominantly in France), arguably the core effect of the adoption

of poststructuralist thought within Marxism was the increasing untenability of

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[57] Gilles Deleuze, "On Capitalism and Desire." Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 263.

assigning *a priori* political privilege to the industrial proletariat (or any political

subject for that matter) as an agent of social of change. While often sympathetic to

the aims of Marxist in general political terms, European post-structuralism tended to

define itself against the predominance of Hegelianism and specifically rejected the

possibility of a, or rather *the*, Subject in a full, substantive, self-present or self-

conscious sense, that otherwise constituted the orienting goal of Hegel's

philosophical system and which was re-iterated in Marx's political narrative of

communist society.[58] "The roots of poststructuralism and its unifying basis," writes

Michael Hardt, "lie, in large part, in a general opposition not to the philosophical

tradition *tout court* but specifically to the Hegelian tradition. For the generation of

Continental thinkers that came to maturity in the 1960s, Hegel was the figure of

order and authority that served as the focus of antagonism."[59] Michel Foucault

likewise viewed a previously hegemonic Hegelianism in French philosophy as one of

the principle antagonists of his generation when, in a lecture titled "The Discourse on

Language," he warned "to truly escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the

price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him":

> It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously
>
> perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to

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[58] As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, the general anti-dialecticism that emerges
from post-structuralism is not so much aimed at the dialectical process as such, in my opinion, but
is rather directed against Hegel's teleology in which dialectical motion moves in a uni-directional
fashion in which difference is progressively subsumed into unity or sameness.

[59] Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1993), x.

think against Hegel, of that which remains possibly one of his tricks directed

against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.[60]

And if Michel Foucault couched his desire to move away from Hegel in careful

terms, the more adamant anti-Hegelianism of the period was expressed by Deleuze,

who famously stated that "what I detested more than anything else is Hegelianism

and the Dialectic."[61] None of this is not to say, of course, that poststructuralist

thought – to the degree that it is possible to use a single term like this to denote the

work of such a wide array of diverse thinkers – was not influenced by Hegel in a

variety of important ways,[62] but rather that the larger goal or movement of

Hegelianism, or the Hegelian Dialectic, as well as its re-iteration in Marx's theory of

communism, constituted an important structural constraint against which much

poststructuralist theory was oriented. For poststructuralism, as Franco Berardi puts it,

the general goal was to "abandon the idea of an original truth to be restored, both on

the level of the self-realization of the spirit and the self-assertion of radical

Humanism."[63] And while outlining the epistemological legacy and effects of

poststructuralist thought for Marxism would be a massive task in its own right,

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985)

concisely outlines and articulates the impact of the post-structuralism on Marxist

thought, and is thus worth briefly referencing on this matter.

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[60] Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language." *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 235.

[61] Gilles Deleuze, "Lettre à Michel Cressole." An Appendix to Michel Cressole, *Gilles Deleuze* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1973), 110.

[62] For an account of the influence of Hegel for some of the preeminent thinkers of mid-twentieth century France, such as Kojève, Hyppolite, Sartre, Lacan, Foucault and Deleuze, see Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections on Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2009) and *Hegel and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, ed. Denis King Keenan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

[63] Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 52.

As Laclau and Mouffe assert in the book's introduction, the principle aim of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was to question "the "evident truths" of classical Marxism which, in their view, "have been seriously challenged by an avalanche of historical mutations which have riven the ground on which those truths were constituted."[64] While the co-authors acknowledge a rich period of theoretical investigation in the 1960s associated with work of Louis Althusser, larger historical trends such as the beginnings of economic neoliberalization in the 1970s and 1980s and the globalization of the capitalist economy had, according to Laclau and Mouffe, placed tremendous strain on Marxism's older "industrial" categories, which Laclau and Mouffe describe as undergoing "increasingly desperate contortions … around such notions as 'determination in the last instance' and 'relative autonomy.'"[65] In specifically theoretical terms, Laclau and Mouffe argue that theoretical work in the fields of analytical philosophy, phenomenology and structuralism over the past decades had rendered any conception of a full and non-mediated concept of identity or subjectivity untenable, and it was on this basis that the evident truths of Marxist theory must be re-examined:

> In these three [fields] the century started with an illusion of immediacy, of a non-discursively mediated access to things in themselves – the referent [analytical philosophy], the phenomenon [phenomenology] and the sign [structuralism], respectively. In all three, however, this illusion of immediacy dissolved at some point, and had to be replaced with one form or another of discursive mediation. This is what happened in the work of the later

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[64] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), 1.
[65] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* viii.

Wittgenstein, in phenomenology with the existential analytic of Heidegger,

and in structuralism with the post-structuralist critique of the sign. It is also,

in our view, what happened in epistemology with the transition to

verificationism – Popper, Kuhn, Feyerbend – and in Marxism with the work

of Gramsci, where the fullness of class identities of classical Marxism had to

be replaced by hegemonic identities constituted through non-dialectical

mediations.[66]

Explicating that "post-structuralism [was] the terrain where we have found the main

source of our theoretical reflection," Laclau and Mouffe's re-interpreation of

Gramsci's concept of hegemony, a *tour-de-force* of Marxist genealogy in itself, was

designed to rid any notions of immediacy (no mediation) from the Marxian apparatus

by arguing that the social field must be grasped in predominantly (if not exclusively)

discursive terms. Politics, they argued, must be viewed as a contingent struggle for

recognition (a resoundingly Hegelian notion, one might observe) in which political

identities are constituted through what they describe as "non-dialectical

mediations":[67]

If social objectivity, through its internal laws, determined whatever structural

arrangements exist (as in a purely sociologistic conception of society), there

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[66] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, ix.

[67] As mentioned previously, Laclau and Mouffe's description of the "non-dialectical" character of the mediations inhering in Gramsci's notion of hegemony seems somewhat strange here, given the definition of their concept of hegemony they subsequently provide: "What, in this case, is the specific universality inherent in hegemony? It results, we argue in the text, from the specific dialectic between what we call the logics of difference and the logics of equivalence" (xiii). "Dialectic," then, takes on a specific meaning in terms of its negation: it references the temporality of the Historical Dialectic in Hegel, which is why the opposite of the adjective "dialectic," in this and similar instances, is the adjective *contingent*. Contingent social antagonisms, in Laclau and Mouffe, may articulate dialectically, but they do not conform to the teleology of a "Dialectic" in the singular nominative.

would be no room for contingent hegemonic relations – or, indeed, for

politics as an autonomous activity. In order to have hegemony, the

requirement is that elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to

enter into one type of arrangement rather than another, nevertheless coalesce,

as a result of an external or articulating practice … But to say *contingent*

articulation is to enounce a central dimension of 'politics.' This privileging

of the political moment in the structuration of society is an essential aspect of

our approach.[68]

In Laclau and Mouffe's work, then, History losses its teleological import and the

older Marxian notion of the "class struggle" is denied any inherent content or

universal significance. While class struggle still has a role to play in an expanded

political sphere, it is no longer *different-in-kind* from the other plurality of struggles

that comprise the permanent field of politics. "Freed-up from a theory of economic

determination," as Nicholas Thoburn puts it, "power [in Laclau and Mouffe] is that

which constructs a set of subject positions in a system of equivalences as a

hegemonic bloc in a fashion that expels certain subjects and formations from 'social

positivity' and bars an alternative extension of the democratic chain of equivalents to

progressive, minority or socialist subject positions and orientations."[69] In the

nominative "post-Marxism" advanced by Laclau and Mouffe, all struggles are now

based on contingent hegemonic relations that are both void of inherent or

transcendent significance and are reciprocally understood as thoroughly and

unavoidably mediated by power and discourse.

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[68] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xii
[69] Nicholas Thoburn,"Patterns of Production: Cultural Studies after Hegemony." *Theory, Culture & Society,* vol. 24, no. 3 (2009), 80.

Yet just as Althusser can be interpreted as reducing the relevance of ideology, classically conceived, for Marxist thought precisely by universalizing ideology, so too did the work of Laclau and Mouffe reduce the importance of politics for Marxist theory through its universalization. By freeing politics up from its connection to the material or economic conditions from which political struggle arises, the work of Laclau and Mouffe can be read as having inadvertently "thinned out" political struggle, so to speak, by rendering politics a matter of discourse and not much else. "[While] the passage from 'essentialist' Marxism," writes Slavoj Žižek directly referencing the work of Laclau and Mouffe, "with the proletariat as the unique Historical Subject, the privileging of economic class struggle, and so on, to the postmodern irreducible plurality of struggles undoubtedly describes an actual historical process, its proponents, as a rule, leave out the resignation at its heart – the acceptance of capitalism as 'the only game in town' [and] the renunciation of any real attempt to overcome the existing capitalist liberal regime."[70] A similar point was made by Wendy Brown, who argued that "the political purchase of contemporary American identity politics would seem to be achieved in part *through* a certain renaturalization of capitalism."[71] Thus if the expansion of the concept of hegemony by Laclau and Mouffe achieved a certain elevation of politics by integrating post-structuralist thought into Marxist theory, it did so in such a way that politics, in the liberal agonistic sense, was no longer capable of acting as site for challenging capitalism as such. Rather liberal-capitalism now constituted the relatively neutral environment or matrix upon which various subject positions fought for discursive

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[70] Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernim? Yes Please!" Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (New York: Verso, 2000), 95.
[71] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 60.

hegemony and thus the environment of politics itself seemed immune from the latter's critique. And while Laclau and Mouffe state that their integration of poststructuralism and Marxism is an attempt to rid the latter of the dream of non-mediated identity by, as they argue, characterizing politics as always thoroughly mediated by discourse, the actual effect of their work is nonetheless more complimentary to that of Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze than this statement makes it seem. For while Laclau and Mouffe do not reference the dimension of the material or technology to the degree that these other thinkers do, the intended effect of their work was likewise to eliminate the "distance" between economic reality and ideological symptom by "reducing" or, as Best put it, "flattening out" the operation of power to a single plane, which for Laclau and Mouffe is the plane of discursive hegemony. And insofar as, according to Žižek and Brown, this reduction was complicit with a resignation or naturalization of liberal-capitalism as the only game in town, then the work of Laclau and Mouffe can be viewed as constituting the other side of Althusserian, Foucauldian and Deleuzian coin. By effectively eliminating the dimension of the political as a source of qualitative change or revolution – by, paradoxically, universalizing it – Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism only strengthens the growing feeling within much Marxist theory that the level of the political will not be a source of social transformation, but it is rather toward the dimension of the technological *as* politics that efforts should be trained.

Post-Industrial Marxism: Autonomia and Empire

If there is a general diachronic trend within Marxist theory over the course of the 20th century in which the political as an explicit site of challenge for contesting the dominance of capitalism has been reduced at the same time that the *technological* – in the expansive or figurative Foucauldian and Deleuzian sense – has become a privileged site for understanding power without recourse to notions like ideology or false consciousness, then a similar scenario can likewise be viewed at the synchronic dimension of present day capitalism itself. That is to say that where Marxist thought has experienced a decline in the importance of the political and the ascension of the significance of the technological, the same dynamic effectively defines capitalism in the early 21st century. As I have argued elsewhere,[72] contemporary capitalist society is subject to a unique mode of temporality in which the *technological* is imagined as the most potent source of social ingenuity while dimension of the political appears entirely sluggish and even static in comparison. This static or fixed conception, or rather perception, of politics was most influentially diagnoses by Francis Fukuyama in his essay "The End of History and the Last Man," originally published in the American policy journal *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989, which attempted to revive an embattled Hegelian understanding of the historical evolution of human societies by observing that, in the post-1989 period, we may well have indeed reached a certain limit or end to the historical process as Hegel imagined: an end of history not in the sense that "important events would no longer happen," but in the sense that "there would be no further progress in the development of

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[72] Matthew MacLellan, "Capitalism's Many Futures: A Brief History of Theorizing Post-Capitalism Technologically." *Mediations*, vol. 26, no. 1-2 (Fall 2012-Spring 2013).

underlying [political] principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions have been answered."[73] While Fukuyama's ostentatious claim continues to evoke widespread criticism, there can be little doubt that the field of political discourse, especially in the West, has, indeed, significantly narrowed over the past two decades in conformity with Fukuyama's thesis. While the conflicts between progressive and conservative forces continues to populate Western headlines as much as ever, these debates no longer hinge on fundamental organizational disagreements but are rather battles fought over modest modifications to regulatory mechanisms, such as corporate taxation, environmental protection, immigration, etc. As Slavoj Žižek is fond of reiterating, "it is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History,' but most people today are Fukuyamean, accepting liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found formula or the best possible society, such that all one can do is try to make it more just, tolerant, and so on."[74] If, then, one were to define the mode of temporality with which Fukuyama's political narrative endows contemporary capitalism, it would surely be a kind of *stasis*: in accordance the Hegelian legacy Fukuyama evokes, dialectical motion has all but ceased as tinkering with a stable liberal-capitalist synthesis, rather than inciting violent and bloody revolution, has become the privilege of those who inhabit the spaces of the globe where History has finally ended.

Yet if liberal-democratic capitalism has been endowed with a static temporality at the level of politics, it is simultaneously narrativized, even burdened, by an almost diametrically opposed temporality at the level of technological

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[73] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 2.
[74] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 88.

development. Far from having reached a point of finality or conclusion, the promise

of new and ever more sophisticated technics produced through the engine of

capitalist innovation has become entirely engrained in the popular imaginary, to the

degree that it is often widely assumed that new and as of yet unimagined

technologies will miraculously emerge, through the mechanisms of the market, to

remedy problems of environmental degradation that are perceived to be too difficult

or too expensive to address in then present. So powerful is this technological

narrative that contemporary capitalist society is witness to a strange stylistic

inversion whereby the voice of the pragmatic and level-headed scientist has taken to

enunciating claims that far outstrip anything that might have once been asserted by

even the most radical utopian philosopher. As popular physics writer Michio Kaku,

for instance, argues with an unabashedly anachronistic Enlightenment cadence,

human abilities within one hundred will be such that the species will more closely

resemble the "gods of mythology" than the more modest collection of natural

subjects that informed the political philosophies of Locke or Rousseau:

> By 2100, our destiny is to become like the gods we once worshipped and
>
> feared. But our tools will not be magic wands and potions but the science of
>
> computers, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and most
>
> of all, quantum theory … Computers, silently reading our thoughts, will be
>
> able to carry out our wishes. We will be able to move objects by thought
>
> alone, a telekinetic power usually reserved only for the gods. With the power
>
> of biotechnology, we will create perfect bodies and extend our life spans. We
>
> will also be able to create life-forms that have never walked the surface of the

earth. With the power of nanotechnology, we will be able to take an object

and turn it into something else, to create something out of nothing. We will

ride not fiery chariots but sleek vehicles that soar by themselves with almost

no fuel, floating effortlessly in the air. With our engines, we will be able to

harness the almost unlimited energy of the stars.[75]

The conflicting temporality of the present age thus becomes outright paradoxical

when examined in terms of the ontological assumptions informing a politics of stasis

amidst technological revolution. At the political level, the impossibility of further

innovation at any fundamental level is built on the solid ontological foundation

provided by the (recently discovered) species *homo oeconomicus:* our fixed political

and economic consensus is little more than the pragmatic resignation that, as Jacques

Rancière puts it, "[only] the growth of consumer narcissism puts individual

satisfaction and collective rule in perfect harmony"[76] and thereby defends society

against the excesses of substantive democratic rule. Given, however, that the political

excesses that are thought inherent to truly democratic life cannot be merely erased

from the equation but must be balanced off by an opposing consumerist excess —

which is best produced by a system that, to paraphrase Marx, must constantly

revolutionize the objects of consumption — then the present moment is witness to a

truly paradoxical and disjointed scenario: if it has already been said of our age that it

is easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than the seemingly more modest task

of imagining a different organization of production, then it is similarly the case that it

seems infinitely easier to imagine the categorical transformation of the biological

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[75] Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Future* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 10-11.
[76] Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006), 21.

species through scientific marvel than to consider the seemingly far more remote

possibility that a correlative notion of human nature might somehow shift enough to

embrace a different mode of politics outside the current liberal-democratic

consensus; such is the seeming power of technology for realizing qualitative change,

and the seeming impotency of politics for doing the same.

The first decade of the twenty-first century can thus, I argue, be defined in

narrative terms as a historical moment in which the technological offers far more

promise for social transformation that does the political, traditionally conceived.

Given the technologically-privileged temporality of liberal-capitalist society, and the

simultaneous critique of the political and the ascension of the technological in

Marxist theory over the course of the 20th century, it is thus hardly surprising that in

the early years of the twenty-first century, Marxist theory tended to frame the

dimension of the technological as a source of political agency and resistance in the

context of an increasingly global and neoliberalized capitalism. Nor is it surprising

that contemporary Marxist thought, insofar as it effectively reverses the trajectory of

Marx's conception of social transformation described above, has been most inspired

by Marx's conception of social change in the *Grundrisse*, rather than his narrative in

Capital. It is out of this specific trajectory of events, then, that we can understand

post-operaismo or Autonomist Marxism, and the work of Hardt and Negri in

particular, as gaining such a prominent position over the past decade.

Grounded in theoretical work developed in Italy during the 1970s, *operaismo*,

or "workerism," emerged out of concrete labour struggles in Italy against a

monolithic and hierarchical system of Italian labour unions operating within the large

factories in Northern Italy. The Marxist theorists associated with operaismo – Tronti, Panzieri, Negri, Alquati, Bologna – began to re-consider longstanding conceptions of the interconnection between work, politics, economics and culture drawn from a traditional readings of Marx. Specifically, these theorists believed that the organizational forms of Eastern or state-socialist Marxism that privileged the "mass worker" were in fact commensurate with the Western Keynesian strategy of planned capitalist development, and thus these theorists viewed Western capitalism and Eastern socialism as two only slightly varied regimes for managing the needs of industrial production, and neither was in the interest of workers.

In order to break out of the false dichotomy that opposed Keynesian command capitalism to Soviet-style productivism, Italian operaismo increasingly adopted an *immanent* mode of political praxis in which the worker does not attempt to gain the greatest value for its labour by extracting itself periodically in the form of the "strike,"[77] but rather attempts to alter the conditions of capitalist valorization from within in order to re-define what it means to be a "productive" worker or citizen, and thereby re-define the notion and operation of capitalist "value" from within the terrain where value is from the outset produced. For operaismo, then, workers struggles are not understood as existing in a reactionary or subordinate relation to the organization of capital; rather worker struggles are understood as preceding and prefiguring the constant re-structuring of capital-labour relation and thus, by extension, the larger composition of capitalist society as a whole. According to this view, workers are conceived as agents of social transformation due to their structural

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[77] For an example of operaismo's critique of the "strike" see Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal" *Autonomia: Post-political Politics*. Ed. Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

position within the capitalist machine (not from some essential 'species-being' as a younger Marx might have argued) and are considered the active force in political struggle, while capital is conceived as reactive in regards to worker resistance. Thus, despite claims to anti-dialecticism,[78] operaismo offers a general theory of capitalism as an ongoing series of immanent dialectical reactions and counter-reactions: worker's struggles force capital to restructure, capital's restructuring destroys the previous conditions of worker organization and resistance compelling new worker strategies, which in turn push against capital in new ways, and so on. Systemic change is constant without the necessity of appealing to an "outside" of the circuit for engendering the motor or impetus of this change.

Yet as the factory model of production began to decline as the paradigmatic site of economic antagonism in the 1970s and, accordingly, the dynamics of capitalist accumulation increasingly spilled out into the larger socio-cultural field, the theorists of operaismo began developing new concepts such as "immaterial labour" and "social capital" that more accurately reflected the intensifying structural transformation of the advanced capitalist economies. Drawing from the terminology

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[78] Operaismo's claim to anti-dialecticism should be understood in the same narrow sense as that offered in the work of Laclau and Mouffe: namely as a rejection the Hegelian view of history in which an original or authentic subjectivity is restored, at a higher level albeit, and singular humanistic spirit (re)realized. Rather, operaismo's view of history and subjectivity is much more Foucauldian in orientation. As Franco Berardi again writes, "it is thanks to Michel Foucault that the theme of subjectivity has definitively been freed from its Hegelian and historicist legacy, and thought again in a new context -- that of biopolitical discipline. The subject does not pre-exist history, it does not preexist the social process. Neither does it precede the power formations or the political subjectivation that founds autonomy. There is no subject, but subjectivation, and the history of subjectifying processes is reconstructed through the analysis of epistemic, imaginary, libidinal and social *dispositifs* modeling the primary matter of the lived. In the place of the Historical Subject, operaismatic thought argues for a more open process of subjectivation without definite closure commensurate with decades of post-structuralist discourse in the humanities." See Franco Berardi, "Biopolitics and Collective Mutation." *Culture Machine,* Vol. 7 (2005).

of the French Regulation School,[79] operaismo contended that structural changes that

preceded the economic crises of the 1970s were producing a new regime of

production and accumulation that was fundamentally different from the industrial-

factory paradigm, which they described as *cognitive capitalism*. In this view,

technology or machinery does not so much stand in a relation of opposition to

workers – in contrast to the view proffered by Marx in *Capital*, in which machinery

is viewed rather singularly as weapons developed by capitalists to wage war against

the working class – but rather occupies more of an intermediary position between the

two agents. As Carlo Vercellone writes, "from the moment in which knowledge and

its diffusion is affirmed as the principal productive force, the relation of domination

of dead labour over living labour enters into crisis … Inside this new situation, the

attempt to distinguish the productive contributions respectively of capital and of

labour (as the neoclassicists do, separating the parts of the different 'factors of

production' in the product) definitively loses all of its foundations."[80] Socialism,

according to this narrative, is thus not the result of an *imminent* political

confrontation between an increasingly concentrated capitalist class and a critical

mass of impoverished wage-labourers and army of the unemployed, but is rather the

result of an *immanent* technological evolution in which manual labour is displaced as

the principle productive force, and the paradigmatic measure of capitalist output is

supplanted by the collective knowledge of society itself.

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[79] For background, see Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1990).
[80] Carlo Vercellone, "From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism." *Historical Materialism, vol. 15*, 29.

It is thus not difficult to view why such a conception of *technology as politics* has been so attractive, given its conformity to the larger the theoretical and discursive parameters of both Marxist theory and capitalism itself in the 21st century. By far the most influential work of post-operaismo over the past decade has been the trilogy of books produced by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2005) and *Commonwealth* (2009). In accordance with the diachronic progression of Marxist theory described above, Hardt and Negri draw their principle theoretical inspiration from the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, particularly in terms of their conception of contemporary post-industrial society as being what they described as a *biopolitical society*. "Foucault [and Deleuze's] work allows us to recognize a historical, epochal passage in social forms from *disciplinary society* to the *society of control*," write Hardt and Negri, in which "power is now exercised through machines that directly organize the brains (in communication systems, information networks, etc.) and bodies (in welfare systems, monitored activities, etc.) toward a state of autonomous alienation from the sense of life and the desire for creativity."[81] Following Foucault and Deleuze, Hardt and Negri thus define the post-industrial society as *biopolitical* society, insofar as power now "regulates life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, rearticulating it;"[82] and for Hardt and Negri, the immanent transformation of power under post-industrial conditions has been principally facilitated by the rise of information and communications technologies and their hegemonic role in driving the process of post-industrialization, whereby knowledge or information has replaced manual

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[81] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 23.
[82] Hardt and Negri, *Empire,* 23-24.

labour as the primary productive force. "In post-fordism," as Gerald Raunig characterizes this shift, "the raw materials and means of production of living labour is the capacity for thinking, learning, communicating, imagining and inventing, which is expressed through language … the general intellect no longer presents itself only in the knowledge contained and enclosed in the system of technical machines, but rather in the immeasurable and boundless cooperation of cognitive workers."[83] In accordance with this immanent theoretical paradigm, Hardt and Negri's trilogy collectively argue that the informational and communicative basis of contemporary post-industrial capitalism offers new and unprecedented means of radically transforming capitalism into an economy, and indeed society, that is based not on private property but rather on what they call the "commons," in which knowledge, social relationships, and human subjectivity itself becomes the principle productive force:

> What is the operative notion of the common today, in the midst of [post-industrialism], the information revolution, and consequent transformations of the mode of production? It seems to us, in fact, that today we participate in a more radical and profound commonality than has ever been experience in the history of capitalism. The fact is that we participate in a productive world made up of communication and social networks, interactive services, and common languages. Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services

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[83] Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 115.

and relationships. Producing increasingly means constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities.[84]

While a more detailed discussion of Hardt and Negri's work is the object of Chapter Two, this brief description should be enough to demonstrate the degree to which Hardt and Negri's work, effectively, calls for a new synthesis of between the fields of media theory and political philosophy. For, as the pair argue in *Multitude,* while "the future institutional structure of this new society is embedded in the affective, cooperative, and communicative relationships of social production,"[85] these underlying infrastructural tendencies will not, in and of themselves, produce the kind of social change that Hardt and Negri advocate. Rather, "the democracy of the multitude needs a 'new science,' that is, a new theoretical paradigm to confront this new situation."[86] Unfortunately, the task of generating a new political philosophy based on changes in media environment is far from a simple endeavour, particularly given the contradictory formulation of the concept of *mediation* that, as described in the introduction, characterizes their work. In the second chapter, then, I aim to further demonstrate the marked degree to which, in the contemporary period, media theory and political philosophy have largely failed to integrate their respective epistemological frameworks in such a way that might produce a political philosophy of the post-industrial society. Rather, as mentioned, the interaction between these two fields has resulted in a highly problematic conceptual contradiction or paradox that hinders the development of a theory of political mediation under post-industrial conditions. Following a more detailed analysis of this conceptual contradiction in

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[84]Hardt and Negri, *Empire,* 302.
[85]Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 350.
[86] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 353.

Chapter Two, then, the third and fourth chapters of his dissertation attempt to re-

construct a larger theoretical picture of how media technologies and political

categories intermingle through what this dissertation calls *comparative political*

medialogy: a practice that examines past or historical media environments and the

correlative political forms that were associated with these environments in order to

garner a better picture of how media forms and political categories interact with each

other within a general theoretical framework. While such a comparative approach

will of course provide no guarantees, nor a complete roadmap that will tells us how

politics will change as a result of post-industrialization, it will provide a more

historically-informed picture of the interplay between media technologies and

political categories that can be used for theorizing a new political science appropriate

for the post-industrial multitude.

Chapter 2: Media Without Mediation?
        On the Disjunctive Synthesis of Media Theory and Political
        Philosophy

      The first chapter of this dissertation argued why technology as become an

increasingly important source of politics for Marxist theory in the 21st century.

While documenting this field-specific trajectory is important for understanding

the utility of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's work in the post-industrial age,

theoretical trends within Marxism are not solely responsible for this outcome. As

the first section of this chapter outlines and articulates, the technologies associated

with the rise of the Internet, which have collectively given shape to what Manuel

Castells calls "the network society,"[87] have been received with greater enthusiasm

than their immediate predecessors in terms of their inherent capacity for

enhancing and expanding democracy. After documenting why the technologies

associated with the rise of the Internet in the 1990s have been theorized as holding

greater potential for expanding democratic agency than did the mass media

technologies of the twentieth century, this chapter conducts a more thorough and

detailed reading of Hardt and Negri's work. In particular, this chapter

demonstrates why the concept of *mediation* has become an increasingly

problematic conjuncture between the fields of media theory and political

philosophy in Hardt and Negri's work, wherein the surfeit of media technologies

associated with post-industrialization is described as producing a *lack* or *absence*

of mediation in political terms. After articulating the degree to which this

problematic tendency is rooted in some of the fundamental assumptions

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[87] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

structuring the fields of media theory and political philosophy, the chapter thus closes by arguing for the necessity of a wider and more collaborative theoretical interaction between the fields of media theory and political philosophy, which this dissertation calls *comparative political medialogy*.

From Media for the Masses to Internet Democracy

It is almost axiomatic in the field of media history that every new mass media technology introduced over the past 150 years can be, and has been, articulated in terms of enhancing democracy, freedom, individuality, etc. Yet when one reviews the commentary surrounding the political potential of information and communication technologies that were developed during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century – essentially those technologies captured by the concept of the *mass media* – one discovers a strictly dichotomous assessment. On the one hand, those persons and institutions responsible for the invention and dissemination of mass media technologies themselves during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries invariably trumpet the virtues of these technologies using political terms such as democracy and freedom, etc. On the other hand, however, these same mass media technologies just as often came under intense criticism, by contemporary academic and intellectual opinion across the political spectrum, for their seeming capacity for deteriorating democratic engagement, individual autonomy and critical thinking, and more generally for inducing an infantile state of social conformity and homogeneity across Western societies.

Speaking to the first point, Timothy Wu's *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (2010) documents the degree to which the genesis of virtually every new mass media technology from the late-nineteenth to the present day was played out on an ideological field in which notions like freedom, autonomy, equality and progress were the objects of intense struggle. Specifically, Wu argues that modern media technologies tended to be initially developed as "open" and "diffuse" technologies that were free to users and developers alike, but which were soon placed under the control of commercial interests who favoured "closed" and "centralized" systems more amenable to the accumulation of capital than the free development of the technology itself:

> History shows a typical progression of information technologies: from somebody's hobby to somebody's industry; from jury-rigged contraption to slick production marvel; from a free accessible channel to one strictly controlled by a single corporation or cartel – from open to closed system. It is a progression so common as to seem inevitable … Without exception, the brave new technologies of the twentieth century – free use of which was originally encouraged, for the sake of further invention and individual expression – eventually evolved into the privately controlled industrial behemoths, the "old media" giants of the twenty-first, through which the flow and nature of content would be strictly controlled for reasons of commerce.[88]

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[88] Timothy Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 6.

What is particularly interesting about Wu's account is the way in which both sides

of the struggle, those advocating both "open" and "closed" systems, fought for

their respective views about technological development and application using the

same ideological or political terms, namely freedom, equality and democracy. To

look at just one example, the development of telephony in the United States pitted

a loose collection of telephone libertarians or anarchists, calling themselves "the

Independents," against the would be hegemon of the telephone system in the

United States throughout the twentieth century, the Bell Corporation. That the

Independents touted their vision of telephony in terms of freedom and democracy

is perhaps unsurprising given their view that the primary virtue of the telephone,

as they saw it, was as a means of extending community, spreading information

freely, and enhancing social interconnectedness. "The Independents," writes Wu,

"saw a different world, in which the telephone was made cheaper and more

common, a tool of mass communication, and an aid in daily life. They intuited

that the telephone's paramount value was not as a better version of the telegraph

or a more efficient means of commerce, but as the first social technology."[89]

Thus while it may seem unsurprising that the Independents mobilized their

efforts through notions like freedom, individuality and democracy, what is

perhaps more surprising is that the efforts of the Bell Corporation – which were

aimed explicitly and unabashedly at establishing, organizing and controlling an

enormous telephone monopoly across the entire United States – were likewise

deployed as an exercise in enhancing freedom and democracy. The person most

responsible for Bell's public relations campaign was not in fact the inventor of the

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[89] Wu, *The Master Switch,* 46-47.

device, Alexander Graham Bell, but rather a powerful industrialist named Theodore Vail, "who styled himself as a private sector Theodor Roosevelt"[90] and believed that the obligation of commercial corporations, particularly those involved in information and communication sectors, extended beyond the narrow profitability of the firm and must include a heavy dose of public responsibility, duty and charity. With the financial backing of one the greatest corporate monopolist of the time, J.P. Morgan, Vail engineered a campaign to stamp out all independent telephone operators and create a "grand unification of telephony" in the United States that was expressed using the slogan "One System, One Policy, Universal Access."[91] In other words, it was Vail's philosophy that the public would be best served by ensuring that everyone in the United States had universal (or near universal) access to a high quality telephone system and, furthermore, that having several or even dozens of competing telephone networks or lines strung between cities was as wasteful and senseless as having ten or twenty railway lines serving the same routes (which was in fact a common occurrence in the nineteenth century). Thus, for Vail, a "closed" and centralized system, as opposed to the chaotic, ruthless and competitive "openness" advocated by the Independents, was far better suited to serving the general public interest: "with the security of monopoly, Vail believed, the dark side of human nature would shrink, and natural virtue might emerge. He saw a future free of capitalism's form of Darwinian struggle, in which scientifically organized corporations, run by good

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[90] Wu, *The Master Switch,* 4.
[91] Wu, *The Master Switch,* 51.

men in close cooperation with government, would serve the public best."[92] As

Wu's account thus comprehensively documents, not only did all new forms of

electronic media technology develop through a similar struggle between "open"

and "closed" formats – usually beginning in an "open" modality that was

eventually consolidated into a "closed" commercial model – but, almost without

exception, each side of this competition framed the benefits of their technological

vision in terms of freedom, individuality, equality and democracy. Thus from the

mouths and pens of the producers of these mass media technologies, there is no

shortage of glowing illocution about the political benefits of these new media

forms.

Yet while the discourse that issued from the producers of the twentieth-

century's mass media technologies was consistently characterized by this uplifting

political rhetoric, the same cannot be said about the contemporaneous political

and philosophical commentary, which took a much dimmer view of the

democratic potential of these new technologies, especially as they took the form

of consolidated and centralized industries. Undoubtedly affected by the horrific

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[92] Wu, *The Master Switch,* 9. This ideological struggle over the telephone system interestingly mirrors a similar dispute over the notion of "freedom of the press" between Soviet and American politicians during the 1930s and 1940s, as documented in Alexander Inkeles' monograph *Public Opinion in Russia* (1950): "In the United States and England it is the freedom of expression, the right itself in the abstract, that is valued … in the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the *results* of exercising freedom are in the forefront of attention, and the preoccupation with the freedom itself is secondary. It is for this reason that the discussions between Soviet and Anglo-American representatives characteristically reach absolutely no agreement on specific proposals although both sides assert that there should be freedom of the press. The American is usually talking about freedom of expression, the right to say or not say certain things, a right which he claims exists in the United States, but not in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Representative is usually talking about *access* to the *means* of expression, not the right to say things at all, and this access he maintains is denied to most in the United States and exists for most in the Soviet Union" (137). Analogously, the Independents assert that Americans, or those Americans with the means, should have the freedom to organize their telephone systems as they choose, while Vial asserts, along lines similar to the Soviet representatives above, that there should be universal access to the telephone system at the cost of imposing a monolithic system on all.

effectiveness to which the National Socialist regime in Germany had put a

centralized system of mass media and communications technology during the

1930s, philosophical and sociological commentary of the mass media in the post-

war years tended to view these new technologies as endangering, if not outright

eliminating, what meagre prospects for genuine democracy existed under the

conditions of monopoly capitalism in the West. One of the earlier and more

influential indictments of mass media concentration was Max Horkheimer and

Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), which explicitly argued

how much better suited American capitalism was to inducing social conformity,

in comparison with the relatively crude use of mass media technologies by the

Nazis in Germany. The initial philosophico-sociological framework through

which Horkheimer and Adorno assert the deleterious affects of the culture

industry describes the negation of those conditions that initially made critical

Enlightenment itself possible, namely what pair call the "loss of the support of

objectively established religion, the dissolution of the last remnants of

precapitalism, together with technological and social differentiation and

specialization."[93] If these sociological developments opened up the possibility of

some form of general Enlightenment, which is in the first case merely the freedom

to think and act outside the confines of handed-down tradition, then the

development of the mass media, in the view of Horkheimer and Adorno, quickly

sewed up these opportunities for freedom by virtue of a technologically-induced

state of cultural uniformity and ideological homogeneity. "For culture now

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[93] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1969),120.

impresses the same stamp on everything," argue Horkheimer and Adorno, "films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part."[94] Thus while the older traditions and mythologies that gave legitimacy to pre-capitalism are initially torn asunder by the economic, technological and philosophical developments characteristic of Western modernity, Enlightenment – or the promise of sovereignty for both the individual and the society as a whole – is quickly cancelled out inasmuch as "the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry."[95] Horkheimer and Adorno's essay thus exhaustively catalogues, with great erudition, the ingeniously heterogeneous and differentiated means through which the culture industry exhausts and over-codes the cultural imagination with a veritable universe of pre-made and mass produced stereotypes and clichés, thereby rendering genuine originality, spontaneity and individuality virtually impossible. In a strange, but for that all the more effective, inversion of the mythos of Enlightenment progress, the shattering of the traditional society, its differentiation and fragmentation at the behest of progressive forces, is captured and consolidated by the ideological power of new media technologies and is simultaneously maintained and transcended in the rise of the culture industry. Yet unlike the dialectical movement associated with Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung*, the simultaneous maintenance and transcendence achieved by the culture industry is entirely superficial: the seeming transcendence of uniformity into differentiation, which is for Horkheimer and Adorno only a more gripping kind uniformity achieved through false or pseudo-differentiation, does not move

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[94] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 120.
[95] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 126.

society beyond itself, as it were, but rather aims at holding society fast in the

paradoxical grip of a competitive market that functions within a system of

monopoly capitalism, such that the ubiquitous condition of life in late capitalism,

rendered palatable by the culture industry, is one in which superficial change is

constant (as the market demands) within a system that, in the last analysis, always

remains constant.[96]

If the identification of the mass media as a technological apparatus for

inducing cultural uniformity and facilitating elite social control in an age of mass

democracy was initially articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, the theme was

subsequently taken up and furthered by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural

Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), whose more media-based account

sets up a paradigmatic dichotomy between print technology – viewed as

facilitating critical and public reason – and electronic or mass media technologies

– viewed as inducing a state of passive conformity and consumerism. Habermas'

account begins with the initial genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, which is

understood as inseparable from the spread of print technology throughout early

modern Europe; it is by means of this media-technological development, argues

Habermas, that the ideological construct of the autonomous liberal citizen,

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[96] Brown and Szeman assert the veracity of the same axiom in the neoliberal age: "it is becoming clear that the hegemonic concept of Difference is at one and the same time the most universal and (therefore) the most empty concept, virtually synonymous with Being because both name the very medium of experience. In fact it is Difference (as slogan and as concept), not Totality, that reduces the complexity of the world to the monotonous Same, because the truly different (that is, what refuses to be seen as merely different—what goes, for example, by ideological names such as totalitarianism, fundamentalism, communism, and tribalism) is excluded from the field of difference. The primacy of "difference" in fact outlines an identity—the unacknowledged frame of the monoculture, global capitalism" ("Twenty-Five Theses on Philosophy in the Age of Finance Capital," 49).

critically informed and actively participatory, was given real or material support

in the institution of the press. Yet unlike Horkheimer and Adorno's account –

which can be viewed as offering a narrative in which political agency was

cancelled out by the power of capital in a diachronic or causal sequence –

Habermas documents the degree to which the genesis of the democratic agency

within the public sphere was always the result of the dialectical interaction

between two quickly intensifying mass media forms that are in some sense

synonymous with Western modernity itself: namely *capital* and *print*; or, as

Habermas puts it, "the *traffic in commodities and news* created by early capitalist

long-distance trade."[97] The eventual genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, for

Habermas, is thus traced back to the origins of capitalism in Europe, beginning in

the Italian city-states during the Renaissance and subsequently intensifying and

expanding throughout the rest of the continent in subsequent centuries. The

expansion of trade and commerce beyond local communities and townships, as

well as the burgeoning division of labour that would subsequently characterize a

modern industrialized capitalist economy, demanded a corollary economy for

gathering and disseminating information, and thus capital and print, for

Habermas, share a common ancestry:

> With the expansion of trade, merchants' market-oriented calculations
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> required more frequent and more exact information about distant events.
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> From the fourteenth century on, the traditional letter carrying by

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[97] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 15. On the literary and epistemological influence of the postal service in early modern Europe, see Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

merchants was for this reason organized into a kind of guild-based system of correspondence for their purposes. The merchants organized the first mail routes, the so-called ordinary mail, departing on assigned days. The great trade cities became at the same time centres for the traffic in news; the organization of this traffic on a *continuous* basis became imperative to the degree to which the exchange of commodities and of securities became continuous. Almost simultaneously with the origin of stock markets, postal services and the press institutionalized regular contacts and regular communication.[98]

For Habermas, the genesis of early capital markets in Europe thus required, in fact demanded, a corollary system for transmitting reliable information concerning anything that might impact market conditions, and it is highly probable that without this corollary system of information transmission, market capitalism in Europe might have been stunted from the outset and remained a peripheral mode of production confined to local regions and communities. Thus while the origins of this system of information should be considered, in a strictly chronological sense, as ancillary to the system of commodity exchange, it is more accurate, in a theoretical sense, to understand these systems as co-developing and dialectically linked insofar as it is impossible to conceive of the existence of one without the other.[99]

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[98] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 16.
[99] Benedict Anderson also offers a convincing historical account that links print technology with the rise of capitalism in *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983). Anderson's account will be described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

At this early stage of development, however, both these media systems remained strictly "private" in their orientation, meaning that both these media flows remained outside the domain of state administration. Both capital and the traffic in print news began their lives, so to speak, as an internal matter of commercial agents for trading and communicating endogenously with each other without the participation of the state nor the general public. Yet with the rapid expansion and intensification of commercial markets and information transmission between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, neither commodity markets nor the traffic in news was able to long remain outside the purview of state administration and, as Habermas argues, both media flows were co-extensively, if unevenly, "publicized." In terms of the "becoming public" of commodity markets and commercial exchange, there is a rich and comprehensive record that documents the degree to which – contrary to the mytho-political doctrines of free market equilibrium – the state was always deeply involved in the successful rise of capitalism in Western Europe. Whether in the form of increasing state taxation, legislating acts of early incorporation tied to imperialism and colonialism, the consolidation and management of stable currencies, or the management of regional stock markets, the hegemony of market capitalism in Europe always "had to be oriented toward a commodity market that had expanded under public direction and supervision."[100]

 Yet despite the fact that the state always played a formative role in growth of capital markets and exchanges, this "publicization" of the market economy was never much more than a backing measure designed to ensure the smooth and

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[100] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 19.

continuous private appropriation of surpluses, and thus the publicization of the

market beginning in the eighteenth century remained a shadowy enterprise out of

the public view. The same, however, cannot be said for the traffic in news which,

in sharp contrast to the flows of capital, "developed a unique and explosive

power"[101] not merely for giving voice to an emergent public sphere, but for

infrastructurally constituting this new democratic formation as such which,

according to Habermas, received its classical political formulation in Kant's

principle of publicity, most articulated in his political philosophy. As Kant

famously argued in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" not only is the public

sphere the domain in which previously private persons could engage each other in

a public form and through the use of their reason, but, more importantly, as Kant

recognized (if only implicitly) this public was a unique political space made

possible by the availability of print technology:

> By the public use of one's reason, I mean that use which anyone may
>
> make of it as *a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading public*. What
>
> I term the private use of reason is that which a person may make of it in a
>
> particular *civil* post or office with which he is entrusted … It is, of course,
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> impermissible to argue in such cases; obedience is imperative. But in so
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> far as this or that individual who acts as part of the machine also considers
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> himself as a member of a complete commonwealth or even a cosmopolitan

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[101] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 20.

society, and thence as a man of learning who may through his writings

address a public in the truest sense of the word.[102]

However, while it is certainly been argued that the nascent reading public

provided a means of democratic voice or agency, it can also be argued, as I

discuss in Chapter 4, that print technology, and its associated institutions, places

strict limitations on legitimate political activity and reinforces a naturalized and

ideological conception of the Western subject as atomized, isolated and private. In

Kant's political philosophy in particular, print technology is used as a crucial

mechanism for the quasi-politicization of the liberal citizen that does not,

however, undermine the basic ontology of liberal political subjective as both

highly *privative* and *individualistic* in nature. There is a certain sense, then, that

print technology functions as an alibi or even fetish for the deprivation

characteristic of capitalist society as a whole at the same time that it, ostensibly,

permits greater democratic agency.

In any case, while "the press," as it may now be properly called, was

certainly "public" in a new and unprecedented fashion, it nonetheless remained

confined to what often amounted to the same sectors of the society from which it

initially rose, given that it was the newly prosperous bourgeoisie that was the

most literate and well-read sector of the population. However, despite the fact that

the new sphere of publicity was confined to those sectors of the society that were

able to read and write, and despite the fact that commercial operations and policy

itself remained in the private control of the new bourgeois stratum, the genesis of

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[102] Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S.Reiss
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55-56.

the modern public nevertheless evoked a new mode of political association in which this new public was able to challenge the authority and autonomy of the economic sphere itself. Thus while the press had originated as an ancillary system of information collection and transmission to assist in the growth of capital markets across a patchwork of feudal territories, the triumph of the bourgeoisie in both outgrowing their local market, as well as (in time) supplanting the monarchical State as the prime mover of social policy and administration in Europe, meant that the organs of information collection and transmission were turned against the commercial bourgeoisie, as it were, and began to function as a vehicle for a properly Kantian conception of public reason. "As early as the last third of the seventeenth century," writes Habermas, "journals were complemented by periodicals containing not primarily information but pedagogical instructions and even criticism and reviews [and thus] in the course of the first half of the eighteenth century … critical reasoning made its way into the daily press."[103]

Unfortunately, for Habermas, the historical period of public reason was short lived. Against a politico-economic *longue-durée* in which the liberal era gave way to an increasing monopolization or oligopolization in the advanced industrial nations and a gradual democratization of economic policy, it became increasingly difficult to maintain a critical public sphere dependent on the "tension-charged field between [public] state and [private] society" for its existence.[104] For the slow genesis of what would become the welfare state in Europe and North America in the mid-twentieth century increasingly rendered the

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[103] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 25.
[104] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,141.

dichotomy of public and private itself entirely confused and problematic, insofar as the welfare-state model rendered all aspects of social life, whether public or private, a matter of state administration. "From the midst of the publicly relevant sphere of civil society," writes Habermas, "was formed a repoliticized social sphere in which state and societal institutions fused into a single functional complex that could no longer be differentiated according to criteria of public and private."[105] Thus while the gradual collapse of these mutually opposed spheres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century via the genesis of the modern welfare state was undeniably effective in ensuring that "the unpropertied masses [were] able to make sure that their share of the national income had not decreased over the long run,"[106] it nevertheless altered the conditions under which the public's use of their reason, exercised and manifest through the medium of print technology in a public sphere separate from both the administrative state and the commercial economy, would become increasingly ineffectual. Specifically, while the development of the welfare state system in the West realized a more equitable distribution of the resources, Habermas argues that the increasingly totalizing regulation by the state had the general effect of dis-empowering or even infantalizing the public insofar as a prior "culture-debating" [*kulturäsonierend*] public was replaced with a "culture-consuming" public: "the public sphere in the world of letters was replaced," argues Habermas, "by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption."[107]

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[105] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 148.
[106] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 148.
[107] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 160.

Within the parameters of Habermas' account, it is possible to view this shift from a debating to a consuming public as a corollary or even a determined effect of the shift from print technology to electronic media such as radio and television, not dissimilar to the argument already raised by Horkheimer and Adorno. For not only did Habermas contend that the organizational character of the media such radio and television – which tended to be highly centralized and uniform in nature – detract from the ability of the public to engage in substantive debate, but Habermas likewise echoes Horkheimer and Adorno's culturally conservative views about the degradation of culture within an environment in which mass media is developed and deployed predominantly as a means of accumulating capital. "Mass culture," writes Habermas, "has earned its rather dubious name precisely by achieving increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance … Serious involvement with culture produces facility, while the consumption of mass culture leaves no lasting trace; it affords a kind of experience which is not cumulative but regressive."[108] For Habermas, then, the seeming enlargement of the public sphere via electronic mass media did not lead to a corollary enlargement in democratic participation or agency, but rather contributed a generalized de-politicization of welfare-state societies insofar as the capitalistic imperative for media outlets to reach broader markets – i.e., the propertyless and relatively uneducated masses – tended to result

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[108] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,165, 166.

in a de-politicization of content and a systemic preference for entertainment over enlightenment.

While I have given special and extended reference to the accounts provided by Horkheimer and Adorno as well Habermas inasmuch as these texts constitute important theoretical touchstones for contemporary media and cultural theory, it should be stressed that these texts, and the arguments therein, were far from unique during their respective periods of publication. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a period in modern Western history in which commentary from both the political right and left were so united in consensus as in this genre of post-war academic writing that laments the rise of the mass media and the distribution of mass culture as de-politicizing and/or infantalizing the culture at large. While those writing from the political left viewed this development as a direct result of the concentration of media by capital, those from the right viewed the same tendencies as a regrettable symptom of the decline of the competitive market in an age of monopoly capital, welfare state administration and mass media influence. In his very influential *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), for instance, David Riesman argues that the increasing subsumption of the middle classes within the rigors of the fordist-industrial machine and their constant exposure to the mass media, has produced a fundamental deterioration in the Western character. As articulated in the book's preface, Riesman effectively equates the apex of the "human being" itself with the pioneering and domineering "inner-directedness" of the modern Western individual and its historically remarkable *Wille zur Macht,* to borrow Nietzsche's phrase:

In our own Western history, as perhaps also at other times and places, a

superlatively efficient and impressive social character was created (which

we termed "inner-directed"), which gave Portuguese and Spaniards and

Dutchmen, Englishmen and Frenchmen, Russians and Americans, power

to impose their aims and their very physical characteristics on vast

populations (including greatly increased populations of their own kind)

over large parts of the globe – so that a Spanish Philippine commander in

the sixteenth century could write his superior at home that with six

thousand men they could conquer China.[109]

Yet where Western man (pronoun intended) once displayed such a historically

unique inner-directedness, the mid-twentieth century Western subject had become

almost entirely "outer-directed" in Riesman's view and now demonstrates a

regrettable and pervasive "tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and

preferences of others."[110] Thus upon asserting that the shift from inner- to outer-

directedness should be viewed as "facilitated by education, by mobility, [and] by

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[109] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), xxv. Another way of characterizing the same European colonial predilections is offered by Noam Chomsky as follows: "As Adam Smith observed, European success was a tribute to its mastery of the means and immersion in the culture of violence. 'Warfare in India was still a sport,' John Keay observes: 'in Europe it had become a science.' From a European perspective, the global conquests were 'small wars,' and were so considered by military authorities, Geoffrey Parker writes, point out that "Cortes conquered Mexico with perhaps 500 Spaniards; Pizarro overthrew the Inca empire with less than 200; and the entire Portuguese empire [from Japan to southern Africa] was administered and defended by less than 10,000 Europeans.' Robert Clive was outnumbered 10 to 1 at the crucial battle of Plassey in 1757, which opened the way to the takeover of Bengal by the East India Company, then to British Rule over India. A few years later the British were able to reduce the numerical odds against them by mobilizing native mercenaries, who constituted 90 percent of the British forces that held India and also formed the core of the British armies that invaded China in the mid-19th century. The failure of the North American colonies to provide 'military force toward the support of Empire' was one of Adam Smith's main reasons for advocating that Britain should 'free herself' from them. Europeans 'fought to kill' and they had the means to satisfy their blood lust" (*Year 501*, 7-8).
[110] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd,* 8.

the mass media" and which has a tendency to result in an "enlargement of the circles of empathy beyond one's clan, beyond one's class, [and] sometimes even beyond one's country," Reisman is sufficiently alarmed to speculate that "we may indeed be coming to end of the human story."[111]

Yet *The Lonely Crowd* is merely one of the more influential examples of an entire genre that runs throughout the 1960s and 1970s and which manifests a virtual consensus, across the political spectrum, that the saturation of the society by the mass media has lead to definite and worsening cultural or political impoverishment. From the more radical left, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) argues that, in the industrial mid-twentieth centuries of both West and East alike, "intellectual freedom would [only] mean the restoration of individual thought now absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination [and] the abolition of 'public opinion' together with its makers,"[112] while the conservative-minded Daniel Bell argued in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) that the mass media "invites not purgation or understanding but sentimentality and pity, emotions that are quickly exhausted, and a pseudo-ritual of pseudo-participation in events" and therefore that the industrialization of cultural via the mass media in the twentieth century is fundamentally "in conflict with the advanced cultural trends of the Western World."[113]

To return to the central argument of this section, this brief but exemplary survey of academic literature demonstrates a definite discursive division on the

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[111] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd,* xxi, xxv.
[112] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 4.
[113] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 108, 84.

topic of the mass media technologies of the twentieth century between (a) the proponents of the technologies themselves and (b) the coinciding social and political commentary on these mass media technologies, in terms of their political and cultural impacts. While the former tended to almost universally proclaim the benefits of these technologies for improving modern democracies, the latter were for the most part convinced that the media technologies of the twentieth century had severely diminished, if not ended, the prospects for individuality, freedom and democracy in the West. And insofar as one is able to point to a root cause for this dichotomous commentary, it is conventional on the matter to observe that it is the infrastructural framework and demographic pattern characteristic of these mass media technologies themselves that are responsible for this division of opinion. For rather than addressing a delimited, informed and participatory public – as Habermas argues was still the case in the early development of the literary public sphere – twentieth-century media technologies, as specifically *broadcast* media, invariably interpellate the public as, to put it somewhat tautologically, a *mass* rather than a *public*. Whereas a "public," to borrow the criteria used by C. Wright Mills, is defined by heterogeneity of opinion, the capacity for immediate feedback and debate, and a substantive relationship between rational debate and corollary effective political action, a "mass," on the other hand, is the interpellative-demographic outcome of media technologies that display the following and contrasting characteristics:

> (1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the
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> community of publics become an abstract collection of individuals who

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receive impressions from the mass media. (2) The communications that

prevail are so organized that there it is difficult or impossible for the

individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (3) The

realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize

and control the channels of such action. (4) The mass has no autonomy

from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions

penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it might have in the formation

of opinion by discussion.[114]

Simply put, one can understand the dichotomous commentary on the mass media

technologies of the twentieth century as a function of their centralized

organization, "broadcast" operation and hierarchical structure. This structural

feature did not inspire or nurture liberal notions of autonomy and freedom, but

rather suggested an increasingly programmed or managed future society that ran

counter to the founding principles of political autonomy and freedom associated

with the bourgeois, liberal citizen.

Yet it is precisely in this respect – the division of opinion between

producers and commentators on the basis of the internal organizations structure of

the mass media technologies – that the advent of the media technologies

associated with Internet has been, in sharp contrast to the mass media

technologies like radio and television, so glowing received in terms of its potential

for re-invigorating democratic participation and expression. For while we might

assume that it is a more or less historical constant that the inventors and

developers of new media technologies will invariably assert the benefits of any

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[114] C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 304.

given technology in terms of the dominant political discourse of their respective

environments[115] – which in the case of liberal modernity means terms like

freedom, equality, democracy, etc. – what is so significant about the media

technologies associated with the Internet, and developed predominantly during the

1990s, is that the internal structure of these technologies correlated, in a

homologous fashion, with Western conceptions of the imagined structure of a free

and democratic society as non-hierarchical, de-centralized, interactive and

participatory. Thus whereas the development of the former mass media

technologies was met with an entire genre of social, political and philosophical

criticism on the horrors of social conformity induced by the mass media,

contemporary "network" media forms contrastingly spawned a whole philosophy

of techno-utopianism, most demonstrable in the culture of Silicon Valley and

publications like *Wired* magazine, in which these new networked technologies

would finally end the democratic deficit associated with representative forms of

democracy through their capacity to inform all members of the societies on any

and all important political issues. According to political theorist Robert A. Dahl,

for instance, the advances in information and communications technologies that

spawned the Internet means that "virtually every citizen could have information

about public issues almost immediately accessible in a form and at a level

appropriate to the citizen."[116] And in the view of Lawrence Grossman, network

technologies are imagined as providing the conditions for realizing a new golden

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[115] Contrastingly, there is also a sense in which it is a historical constant that the introduction of new media forms are thought to be inherently deleterious to the minds and bodies, individual and social, of the social environments in which they are introduced. More will be said on this topic in the third and fourth chapters.

[116] Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 339.

age of mass democracy: "many more citizens are gaining a greater voice in the

making of public policy than at any time since the direct democracy of the ancient

Greek city-states some twenty-five hundred years ago … in an electronic republic,

it will [therefore] be essential to look at politics from the bottom up as well as the

top down."[117] Similarly, Mitchell Kapor argued that the Internet will "enable a

Jeffersonian revolution"[118] by virtue of the unprecedented diffusity of information

and communication and the speed of their dissemination, and Nicholas

Negroponte, in quasi-Marxian terms, argued that the nation-state itself would

soon evaporate "under the influence of new internet technologies."[119]

And while it could be argued that the initial reception of a new media form

is invariably met with some degree of acclaim, the almost two decades since the

introduction of these information and communications technologies has not seen

any substantive decline in publications asserting the political virtues of Internet

associated technologies. From a more liberal perspective, communications and

media theorists Manuel Castells and Yochai Benkler both insist that the

intensifying penetration of communications and information technologies

throughout all levels of the social will invariably transform contemporary political

norms and mechanisms in order to permit greater public participation than

republican or representative democracies have traditionally expected or

encouraged. In the prologue to his influential *The Rise of the Network Society*

(2000), Castells underscores the importance of today's information and

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[117] Lawrence Grossman, *The Electronic Republic* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 3-5.
[118] Mitchell Kapor, qtd. in John V. Pavlik, *New Media Technologies: Cultural and Commercial Perspectives* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 317.
[119] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 165.

communications technologies by drawing a substantive link between technological development and state-political formations. "If society does not determine technology," writes Castells, "it can, mainly through the state, suffocate its development. Or alternatively, again mainly by state intervention, it can embark on an accelerated process of technological modernization able to change the fate of economies, military power, and social well-being."[120] Thus, after a brief account of what he views as the retarding function of state power vis-à-vis technological development in medieval China and the industrialized Soviet Union,[121] Castells argues that the dominant political tendency of what he calls the "informational society" – aside from the ubiquity of capitalist production after the Soviet Union's terminally-ascribed failure to harness new communications and information technologies – will be "the construction of social action and politics around primary identities, either ascribed, rooted in history and geography, or newly built in an anxious search for meaning and spirituality."[122] For Castells, then, one of the core political challenges of the 21st century must involve the transformation and expansion of democratic institutions and mechanisms beyond traditional parliamentary or legislative parameters in order to accommodate the augmented role of cultural identity and development as an axiom of democratic practice and expression in the informational age. Along similar lines, Harvard legal scholar Yochai Benkler argues in *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) that the saturation of all levels of social, political and economic life with networked

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[120] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age, Vol. 1* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell: 2000), 7.
[121] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society.* 7-20.
[122] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society,* 22.

communications and information technology has begun to alter "the very

foundations of how liberal markets and liberal democracies have coevolved for

almost two centuries."[123] Specifically, Benkler suggests that the participatory

character of the new media networks and platforms driving the knowledge or

information economy increasingly subverts the now aging liberal distinction

between public and private by "increase[ing] the role of nonmarket and

nonproprietary production, both by individuals alone and by cooperative efforts in

wide range of loosely or tightly woven collaboration."[124] For Benkler, then, these

new technologies have produced a new paradigm in which economic production,

cultural expression and political exercise can no longer said to be discrete

practices but are rather being collapsed or condensed together within the

increasingly isomorphic figuration of the network. And working from a more

Marxist orientation, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the advent of

what is often referred to as communicative capitalism has finally undermined the

long held assumption in Western political philosophy that political order can only

be achieved when the One rules over the Many, "whether that one be conceived as

the monarch, the state, the nation, the people, or the party."[125] Thus the new

paradigm of the network though which these new communications and

information technologies are deployed – namely, interlinked nodes without a

determinate center – resist, as a matter of structure, the kind of singular

sovereignty that the tradition of Western philosophy deems necessary for effective

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[123] Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1.
[124] Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks,* 2.
[125] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 328.

political rule.[126] For Hardt and Negri, then, the new information and

communication technologies associated with the development with the Internet

will not merely extend the mechanisms of liberal democracy into new domains or

enhance those democratic mechanisms already in place, but rather these

technologies will inaugurate an entirely new political age or epoch fundamentally

different from the liberal societies of the past three centuries.

None of this is to say, of course, that the democratic potential of new

information and communication technologies is not without its sceptics or

detractors.[127] And while these criticism will be addressed later in this dissertation,

the initial aim of this chapter has been to articulate the degree to which the new

information and communication technologies associated with the Internet seem to

hold out a greater promise for improving or enhancing democratic practice or

participation insofar as the organizational infrastructure of these technologies

isomorphically align with our underlying conception of what a properly

functioning democratic sphere should look like: non-hierarchical (horizontal),

multifaceted, interactive and participatory. But if it seems as if these technologies

will encourage greater democratic enfranchisement – whether in terms of an

expansion of the traditional liberal notion of politics or a fundamentally different

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[126] It is worth recalling that what would eventually become the Internet originated in the drawing rooms of the US Defense Department Advanced Research Projects Agency in the 1960s, as a military exercise designed to ensure that the US military could maintain control over their nuclear arsenal in the event the Soviet Union successfully disrupted the center of US military command at the Pentagon by implementing a decentralized or networked system of military command and control. The Internet thus grew out of the initial instantiation of this project, called ARPANET, and therefore retains an inherent structural tendency that subverts efforts to ground authority or sovereignty in a single, central point or node.

[127] One of the most incisive and prolific of these critics has been Jodi Dean. See: *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), *Reformatting Politics: Information Technology and Global Civil Society* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2002).

conception of political practice – what I want argue in the next section is that a

closer examination of the terms through which contemporary accounts of the

relationship between technology and politics describe this potentiality manifest a

considerable theoretical impediment in terms of theorizing the politics of new

information and communications technologies. Specifically, I argue that there is a

substantive conceptual contradiction or lacunae in much contemporary cultural,

media and political theory on the topic of the political effects of new media

technologies, and this contradiction is centred around the overlapping use of the

concept of "mediation" in media theory and political philosophy respectively. To

put it directly, work on this topic tends to articulate the increasingly saturation of

social field with emergent information and communications media as collapsing

the boundaries between various domains of social life – domains that more or less

mirror the disciplinary enclaves characteristic of Foucault's influential account of

modernity – thus producing a pronounced lack or absence of *mediation* in

political affairs. In other words, theoretical work in this field produces a strange

conceptual scenario in which a surfeit of *media,* in terms of communications and

information, produces a lack of *mediation* in terms of political relations. In order

to better map out the logic of this contradictory conceptual formulation, the

second section of this chapter will closely examine the work of Michael Hardt and

Antonio Negri, which is viewed as paradigmatic of this general tendency, in order

to gain a greater grasp of the framework through which this conceptual

contradiction remains active and largely unattended in contemporary media and

political thought. By examining the genesis of their narrative of the dissolution of

political mediation – which, in the case of Hardt and Negri, involves an arc of political philosophy that begins in Hegel and terminates in Deleuze – I hope to demonstrate the degree to which the interaction of the fields of media theory and political philosophy is, at present, largely inadequate when it comes to theorizing the changing nature of social and political life under post-industrial conditions. By better understanding the genesis of this conceptual contradiction in the fields of media theory and political philosophy respectively, I hope to lay the groundwork for a different kind of collaboration between these two fields of inquiry that will occupy the remainder of this dissertation.

Wither Mediation? On the Problem of Political Media(tion) in Hardt and Negri

There is little doubt that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's trilogy – *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2005) and *Commonwealth* (2009) – has been, taken together, one of the most widely-read and influential accounts of the political effects wrought by the transition from industrial to post-industrial capitalism. While acknowledging Hardt and Negri's exceptional ability to condense the multitudinous political implications inhering in the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial paradigm within a single, comprehensive political account, what I want to argue here is that their analysis is nonetheless symptomatic of the way in which the concept of *media* and *mediation* in the fields of media theory and political philosophy have failed to translate well, despite the contemporary necessity of their dialogue. In order to bring the conceptual impediment hindering more substantive dialogue between these two fields, this section will trace the

evolution of *political mediation* in Hardt and Negri's work as a means of articulating the nature of the conceptual contradiction described above. Beginning in one of the more formative stages of the pair's work, Michael Hardt's article "The Withering of Civil Society" (1995), and then proceeding through their trilogy *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2005) and *Commonwealth* (2009), I will demonstrate the degree to which the concept of *political mediation* indexes the differentiation or compartmentalization of modern society, and the way in which this compartmentalization works to "educate," the modern worker-citizen in the interest of capital. While this conceptualization of mediation does important work for Hardt and Negri, it nevertheless leads them into a paradoxical conceptual scenario in which a proscribed condition of social and political *immediacy* is understood as a product or symptom of a more general surfeit of *media* (communications networks and technologies). By mapping the logic of this paradoxical scenario, I argue that Hardt and Negri's work falls into an identifiable genre of cultural, media and political theory that views the genesis of digital media technologies as somehow putting an end to the utility of the concept of political mediation as such, which, in my view, limits our ability to imagine or theorize the political effects, and potential, of these media technologies. By arguing in this chapter's conclusion that there is a certain sense in which both media theory and political philosophy are speaking of the same kind of social process through their respective notions of mediation, my aim is to re-formulate the ways in which these fields interact and thereby offer a better model for

theorizing the political effects of media technologies under post-industrial conditions.

Before discussing the relationship between media theory and political philosophy in the work of Hardt and Negri, however, it is necessary to gain some understanding of how the concept of political mediation functions in their work in the first place. And to do this, I will begin with an early and formative essay by Michael Hardt titled "The Withering of Civil Society."[128] In this essay, Hardt traces the genealogical development of what he calls "civil society" and focuses on its ability to mediate between the imperatives of capital and the political demands of Western populations. In this respect, the essay serves as something of a template for the way in which both Hardt and Negri will articulate the lack or obsolescence of political mediation in their expanded Empire trilogy. For Hardt, the notion of civil society finds its origin in a foundational opposition in Western political philosophy between *nature* and *culture*, an opposition that was typically manifest in modern political thought in terms of the dualism between the *state of nature* and the *State* as such. In the political philosophy of Hobbes, for instance, the state of nature is consistently conceived in terms of irrationality, brutality and egoism, while the public sphere or civil society, which is only actualized by the existence of the political State, provides the sole reflective space within which humans are able to contemplate various political schemas that, in one way or another, mediate the liberal imperative for individual freedom within the confines

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[128] The contents of Hardt's WCS should not, however, be divorced from his collaborative work with Antonio Negri. As Hardt makes clear in the essay's acknowledgements, "The principle ideas of this essay were first developed with Antonio Negri as part of a study of the contemporary juridical formation of the capitalist State." See Hardt and Negri, *The Labor of Dionysus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 257-61.

of our inextricable sociality. With the intensification of capitalist relations of

production in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, this

relatively simple conceptual dualism was realigned with the introduction of a third

conceptual term – political economy – and it was initially unclear how the

burgeoning system of markets would reorient the logic of the nature/culture split

from which the utility of civil society first arose. For Hardt, the most influential

attempt at a re-synthesis of these terms is found in the political philosophy of

G.W.F. Hegel, specifically his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (1820),

wherein the concept of civil society – which is rendered in Hegel as *bürgerlichen*

Gesellschaft – a concept that translates more accurately as "bourgeois society"

and which carries far greater economic significance than does the more neutral

English term "civil society"[129] – is understood as mediating self-interested and

particularistic action conceptually associated with the behaviour of the individual

in the state of nature, but which is now drawn into modern economic relations and

directed toward a universal ethos embodied by the State.[130] Hegel's civil society

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[129] This point of translation was, of course, not lost on Hardt, ("The Withering of Civil Society." *Social Text,* No. 45, 1995), who recognizes that "many commentators have pointed out that Hegel developed his concept of civil society on the basis of the writings of English economists of the time, and that the standard German translation of the English 'civil society,' which Hegel used, was *bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* or 'bourgeois society.' This fact alone should lead us to focus on the relationship between Hegel's conception of civil society and the conceptions, widespread at the time, of the civilizing process contained in market exchange and capitalist relations of production." (28).

[130] In recuperating the egoistic actions of "naturally" conceived peasant labor, it should be noted that Hegel's conception of civil society encompasses the entirety of concrete or material relations make up the social totality, but falls short of the more abstract and universal criteria Hegel reserved of the concept of the State. For instance, in his "Preface to *A Contribution of a Critique of Political Economy,*" Marx makes explicit reference to Hegel's conception of civil society as encompassing both political institutions and economic relations when, in the context of advancing his materialist philosophy of history, he states that "neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term 'civil society'" (1994, 210-211).

"takes the natural human systems of needs and particular self-interests," writes

Hardt, "puts them in relation with each other through the capitalist social

institutions of production and exchange and, thus, on the basis of the mediation

and subsumption of the particular, poses a terrain on which the State can realize

the universal interest of society in 'the actuality of the ethical Idea.'"[131] Yet it

should be recognized that there is substantive difference between Hegel's notion

of civil society and the capitalist market itself, insofar as the former is understood

by Hegel as a palliative that mitigates the excesses of the latter. While it is true

that Hegel understands civil society as essentially the sphere of economic freedom

in which individuals produce, trade and cooperate so as to satisfy the needs of the

society at large, Hegel is also aware that the highly egoistic character of the

mechanism through which the general social good is attained in a market –

namely the profit-motive – tends to undermine the beneficent ends of civil society

through a polarization between the rich and the poor.[132] His response to this

problem, as outlined in his *Philosophy of Right*, is the creation or maintenance of

a web of interconnected *corporations*, by which is meant simply collectives based

on common interests such as a guild or labour union, such that the regulation or

creation of "balance" within the market is easier to maintain, overproduction

amidst poverty is avoided, and the productive sphere thereby becomes truly

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[131] Michael Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society." *Social Text* (No. 45, 1995), 29.
[132] Specifically, Hegel argues that left to its own devices the capitalist market produces poverty in a paradoxical fashion, namely through *overproduction*: "The evil [of the market] consists precisely in an excess of production and in the lack of a appropriate numbers of consumers who are themselves also producers, and this is simply intensified by both of the methods [(a) charity and (b) make-work programs] by which it is sought to alleviate it. It hence becomes apparent that despite an *excess of wealth* civil society is *not rich enough*, i.e., its own resources are insufficient to check excessive poverty and the creation of a pernicious rabble" – G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222.

cooperative. In these terms, then, civil society is something more that the callous and naked self-interest of the market, but less that the concept of the Habermasian public sphere, for instance, which is defined against economic interests as such.

What must be underscored in terms of Hardt's reading of Hegel's concept of civil society is the stress Hardt places on the *educational* function of civic society, by which is meant the ability of the totality of social relations to "enlighten" the worker, as it were, or at least his actions, through social interaction and interconnection. Hegel thus joined Adam Smith in recognizing that labour is the seat of all wealth (as opposed to the Physiocratic identification of agricultural surpluses as the true source of wealth), but he harboured no romantic illusions about labourers or their motivations. Labour may be the foundation of the burgeoning industrial economy, but left to its own devices it is entirely particularistic and, as Hardt puts it, "uneducated in the universal interest."[133] Thus in some sense similar to Hobbes' conception of civil society as the necessary consignment of one's egoistic freedoms in the interests of a more civilized and commodious life, Hegel understands that it is only through some means of forced interconnection that the isolated and self-interested character of peasant labour is negated and rendered a social power. While it is unclear if Hegel viewed this process as educating actual labourers themselves – or if the general process of re-directing labor *en masse* is simply described as "educative" based on its superior results – what is clear is that the mediating function of civil society in Hegelian political philosophy is synonymous with its educative function, or its ability to recuperate the egoistic nature of human action and put it to work for the universal good.

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[133] Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," 29.

Hardt next argues that political theory in the twentieth century tended to reformulate Hegel's influential account of civil society in one of two distinct ways: "when we survey the work of the wide variety of twentieth-century authors who in some form or another take up this notion of civil society," writes Hardt, "we quickly recognize that the social dialectic of civil society is presented in two guises, one more democratic and the other more authoritarian."[134] From the more democratic side, Hardt focuses on the work of Antonio Gramsci and argues that Gramsci reverses the logic of Hegel's conception of civil society in order to render it an organ for radical democratic governance. Given his expansion of Marxist theory beyond infrastructural machinations to include the overlapping domains of political and cultural hegemony (not to mention the empirical fact of his imprisonment), Gramsci tended to follow Marx in the view that the State is less the embodiment of the "actuality of the ethical Idea" and more the "committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie," and thus his conception of civil society diverged from Hegel's insofar as Gramsci framed civil society as an oppositional power operating within State, rather than a vehicle for attaining social and ethical universality through the State. Specifically, Gramsci argues that the State is not the embodiment of a homogenous ethic but is rather comprised of two components or factions – *political society* and *civil society* – and it is the latter that, according to Gramsci, tends toward social universality while the former is governed by particularistic concerns as a result of its interpenetration by capitalistic interests. Following this logic, Gramsci thereby reverse Hegel's conception of civil society by arguing that insofar as political society wrests control over the State, it is the State,

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[134] Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," 30.

not civil society, that is compelled to play the role of educator for a bourgeoisie

grappling with the liberal antinomy in which formal or legal equality is rendered

possible by real economic inequalities produced through capitalist exchange. As

Gramsci writes, "[whereas] the previous ruling classes were essentially conservative

… their conception was that of a closed caste … the bourgeois class poses itself as an

organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society,

assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State

has [thus] been transformed; the State has become an 'educator.'"[135]

In contrast to the structurally exclusionary character of political society and

the bourgeois State, however, Gramsci conceives of civil society as capable, in

theory, of subsuming and supplanting the political state with some form of

decentralized and consensual political model. By comparing civil society with the

trench-systems developed during the First World War, Gramsci argues that political

society's interconnectedness with the capitalist system means that the State will

necessarily suffer in periods of economic crisis along with the capitalist class, while

civil society is contrastingly revealed as the material hearth of society's social

relations of production (which is to say the domain in which actual economic and

cultural wealth is produced but subsequently expropriated). Gramsci thus contends

that while the State is fragile in the face of economic crises, civil society is resilient:

"In Russia the State was everything, [and] civil society was primordial and

gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society,

and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was revealed. The

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[135] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 2008), 260.

State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks."[136] By articulating the grounded and cohesive character of civil society in the West against the absence of any such socio-cultural infrastructure in Russia, Gramsci is also able dispense with the notion of the party vanguard operative in Leninist theory for a more fluid and less hierarchic conception of a "passive revolution" in which the inexorable movement of social forces of production in civil society corrode the structures of domination and authority from below and eventually dissolve the entire State apparatus in an upsurge of popular autonomy. "The activation of the forces of civil society," as Hardt frames Gramsci's logic, "makes the State porous, destablizing its dictatorial powers or rather 're-absorbing' them within the expanding hegemony of civil society."[137]

Yet while Gramsci's work is paradigmatic of the more democratic interpretation of Hegel's conception of civil society, Hardt ultimately finds Michel Foucault's authoritarian reading of civil society the more compelling version of the concept and – in what may seem like a counter-intuitive reading given the anti-Hegelian motivations of a thinker like Foucault – argues that the Foucauldian conceptualization of civil society is in a certain sense truer to Hegel's version, despite the marked divergences between Hegel and Foucault's respective conception of civil society's ethical function. Foucault, quite unlike Gramsci, did not conceive of the various social and political institutions that comprise civil society as a potentially revolutionary stratum or space from which struggles for popular autonomy could arise, but rather understood civil society as a stifling network of disciplinary

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[136] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 238.
[137] Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," 31.

enclosures almost entirely subordinated to the logic of State governmentality. The church, the school, the prison, the family, the union, etc., are not conceived as potential sites of revolt but as elements of a methodically-organized system of enclaves that make up the grand disciplinary architecture producing subjects finely-tuned to the needs of modern state-capitalism. That said, what marks Foucault's vision of civil society as approximate to Hegel's formulation, in Hardt's view, is Foucault's unflinching extension of Hegel's conception of civil society as an educational apparatus: "while [denying] all the moral and teleological elements of Hegel's social theory," writes Hardt, "Foucault's understanding of the disciplinary and governmental society does in certain respects take the Hegelian notion of civil society to its logical conclusion ... Foucault reformulates the educational process of civil society in terms of *production*: power acts not only by training or ordering the elements of the social terrain but actually by producing them – producing desires, needs, individuals, identities, et cetera."[138] As Hardt observes, Foucault does not question the educational function of civil society but rather re-interprets its significance from a perspective on modernity that was unavailable to Hegel. Specifically, by shifting the discourse about knowledge from an experience of enlightenment to an exercise of power, Foucault is able to make two conceptual leaps beyond Hegel's initial articulation of civil society: first, Foucault recognizes that subsuming and mediating the masses in the interests of the State involves education, but education conceived as discipline rather than enlightenment. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault grasped that freedom in mass industrial society often amounted to little more than the freedom to be disciplined, to freely play one's

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[138] Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," 33.

proper social role as if it were internal compulsion. Second, Foucault's notion of

biopower – which will heavily influence Hardt and Negri's subsequent work –

fundamentally rejects the highly metaphysical liberal premise that the individual or

the subject somehow enters into quasi-legal relations with the State insofar as

Foucault's analyses of disciplinary society revealed the liberal subject itself a product

of specific governmental technique. In other words, the figure of the bourgeois

individual, the raw or natural material that, according to Hegel, must be educated in

civil society in order to contribute to the universal good, is now itself understood as a

specific articulation of power rather than a natural resource requiring refinement,

Foucault's notion of biopower does not therefore so much negate the educative

function that Hegel identified with civil society, but rather extends its logic beyond

the scope delimited to it by Hegel's historical situatedness. For Foucault, civil

society does not mediate already constituted but uneducated subjects: it rather

produces and disciplines all at once.

By marking this connection between Hegel and Foucault, Hardt is then able

to conclude his reflection on the genesis of civil society by turning to Gilles

Deleuze's brief but influential reading of Foucault titled "Postscript on Control

Societies" (1991) which addresses what Deleuze believes to be the crisis of the

disciplinary paradigm in the post-industrial era. Upon observing the decline of the

prison as the paradigmatic model of social architecture in Western modernity,

Deleuze asserts that capitalism has entered a new mode of accumulation not based on

a closed logic of property and confinement – as in the industrial-factory-prison

model – but on an open platform that privileges diffusion, circulation and continual

transformation. "One of the most important lessons that Foucault tried to teach us," argues Hardt, "is that power never leaves a vacuum but always in some form fills social space. Deleuze suggests that it is more adequate, then, to understand the collapse of the walls defined by the [disciplinary] enclosures not as some sort of social evacuation but rather as the generalization of the logics that previously functioned within these domains across the entire society."[139] While Hardt is not entirely inaccurate when he argues that we should conceive of what Deleuze calls "control" as the generalization of the disciplinary apparatus, we should nevertheless also observe that insofar as control privileges circulation and transformation over production and property, control fundamentally inverts the dynamics of disciplinary subjectivity and therefore constitutes a rupture with disciplinarity as such. Where disciplinary society demands that its subjects emulate a series fixed and static models in relation to one's movement throughout the various zones of the disciplinary superstructure, control compels its subjects to undergo unceasing alteration and live in a state of constant subjective openness or indeterminacy. "Disciplinary man produced energy in discrete amounts" writes Deleuze, "while control man undulates, moving among a continuous range of different orbits."[140]

By marking the movement from the Foucauldian disciplinary society to the Deleuzian society of control, Hardt is able to conclude his thesis on the withering of civil society by depicting the contemporary period as entering a "postcivil condition" or an age in which the mediating functions of civil society have withered and thereby introduced a state of political *immediacy*. Having eschewed its dependency on

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[139] Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," 35.
[140] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies." *Negotiations* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1995), 180.

exogenous mechanisms of command and control associated with the "artificial" zones of discipline in civil society, capital now invests the fabric of the social directly, articulating it from within, and in this sense no longer requires the machinations of state mediation. Capital is now in the business of producing and modulating subjectivities and social relations directly, and thus Hardt argues that the new paradigm of control must be thought of in terms of immediacy, of an immediate relation between capital and its subjective components: "what has come to an end, or more accurately declined in importance in postcivil society, then, are precisely these functions of mediation or education and the institutions that gave them form."[141]

By following Hardt's depiction of political immediacy under post-industrial conditions in this essay, we are thus able to form an initial framework through which it is possible to conceptualize the extension and expansion of this thesis in Hardt and Negri's subsequent work. As illustrated above, the withering away of mediation described here principally refers to the redundancy of civic or disciplinary institutions designed to mould the worker-citizen, understood as a natural resource or an exogenous element that the system must incorporate and refine in order to fuel the machine of industrial capitalism. At this point, however, Hardt's conception of *political immediacy* is not connected whatsoever to the rise of new information and communication technologies or media, but rather narrowly denotes the demise of state institutions that worked to create such a degree of distance between human subjects and the direct processes of the capitalist machine. Hardt's identification of the "postcivil" condition thus denotes a very particular object or problematic for political and cultural theory in the post-industrial age: it deals with state of society,

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[141] Hardt, "The Withering of Civil Society," 40.

power, subjectivity and resistance once capital is understood to have transcended or overcome various barriers to total commodification that have existed in the West in one time or another. It is no longer a case of "socializing" traditional, parochial or natural subjects in such a way as benefits the capitalist apparatus: rather, the unmediated or post-civil condition refers to a state in which subjectivity itself must be considered from the outset as a product capital.

Yet if Hardt's essay "The Withering of Civil Society" does not articulate the demise of political mediation in the context of the rise of information and communication technologies or media, it is merely because the confines of his brief journal article do not permit it. Within this limited context, Hardt simply posits the contemporary existence of the post-industrial society commensurate with what Deleuze calls "control," and does not, as a result of the confines of the medium, offer any insight as to why the Foucauldian disciplinary society transformed into the Deleuzian control society in the first place. However, as we move from Hardt's short but formative article to his influential trilogy with Antonio Negri, the scope of the pair's analysis is voluminously enlarged and Hardt and Negri must now also account for the nature of this transition in addition to diagnosing the new status of power and resistance characteristic of this emergent formation. Thus beginning with *Empire* – and remaining consistent throughout *Multitude* and *Commonwealth* – one finds that the basic logic concerning the pair's assertion about the decline of political mediation remains effectively the same with the exception of two additional narrative elements: **(1)** where Hardt's genealogy of political philosophy began with Hegel, the genealogy in *Empire*'s begins much earlier with what Hardt and Negri describe as "the

discovery of the plane of immanence,"[142] which they date as early as the thirteenth-century philosophy of Duns Scotus; and **(2)** the phenomenon of political immediacy, or lack of mediation, is now directly linked to the saturation of society with information and communication technologies, understood as infrastructurally driving the process of post-industrialization that has facilitated global capital's direct investment in social life.

To begin briefly with the first of these new narrative elements, where Hardt had originally began his genealogy of civil society with Hegel's political philosophy, Hardt and Negri now stretch this genealogy back much farther by redefining the very conflict that lead to modernization in the West. If the drama of modernity typically pits the disenchanting forces of secular Enlightenment against an entrenched ecclesiastical authority, Hardt and Negri take a slightly different approach and argue that the conflict driving modernity forward should be more precisely grasped as a philosophical or conceptual struggle between *transcendentalism* and *immanentism*: "what is revolutionary in [a] whole series of philosophical developments [Duns Scotus, Dante Alighieri, Nicholas of Cusa, Galileo Galilee, Francis Bacon, Baruch Spinoza] stretching from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries is that the powers of creation that had previously been consigned exclusively to the heavens are now brought down to earth. This is the discovery of the fullness of the plane of immanence."[143] This re-conceptualization of the crisis of modernity as a conflict between transcendence (or transcendentalism) and immanence does important work for Hardt and Negri insofar as it casts some of the Enlightenment's central themes

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[142] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 71.
[143] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 73.

and figures in a decidedly counter-revolutionary light. In Hardt and Negri's view, the discovery of the plane of immanence was simply too powerful to permit the return of transcendent authority, and thus modernity's counter-revolutionary forces were compelled to alter their strategy and re-impose order upon the burgeoning multitude by fracturing or dividing-up the plane of immanence so as to prevent the cohesion of the multitude's collective powers. Thus began a process wherein the singular and molar apparatus that had previously mediated between the divine and the earthly – the Catholic Church – was forced to molecularize, to become multiple, in order to keep the multitude from, in Hegelian terms, transforming from a class *in-itself* to a class *for-itself*. As Hardt and Negri put it, "the ontological dualism of the culture of the *ancien régime* had to be replaced by a functional dualism, and the crisis of modernity had to be resolved by means of adequate mechanisms of mediation."[144] By means of this argument, Hardt and Negri are able to expand the narrative of modernity's mediating power beyond the confines of civil society alone and instead offer a more omnipresent picture of political mediation based on a tripartite arrangement of *philosophy*, *politics* and *economics*. First, Enlightenment philosophy (or bourgeois ideology) from Descartes through Kant imposed a whole series of mediating mechanisms that progressively negated the contents of direct experience and replaced them with various abstract formalisms that distantiated the subject from the totality of her material and phenomenological existence. Second, mediation was re-imposed in the political realm by means of a variety of contractual theories of the State in which the natural rights and powers of the multitude were declared a threat to the social order and were thereby surrendered to the sovereign in exchange for

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[144] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 78.

collective security. And mediation was thirdly introduced into the economic domain by the imposition of a system of markets guided by networks of commodity values that played an increasingly determinate role in shaping social life. In this fashion, Hardt and Negri thus greatly expanded the scope of mediation beyond civil society by effectively depicting Western modernity as a tremendous synthetic-mediating-machine locked into an ongoing civil war against a collective multitude attempting to coalesce, but always running up against the barriers and limitations of modern sovereignty.

The second new narrative element, and the more pertinent for present concerns, involves the infrastructural ability of new information and communication technologies or media to negate the above mentioned mediating functions of modern sovereignty, thereby generating a technologico-political environment in which the multitude might, at last, constitute itself in a direct, rather than indirect or mediated, fashion. Again employing a distinctively Foucauldian-Deleuzian sensibility, Hardt and Negri argue that what is fundamentally unique about the contemporary period is that the transition to the post-industrial society – which they view as strictly concomitant with the transition from a Foucduldian disciplinary society to a Deleuzian society of control – means that power no longer occupies an exterior or transcendent position with respects to the objects of power's influence, as it were, but now power and its objects occupy an endogenous plane in which advanced information and communication media functions as infrastructure:

What the theories of power of modernity were forced to considered transcendent [i.e. Hobbes's Leviathan] … is here formed inside, immanent to

the productive and social relations. *Mediation is absorbed within the productive machine. The political synthesis of social space is fixed in the space of communications*. This is why communications industries have assumed such a central position. They not only organize production on a new scale and impose a new structure adequate to global space, but also make its justification immanent.[145]

Thus by exploiting the social field in a direct fashion, capital has unwittingly created the very conditions by which the multitude is put into direct contact with itself. Just as Marx argued, in the context of the industrial economy, that the agglomeration of wage workers on the industrial shop floor constituted the initial cooperative framework through which these workers might overcome their material isolation and constitute a properly political subject – the proletariat – Hardt and Negri contend that the information and communications technologies that define today's post-industrial or *biopolitical* capitalism is structurally compelled to create new modes of the "commons" that challenge and undermine the logic of private property that functions as the fundamental epistemology limit of capitalist governance as such.[146] It is thus through this process that post-industrial or biopolitical capitalism generates its own antagonistic-revolutionary agent – the multitude – which, while formed within the

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[145] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 33.
[146] "What is the operative notion of the common today, in the midst of postmodernity, the information revolution, and the consequent transformations of the mode of production. It seems to us, in fact, that today we participate in a more radical and profound commonality than has ever been experienced in the history of capitalism. The fact is that we participate in a productive world made up of communications and social networks, interactive services and common languages. Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services and relationships. Producing increasingly means constructing cooperative and communicative commonalities (*Empire,* 302).

immanent plane of biopolitical capital, nevertheless "always exceeds what capital and the global political body can expropriate and control:"[147]

> Having achieved the global level, capitalist development is faced directly with the multitude, *without mediation*. Hence the dialectic, or really the science of the limit of its organization, evaporates[148] … The flesh of the multitude is pure potential, an unformed life force, and in this sense an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life. From this ontological perspective, the flesh of the multitude is an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional political-economic measure of value. You can try to harness the wind, the sea, the earth, but each will always exceed your grasp. From the perspective of political order and control, then, the elemental flesh of the multitude is maddeningly elusive, since it cannot be corralled into the hierarchical organs of a political body.[149]

This expanded logic of political immediacy amidst information and communications media is not fundamentally altered in the volumes that follow *Empire*. While the concept of mediation is invoked in smaller regional or local contexts throughout both *Multitude* and *Commonwealth* in order to discuss topics such as neo-Kantian legal theory, Hilferding's theory of capital equalization, the Bretton Woods Agreement, Habermasian political consensus, and so on, substantial application of the concept in these subsequent volumes always references the same historico-transformative phenomenon whereby the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial mode of

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[147] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 212.
[148] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 237.
[149] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 192.

production, infrastructurally driven by information and communication technologies,

has rendered political mediation – as was once found in civil society – obsolete, as

power now occupies an immanent position with respect to the field in which it

operates.

One can certainly imagine definite conceptual advantages to framing the

multitude as an immanent, even elemental, force operating from within the

parameters of post-industrial capitalism. For instance, at an initial political level, this

immanent concept of the multitude obviously avoids or eschews the leftist tendency

to seek what Hardt and Negri call a "politics of purity" that constantly gestures

toward an "outside" of capital from which resistance gains political force and

legitimacy. By following in the path of their seventeenth-century inspiration Baruch

Spinoza, whose pantheism negated the necessity of the transcendent and declared

God to be nothing more than the totality of the laws of nature, Hardt and Negri's

immanent conception of the multitude offers a kind of ready-made politics in which

all the tools and preconditions for revolution are already present within the apparatus

of post-industrial capitalism itself. However, this initial dimension of political

expediency achieved through the immanent conceptualization of the multitude is

nonetheless beset by an underlying theoretical contradiction or lacunae in which the

immanent character of the multitude retains or re-activates a different kind of purity

that, as William Mazzarella puts it, "is a purity that is imagined as an absence of

mediation."[150] And insofar I would argue that the political immediacy of the

multitude is, in the first instance, consistent with a narrow reading of Western

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[150] William Mazzarella, "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 36 (Summer 2010), 713.

political philosophy, my criticism of this conception of immediacy is related to the larger theoretical framework in which this condition of political immediacy becomes possible: specifically, Hardt and Negri's work is exemplary of a kind of theoretical contradiction that is produced when contemporary cultural, media and political theory argues that the saturation of the post-industrial social field with information and communications *media* produces a condition of political *immediacy*. Now it should be stressed that Hardt and Negri are hardly alone in this matter. As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, one finds the same dynamic in the work of Brian Massumi in the context of the necessity of theorizing affect for understanding contemporary politics. For Massumi, the significance of the dimension of affect is similarly theorized as an outcome or effect of the recent saturation of Western societies with information and communications technologies. "There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary, and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narrative are perceived to have foundered."[151] For Massumi, then, the general effect of the saturation of the social realm with information and image-based technologies is the demise of the liberal master narrative according to which politics is a matter of rational debate and communicative exchange, and upon which the critique of ideology is based. Given then that politics has definitely descended, so to speak, from the intermediary realm of the rational public sphere and entered directly into the fabric of social world itself, by virtue of today's information and image-based technologies, cultural theory, argues Massumi, ought to abandon its older discourse of culture as hegemony and ideology, in which "culture occupied the

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[151] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.

gap between matter and systemic change, in the operation of mechanisms of 'mediation,'"[152] and embrace a critical epistemology that does without mediation by putting "matter unmediatedly back into cultural materialism … and [which] finds a semiotics willing to engage with continuity."[153] In other words, Massumi, too, realizes that as our societies become more information- and imaged-based, as a result of new media technologies, not only has political mediation ceased but mediation in the cultural realm has declined in efficacy as well. These technologies, and the affects they elicit, now circulate in our post-industrial environment in an increasingly unmediated manner.

Now while it is surely possible to offer a critique of the narrative of political mediation offered by both Hardt and Negri (and Massumi) on its own terms,[154] my argument here is directed instead at the contradictory way in which this overall narrative effectively bars our ability to theorize what kinds of political relations, categorizations, subjectivities and ontologies these new technologies will or might produce under post-industrial conditions, simply because according to this narrative, *these media technologies don't mediate*: they negate mediation, but do not in turn re-mediate the social world themselves (despite the fact that they *are* media). And while one might be tempted to argue that this paradoxical formulation is nothing more than a semantic issue arising from the interaction of two fields of thought – media theory and political philosophy – that have hitherto had little opportunity for substantive interaction, I would like to conclude this

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[152] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* 1.
[153] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* 4.
[154] For such a criticism, see Beverley Best, "'Fredric Jameson Notwithstanding': The Dialectic of Affect." *Rethinking Marxism,* vol. 23, no.1 (2011): 60-82.

chapter by pointing to the fact that both of these conceptual fields, media theory and political philosophy, are in fact two domains of thought that not only owe their genesis to fundamentally similar phenomenon – namely the differentiation of complexification of Western societies as such – but, in addition, these fields seem to be effectively structured by remarkably similar assumptions about the subsequent evolution of human society, in political and technological terms respectively. For as much as Hardt and Negri's work embraces a political philosophy that is explicitly informed by the work of Spinoza at the expense of Hegel, it is difficult not to notice a resoundingly Hegelian dialectic at work within their narrative with respect to the emergence of unmediated social life at the twilight of capital's rule. "This part of Hardt and Negri's story," writes Mazzarella, "sounds dialectical in the orthodox sense":

> The immaculate autonomy of the multitude is fully realized – in a massive world historical sublation – at the precise point where capital has so entirely subsumed immaterial labour that it can no longer exploit it without, as it were, exploiting itself. Thus we would have, in strict Hegelian terms, the negation of the negation through which the multitude would rise out of the ashes of global capitalism. And thus we reach the moment of immediacy to end all mediations.[155]

And if, as Mazzarella suggests, the larger *political* narrative that runs through Hardt and Negri's work can be described in almost orthodox Hegelian terms, one finds virtually an identical temporal narrative underlying and informing contemporary media theory. In fact, this temporal narrative in a sense originated

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[155] Mazzarella, "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd," 709.

the field of media theory itself through the work of Marshall McLuhan, who

famously argued that all media technologies ought to be understood as extensions

of the human body. Yet in addition to this specific media axiom, McLuhan also

believed that human society, mediated by technology, effectively progresses

through "stages" of development according to a tripartite movement,[156] in which

the third and final stage, characterized by the hegemony of electronic and digital

media, effectively returns human society to its original "oral" or "tribal"

paradigm, though now at a higher or global level. "Rapidly we approach the final

phase of the extensions of man," argued McLuhan in *Understanding Media*

(1964):

> The technological simulation of consciousness, […] the creative process of
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> knowing, will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of
>
> human society, much as we have already extended our senses and nerves by
>
> the various media … After three thousand years of specialist explosion and of
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> increasing specialism and alienation in the technological extensions of our
>
> bodies, our world has become compressed by a dramatic reversal. As
>
> electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village.[157]

For McLuhan, the "three thousand years of explosion and increasing specialism and

alienation in technological extension of our bodies" effectively denotes the historical

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[156] For McLuhan, these stages are in general characterized by the hegemony of "oral" and "written word-print" media respectively, which in turn are aligned with sense ratios that privilege the "ear" and the "eye" respectively: "Only the phonetic alphabet makes a break between ear and eye, between semantic meaning and visual code; and thus only phonetic writing has the power to translate man from the tribal to civilized sphere, to give him an eye for an ear … But today, as electricity creates conditions of extreme interdependence on a global scale, we move swiftly again into an auditory world of simultaneous events and overall awareness" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 27, 29).
[157] Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 3-4, 5.

span that encompasses the invention of the written word up to the dawn of the electrical and digital age and which, described using the political discourse of Hardt and Negri, can be understood as the age in which human society was *mediated* by technology. In other words, the ancient and prehistory of human society, in which oral communication was the dominant media, is for McLuhan an era of human immediacy, of direct human contact and relations, while the era of technological development that stretches from the invention of the written word to the apex of print culture produced "the partial and specialized character of the viewpoint" of which the Western autonomous individual is the high-water mark. Yet as electronic and digital technologies replace the printed word as the dominant media across the globe, our single or fixed point of view, associated with the isolated and individualistic Western subject, is now transformed into "a single field of experience which demands that we become collectively conscious"[158] and that abandons "the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age."[159] For McLuhan, as for Hardt and Negri, *immanence* follows *transcendence*. And moreover, one finds the same underlying temporal narrative organizing the work of the most influential of McLuhan's predecessors, and one of the most widely-read contemporary media theorists, Friedrich Kittler. In the introduction to his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), Kittler likewise describes a scenario in which the technological mediations that have for so long rendered human society more specialized, fragmented and complex are perhaps coming to an end with the arrival of digital media technologies:

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[158] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 5.
[159] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 4.

The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface … Inside the computers themselves everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound, or voice. And once optical fiber networks turn formally distinct data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other. With numbers, everything goes. Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, storage, transposition; scrambling, scanning mapping – a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium. Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run on an endless loop.[160]

Thus, the prominence of the narrative concerning the lack of mediation under post-industrial conditions is thus hardly confined to discourses that privileged the morphology of political relations and treat information and communications technologies as mere underlying infrastructure. Rather, even the field of media studies itself seems to subscribe to the narrative that while past media forms mediated, electronic and digital media are the ultimate apex of media itself, and therefore mark the end of mediation and even the end of the media concept. Whether analyses focus on political mediation, as do Hardt and Negri, or on these technologies themselves, as in the work of Kittler, the contemporary interaction between media theory and political philosophy has resulted in the highly problematic conclusion that digital media technologies don't mediate the social, and thus, by

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[160] Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

inference, that the rise of these technologies means that human societies will simply cease to be *political* in the traditional sense of the term. We will, in McLuhan's estimate, return to a form of village life that takes back beyond even the Greek polis from which the initial necessity of political thought was born.

As I have attempted to argue here, the conceptual hurdle of political immediacy amidst media saturation is not merely a semantic problem that can be solved with better translation but is rather grounded in the very structure, which is to say the temporal assumptions, of the fields of media theory and political philosophy themselves. However, despite the problematic nature of these assumptions, which have produced the strange conceptual scenario described above, both of these fields are, I argue, capable of a much more substantive dialogue, particularly given the fact that each of these conceptual fields take what is in effect the same object, albeit from different perspectives: namely, the differentiation and complexification of human societies that warrants the notion of *mediation* in the first place. In an attempt to place these fields of thought into a more productive relationship, then, the proceeding two chapters of this dissertation engages in a approach described here as *comparative political medialogy,* which is a practice that examines past instances of media and political change in order to generate a different theoretical framework for understanding how media technologies affect political categories, and vice-versa, and which operates under the basic methodological assumption that *media technologies always mediate*. Beginning with the philosophy of Plato as conditioned by the emergence of the written word in fifth-century Athens in Chapter 3, and moving onto the political philosophy of Immanuel Kant as exemplary of the political organization

and assumptions of a capitalistic print culture in Chapter 4, the dissertation concludes

with some commentary as to how these past instances of mediation transformation

and political change can help us begin to better theorize the political implications of

contemporary media technologies beyond the mythology of media without

mediation.

Chapter 3: Plato and the Image Thinkers: A media-epistemological analysis of Plato's Republic

In a follow-up essay to his highly influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas Kuhn narrates the genesis of his revisionist conception of scientific progress as originating in a re-reading of Aristotle's *Physics*, which he had undertaken in preparation for a lecture on the history of mechanics for a general audience. While Kuhn had intended his survey of Aristotle to simply help him narrate the transition from the basic mechanics of the ancient world to the more advanced theories of modern physicists like Galileo and Newton, Kuhn recounts that he was taken entirely aback by the immense poverty of Aristotle's knowledge of the underlying principles governing the physical world, particularly in comparison with his work in other fields of inquiry. In fact so asymmetrically poor was Aristotle's conception of physics when compared to his work in politics, logic or even biology, Kuhn began to seriously doubt whether the author of *Physics* was actually Aristotle at all. "For almost two millennia after his death," writes Kuhn,

> [Aristotle's] work played the same role in logic that Euclid's played in geometry. In addition, Aristotle had often proved an extraordinarily acute naturalistic observer. In biology especially, his descriptive writings provided models that were central in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the emergence of the modern biological tradition … [Yet] Aristotle appeared not only ignorant of mechanics, but a dreadfully bad scientist as well. About motion, in particular, his writings seemed to me

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full of egregious error, both of logic and observation … How could his

characteristic talents have deserted him so systematically when he turned

to the study of motion and mechanics?[161]

Upon closer consideration, however, Kuhn discovered that the problem of

Aristotle's seemingly total collapse when it came to his examination of the laws

governing the physical world did not in fact lie in false authorship, but was rather

rooted in a phenomenon that Kuhn would later describe as a *paradigm shift*.[162] For

Kuhn, a paradigm shift fundamentally denotes the way in which the advancement

of science or knowledge does not proceed in a linear and smooth fashion but is

rather marked by uneven and unpredictable periods of epistemological rupture or

revolution, in which one categorical model or system is rapidly superseded by a

new and often incompatible model or paradigm that effectively negates the

explanatory power of the prior system.[163] In the context of Kuhn's reading of

Aristotle's *Physics*, what Kuhn began to realize was that the dissonance between

himself and Aristotle was not so much the result of Aristotle's failure of logic or

observation, but was rather produced by Kuhn's inadvertent retention of the

various assumptions and axioms that constitute the paradigm governing modern

physics while he was reading Aristotle. For instance, Kuhn was originally

dumbstruck by Aristotle's rambling descriptions of motion until he recognized

that Aristotle's concept of motion was axiomatically – or paradigmatically –

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[161] Thomas Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.
[162] See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[163] This is not necessarily always the case, however, though it is typical. For instance, the paradigm of quantum mechanics did not completely negate the explanatory power of Newtonian physics as such, but merely reduced the explanatory power of the latter from a universal model to a limited or regional system. It is, however, the case that the two models are largely incompatible, in the sense that their respective domains are mutually exclusive.

different from his own. "When the term 'motion' occurs in Aristotelian physics," remarks Kuhn, "it refers to changes *in general*, not just to the change of position of a physical body. Change of position, the exclusive subject of mechanics for Galileo and Newton, is [only] one of a number of subcategories of motion for Aristotle. Others include *growth* (the transformation of an acorn to an oak), alterations of *intensity* (the heating of an iron bar), and a number of more general qualitative changes (the transition from sickness to health)."[164] In other words, so long as Kuhn anachronistically assumed a categorically equivalency between Aristotle's physical examination and that of his modern counterparts like Galileo and Newton, Aristotle's work could only read as utter nonsense. Yet once Kuhn recognized he was erroneously reading modern scientific categories retroactively into Aristotle's work, Aristotelian physics not only began to make sense but the whole system quickly attained an internal logical consistency as elegant as that found throughout the rest of the Aristotelian canon.

Much like Kuhn's reading of Aristotle, the object of this chapter likewise concerns something of a paradigm shift and, in particular, the categorical confusion that can arise from failing to distinguish one paradigm from another. And like Kuhn, the source of this paradigmatic torsion is a classical author writing in the fifth century B.C.E., though the subject of this inquiry is philosophical rather than physical. While it is relatively uncontroversial that Plato's *Republic* is one of the most influential works of political philosophy ever written in the Western tradition – indeed, it could be argued that the text effectively founded the field as such – the *Republic* also contains something of an anomaly when it comes

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[164] Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure,* 17, emphasis added.

to analyses or treatises in political philosophy that has puzzled a great many of

Plato's commentators. In the third and tenth chapters of the *Republic,* Plato seems

to stray from the traditional subject matter of political philosophy in order to

discuss, at great length and with marked seriousness, the role of poetry in the ideal

city-state or society, and with characteristic rigour, Plato astonishingly –

especially from the perspective of the modern reader – demands that all the poets

should be exiled from his ideal city-state and the performance of poetry all but

effectively banned. While it is not entirely uncommon for political philosophers to

discuss aesthetic concerns or include the aesthetic in their political theory,[165] Plato

is virtually alone in the annals of political philosophy when it comes to both the

extraordinary political weight he assigns an aesthetic practice and, more

particularly, the uncompromisingly negative view he holds with respect to this art

form. Thus whatever its politico-philosophical virtues in general, the modern

reader of the *Republic* cannot help but be puzzled – or even disturbed – by the

seeming contradiction in which an idealized society ostensibly devoted to the

preeminent philosophical values of truth and justice can at the same time so

harshly and unfairly condemn an aesthetic practice that has done so much to

endow the human condition with meaning and beauty.

Yet as the study of dialectics amply demonstrates, contradictions can be

highly productive epistemological phenomenon and the problem of poetics in

Plato's *Republic* is no exception. By examining Plato's criticism of poetry in the

Republic, it is the aim of this chapter to demonstrate that the virulence of Plato's

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[165] For a survey of the importance of the aesthetic for political philosophy, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

anti-poetics is not, as is often assumed, rooted in Plato's totalitarian predilections or his admiration of Spartan austerity, but is rather best accounted for as a symptom or "effect" of the shifting mediascape that characterized fifth-century Athens, in which the technology of the written word had begun to slowly but significantly infiltrate and alter an epistemological environment in which oral communication, or oral poetry, had long constituted the dominant social medium. After a general description of the media background of classical Greece, followed by an exegesis of Plato's criticisms of poetry in the *Republic*, this chapter proceeds by drawing on a range of media theory in order to demonstrate the markedly – and even essentially – different function that poetry performs in the context of an oral culture in comparison to the function it fulfills in a modern industrial society. For as this chapter demonstrates, what is most problematic for Plato with respect to poetry is not its function as an aesthetic practice or category, but rather the dominant role that it plays as an informational medium that, as a matter of its very form, resists the kind of critical thinking Plato attempted to propagate amongst his fellow Greeks. Thus far from an exercise designed to *limit* discourse within his ideal city-state, as is often assumed, this chapter argues that Plato's critique of the poetic medium is, in essence, an attempt to push the Greek mind beyond the limiting confines of its self-congratulatory national mythology and toward a more critical and self-reflexive epistemology that Plato refers to as philosophy.

Yet if it is possible to interpret Plato's critique of poetry, in the first instance, as a symptom or effect of the introduction of writing technology into

Greek culture, what is perhaps most instructive about Plato's quarrel with the

poets from the perspective of media theory is not merely the connection between

writing technology and philosophical or Platonic thought, but the additional fact

that, at an explicit or literal level, one would be hard pressed to find a more direct

and forceful critic of the written word than Plato himself. For it is in the *Phaedrus*

that Plato offers one of the most direct denunciations of writing technology, a

denunciation that describes the written word as an alien and inhuman technology

that deteriorates the mind and impoverishes the larger culture. Drawing from both

the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, I argue that it is more accurate to understand the

genesis of Platonic philosophy, from a media perspective, as not simply an

"effect" or "reflection" of writing technology as such, but rather as an

epistemology that emerged out the contradiction, or out of the confused

interstices, produced by two colliding and very different media technologies, oral

poetics and the written word. It is principally in this respect, then, that I argue that

Plato's quarrel with the poets offers a highly instructive example of a process of

social transformation or evolution produced by a new media technology. It

demonstrates that a new medium may not principally augment or even diminish

the breadth of the prior medium, but rather it might initially transform the society

at deep epistemological level – so deep, indeed, that arguably the agent most

responsible for propagating what we could call the *spirit* of writing technology not

only seemed to be unaware of this process, but even explicitly spoke of the

dangers of this new technology for the powers of the human mind. Thus by

demonstrating what could be called the "ground up" way in which a new media

technology, potentially, alters an epistemological field, this chapter lays important theoretical groundwork for the comparative analysis of media technologies and political ontology that follows in chapter 4, and provides a powerful precedent for considering what kind of social, political and even epistemological changes might potentially be produced by the ascension of new information and communication technologies driving contemporary processes of post-industrialization.

Classical Greece: The Medialogical Background

Before discussing Plato's criticisms of the poets from the *Republic* directly, however, some background information that speaks to the media environment of classical Greece itself is in order. What initially marks the proto-Hellenistic cultures of the Mediterranean as distinctive from the older cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia is not, at least in the first instance, their information and communication media, but rather their respective modes of production. The empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia were predominately agricultural and thus tended to produce a socio-legal superstructure that resembled feudalism in medieval Europe: power was highly concentrated and centralized, and the vast majority of the population was compelled to work the land, if they were not enslaved outright. The most notable exception to this model appears to have been the Minoan culture that existed on Crete between 2500 and 1400 B.C.E., which was maritime rather than agricultural in terms of its mode of production and produced what Bertrand Russell describes as "an artistically advanced culture [that] gives an impression of cheerfulness and almost decadent luxury, very

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different from the terrifying gloom of Egyptian temples."[166] While Minoan civilization

on Crete appears to have been in decline from about 1600 B.C.E. onwards, aspects of

Minoan culture subsequently spread throughout the Greek mainland and gave shape to

the Mycenaean civilization, which flourished between 1600 to 900 B.C.E. and is

generally considered to be the immediate genealogical predecessor of the Hellenes

proper.

In terms of media technologies specifically, all of the societies of Egypt,

Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean, prior to at least the eight century B.C.E., are best

described as predominantly *oral cultures*, though the written word was employed in

these cultures to a minor extent. For instance, the Babylonian Empire developed a

cuneiform or pictographic script not dissimilar to Egyptian hieroglyphs, in which clay

served as the predominant medium. And while this script facilitated the development

of one of earliest known legal codes, namely the Code of Hammurabi, the use of

writing technology within these pre-Hellenistic cultures tended to be either strictly

economico-utilitarian, and used almost exclusively for constructing rudimentary lists

and inventories for the purposes of trade, or it was applied in religious contexts. And

yet even when the written word took on a theological role, it tended to operate as a

kind of sacred and magical authority that, as in the case of the ancient Hebrews, even

had the power to bring about creation itself. In either case, what seems clear is that

while writing, in some form or another, was certainly employed in these ancient

cultures, it did not play a major role for the vast majority of the population in any

substantial sense. What seems to have been the case, then, as Harold Innis argues in

his influential *Empire and Communication* (1950), is that the agricultural mode of

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[166] Russell *History of Western Philosophy*, 13.

production that characterized the vast majority of the pre-Hellenistic cultures favoured

a superstructural order that was highly centralized in character and which, as Gilles

Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue in their semiological analysis of what they call the

"barbarian despotic machine," largely maintains power and control through the almost

paranoid drive to code and confine all the social flows in a terrifying and monolithic

symbology, whose primary function is to deify the despot and thereby maintain strict

political and ideological authority.[167] Accordingly, the highly centralized character of

these agrarian empires tended not to produce the degree of semiological abstraction

necessary for more advanced forms of alphabetic writing, but instead favoured a

symbolic mode of representation of a more iconoclastic sort. It was, according to this

view, not surprising then that the maritime cultures of the Mediterranean provided a

more fertile environment in which a more abstracted alphabetic writing could be

developed, given the importance of horizontal networks of maritime trade over the

vertical system of power favoured by agricultural empires. Thus while Greek culture

remained primarily oral until the fifth or fourth century B.C.E, the technology of the

written word seems nonetheless to have been introduced to the Greeks some three

centuries earlier by the Phoenicians, a maritime-commercial civilization that

superseded the Mycenaean civilization in the regions surrounding Crete and the Greek

mainland, and there is good reason to believe that the introduction of this media

technology played an important role in the eventual Greek renaissance in the fifth

century.

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[167] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 192-222.

Yet if the technology of the written word was indeed introduced to the Greeks sometime around the eighth century, it is important to underscore that Greek culture nonetheless remained predominately oral for at least four centuries, and its cultural canon dominated by the works of two poets, Homer and Hesiod. Homer, who existed somewhere between 750 and 550 B.C.E – and who is often thought to have been a series of authors rather than a single individual – produced the first great works of Hellenistic poetic-literature, namely the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Both narratives are, generically speaking, epics that depicted events that were for Homer and his contemporaries understood to have occurred far back in the age of the Mycenae, some ten or twelve generations prior to the life (or lives) of Homer, and which spoke of the fall of many of the great cities of the Mycenaean age, most notably Troy. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are essentially "dramas of human passions"[168] in which the exchanges between humans and gods, against a backdrop of disasters (most importantly wars), serve to communicate ethical and political mores through the narrative device of heroic exploit. The central narrative importance attached to the Homeric hero as a vehicle for disseminating cultural norms and morality was, for instance, what lead Friedrich Nietzsche to draw such a stark contrast between the "master morality" that he believe largely defined the ethos of the classical world and the "slave morality" that, he argued, was characteristic of Judeo-Christian culture.[169]

The work of Hesiod, on the other hand, differs in some important respects from that of Homer. While Hesiod, who is considered to have been active between 750 and

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[168] M.L. West. "Homeric and Hesiodic Poetry." *Ancient Greek Literature.* Ed. Kenneth Dover, et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.
[169] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 24-57, and *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 128-151.

650 B.C.E., conveyed his thoughts in a narrative form similar to the Homeric epics –

which is to say the same poetic hexameter – Hesiodic poetry tended to be much less

heroic in its style and, instead, more didactically and systematically codified "whole

area[s] of the tradition, such as the genealogies of the heroes and heroines of various

parts of Greece, all linked in common descent from Hellen, the mythical eponym of

the Hellenic nation."[170] The Hesiodic canon consists mainly of two works, the

Theogony and the *Work and Days*. The *Theogony* speaks of the origins of the gods and

their subsequent genealogies, as well as the series of events that lead to the

contemporary geo-political order on the Greek mainland at the time of Hesiod's

writing,[171] while the *Work and Days* is more of a "didactic poem giving instruction to

the peasant farmer, but [still] interwoven with tales from mythology."[172] While less

exciting and dynamic in terms of its narrative content, Hesiod's work, especially the

Work and Days, offers a much more explicit – which is to say less metaphorical –

account of early Greek ethics, politics, and morality than do the more literary, so to

speak, Homeric epics.

 While there is no question that the form and presentation of Homer and Hesiod

would have been almost exclusively oral, received opinion in the field of modern

classics understands the canonization of these two authors within Greek culture, and

the standardization of the poem's contents, as itself highly suggestive of the

introduction of writing technology sometime around the eighth century. For while

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[170] M.L. West, "Homeric and Hesiodic Poetry," 24.

[171] Hesiod at least appears as much more of a singular individual than Homer, about whom doubt concerning the particulars of his existence was widespread even in the classical age. In both the *Theogony* and the *Work and Days*, Hesiod tells reader about himself, are therefore at least in narrative terms appears as more real or singular individual than does Homer.

[172] Jenny March, *Classical Myths* (London: Penguin, 2009), 9.

written copies of these texts would have surely been rare, and the ability to write them down or read them even rarer, the general opinion is it is "difficult even to conceive how poems of such length could have been produced without written copies."[173] This view is corroborated by the comparative work of African anthropologist Ruth Finnegan, who argues that while epics are often assumed to be the standard narrative form of non-literate cultures, "this does not seem to be borne out by the African evidence. At least in the more obvious sense of a 'relatively long narrative poem,' epic hardly seems to occur in sub-Saharan Africa, apart from forms like the [written] Swahili *utenzi* which are directly attributable to Arabic literary influence."[174] Thus for Finnegan, the more common literary product, so to speak, of purely oral cultures is "a very loosely related bundle of separate episodes, told on separate occasions and not necessarily thought of as one single work of art."[175] Accordingly, then, it is the general conclusion that while the Homeric and Hesiodic poems were always principally oral works in terms of their performance and dissemination, their standardization as singular works sometime during the eighth century suggests the existence and use of the written word in Greece during this same period.

Yet if it is relatively uncontroversial that writing technology was introduced to the Greeks around the eighth century, the evidence suggests that the written word remained a subordinate media technology for many centuries. For while the epics may have been committed to writing by a select few scribes, "there is no evidence [at this

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[173] George Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951),13.
[174] Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 108.
[175] Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa,* 109.

point] for the existence of anything that can be called a reading public."[176] Thus while

intensification of writing technology becomes increasingly discernible during the

seventh and sixth centuries, as the lyrical poetry of Pindar, Simonides and Bacchylides

began to circulate throughout the Greek territories in such breadth and scale that they

likewise must have been committed to manuscript of some sort, there is almost no

evidence of anything resembling a reading culture in Greece until at least the

generation after Aristotle. Indeed, while there is ample evidence within fifth-century

literature itself that indicates that books had become almost commonplace objects,

reading still seems to have been considered an inferior and subordinate means of

storing and transmitting information. In terms of the existence of books, Plato's

Phaedo, for instance, depicts Socrates stating that he "heard a man reading from a

book, as he said, by Anaxagoras, that it is the mind that arranges and causes all

things"[177] and in the *Theaetetus*, Eucleides recounts both writing down and referencing

a speech made by Socrates before he hands the actual book to his interlocutor,

Terpsion, for inspection.[178] The comedies of Aristophanes also suggest the existence

of books within Greek society, such as when Pistheataerus asserts in *The Birds* that the

Chorus to whom he is speaking is "ignorant and heedless" as a result of having "never

read his Aesop"[179] and, similarly, Dionysus recounts in *The Frogs* that "I was reading

the 'Andromeda' on [a] ship [and] I suddenly felt my heart afire with a wish so

violent."[180] Indeed, Xenophon's *Memorabilia* even suggests the existence of

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[176] George Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 15.
[177] Plato, *Phaedo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 335/97b.
[178] Plato, *Theaetetus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 9-10/143a-c.
[179] Aristophanes, *The Eleven Comedies,* "The Birds" (New York: Van Rees Press, 1936), 114.
[180] Aristophanes, *The Eleven Comedies*, "The Frogs" (New York: Van Rees Press, 1936), 189.

rudimentary personal libraries, such as when Socrates asks Euthydemus if he is "rightly informed that you have a large collection of books written by the wise men of the past," to which Euthydemus responds "yes, Socrates, and I am still adding to it, to make it as complete as possible." [181]

While there seems little doubt, then, that books were relatively common objects in fifth-century Greece, there is also, however, good evidence that suggests that book or prose culture nonetheless remained subordinate to the oral tradition. And while the subordinate status of the written word is manifest by the Socrates of both Plato and Xenophon, it is the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus* that is far more often the spokesperson for the distrust of writing technology in fifth-century Greek culture. For it is in the *Phaedrus* that Socrates explicitly states that the written word "produces forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned [to read], through lack of practice at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from the outside by alien marks" (more will be said about this denunciation of writing in the chapter's final section). [182] Thus while there is little doubt that the fifth-century was a period of intense artistic creativeness in which the written word was certainly a familiar technology, it seems nonetheless the case that writing remained hegemonically subordinate to the oral tradition as a means of storing and circulating information, at least until after Aristotle. "It is not too much to say," writes classicist George Kenyon, "that with Aristotle the Greek world passed from oral instruction to the habit of reading. The history of libraries in the Greek and Graeco-Roman world is rightly taken to start with the foundation of the Museum at Alexandria; but the

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[181] Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 273/Book IV, ii.
[182] Plato, *Phaedrus* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 62/275a. More will be said about the importance of Plato's distain for writing technology in the final section of the chapter.

foundation of the Museum and of the great Alexandrian Library was made possible by the change of habit which took form in the time, and largely under the influence, of Aristotle."[183]

In more precise conceptual terms, then, the medialogical condition of fifth century Greece, just prior to the advent of a reading culture after Aristotle, is perhaps best articulated using media theorist Walter Ong's notion of *secondary orality*. In contrast to "primary orality," which Ong uses to define "a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of print or writing,"[184] a condition of "secondary orality" refers to a mixed-media environment in which oral communication, while it is still the dominate or hegemonic medium of information storage and transfer, has begun to undergo certain morphological shifts as a result of the co-presence of a competing and very different medium. And as Harold Innis effectively corroborates in his survey of Western media history, the most singular transformative effect of writing technology under conditions of secondary orality, particularly in the Greek context, was the growing appearance and intensity of a kind epistemological abstraction and universality that tends not to be produced by purely oral cultures. "Prose," argues Innis, "reflected the demands of the city-state and to some extent the philosophers, as written laws assumed the development of prose in clear and universally valid sentences."[185] Indeed, as will be argued below, there is good reason to believe that not merely the administration and organization of the Greek polis, but even the most fundamental genetic traits of Western philosophy itself, were influenced by a shift in media technology along the lines described by both Ong and Innis. However, before

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[183] Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 25-26.
[184] Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 11.
[185] Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 102.

articulating the epistemological connection between writing and philosophy in the

context of Plato's critique of poetry in the *Republic*, which follows in the third section

of this chapter, I will first examine some passages of the *Republic* directly in order to

gain a greater and more accurate understanding of precisely why, or what grounds,

Plato denounces poetry in the context of the ideal city-state.

Plato's Republic

Unlike Homer and Hesiod, the circumstances of Plato's life and work are

relatively well known. Plato was born in Athens in 427 or 428 B.C.E., during the

early years of the Peloponnesian War, into the ranks of the Athenian aristocracy.

Plato was the brightest pupil of Socrates, but he was also heavily influenced by

many of the pre-Socratics including Pythagoras, Parmenides and Heraclitus.

These thinkers imbued his philosophical outlook with a great respect for

mathematics, particularly in the case of Pythagoras, and from Heraclitus Plato

seems to have adopted the conception that universal truths – or forms, as he would

later put it – are transcendent, timeless and unchanging properties and that,

contrarily, constant change and flux rules over empirical existence. In terms of the

Republic, the text is generally considered Plato's most magisterial work and,

accordingly, is often cited as one of the foundational texts of Western political

philosophy itself. "Although other Platonic texts supersede the *Republic* in some

aspect or other," writes Mark McPherran, "[the *Republic*] nevertheless brings

together all of Plato's prior work, ranging over everything from moral

psychology, philosophy of education, aesthetics and comparative political science

to epistemology and supra-sensible metaphysics – unifying them in a comprehensive vision that is at once theological, philosophical, political and moral."[186]

Broadly speaking, The *Republic* consists of three main parts or sections (though technically speaking the text is comprised of eleven books or chapters) and, as is the case of all of Plato's writings, the *Republic* is dialogical in narrative form. The conversation that drives the narrative in the *Republic* is situated in the home of Polemarchus, a colleague of Socrates,' and includes the characters Socrates, Glaucon and Adeimantus (Plato's brothers), Niceratus, Charmantides and Cleitophon, the sophist Thrasymachus, Cephaleus, and Cephaleus' three sons Lysias, Euthydemas and Polemarchus himself. The elder of the group, Cephalus, begins the dialogue with a reflection on his hedonistic youth in which he states he was once under the control of "a lot of mad masters"[187] – a euphemism for desire – and yet Cephalus does not regret the free rein he permitted his youthful indiscretions except insofar as he may be subject to divine punishment for these acts of injustice after he dies. Thus while the *Republic* begins as a debate about the nature of justice and injustice on a personal level, the conversation quickly broadens out – in accordance with Socrates' methodological axiom in the *Republic* that one ought to "start [one's] inquiry with the community and then proceed to the individual and see if we can find in the conformation of the smaller entity anything similar to what we have found in the larger"[188] – and thus the

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[186] Mark L. MacPherron, eds. *Plato: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.
[187] Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 5/329d.
[188] Plato, *The Republic*, 58/369a.

remainder of the text is devoted to theorizing the concept of justice in the larger

context of the ideal Greek city-state. Some of the more noted conclusions arrived

at in the text in terms of general political philosophy include the decision to divide

the population into three distinct classes – commoners, soldiers and the Guardians

– whereby the Guardians or rulers practice a thoroughgoing communism, while

the remainder of the population retain some private property, including their own

labour, though one is not permitted to alter one's profession, which is assigned by

the state on the basis of natural skill or endowment.[189] Excess wealth is strictly

forbidden, insofar as Plato argues that both extreme wealth and extreme poverty

are dangerous and degenerative qualities that invariably disturb the harmony of

any republic or city-state. In terms of family organization, men and women live in

common houses and marriages are ostensibly arranged by lottery (but in fact they

are arranged by the Guardians according to principles that could be somewhat

anachronistically called eugenic). Children are also taken from parents at birth and

raised on a collective basis, as was the practice in Sparta during Plato's lifetime.

Lastly, the necessity of a solider class grows out of the conviction that the state

will invariably run out of room – as a result of the increasing number of

occupations needed to keep the society running smoothly – and therefore Plato's

republic adopts a permanent imperial posture in order to accommodate its

growing population.[190]

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[189] Plato, *The Republic*, 61/371b.
[190] It should be mentioned that the republic is only running out of room not because of biological-demographic increases, but because the participants of the dialogue in the *Republic* are continually adding what they view as necessary occupations amongst the commoners, which increases the concentration of the population. However, simply increasing the presumed geographical size of the state itself seems not to have been an option. This strange turn of logic in the dialogues thus lends some support to the idea that Plato's *Republic* is just as much social or political commentary

While one may agree or disagree about the merits of any of the above organizational principles, none of these topics are unusual fare for a treatise in political philosophy. What is unusual for a text in political philosophy, however, is the seemingly disproportionate amount of time Plato spends critiquing an aesthetic practice, namely poetry. Even more surprising, from a contemporary perspective, is his decision that poetry, of all things, is so dangerous to the welfare of the republic that the poets will be banished from the republic and poetry effectively censored. According to some of the more prominent commentators of the *Republic*, Plato's strange discussion of poetry, and his general criticism of artistic practice as such, is simply evidence of Plato's underlying predilection for Spartan austerity or militarism, his desire for governmental totalitarianism, or his distain of Athenian democracy (particularly given the latter's penchant for executing prominent philosophers). Writing in the socio-political context of Rome's collapse in the fourth century C.E., St. Augustine of Hippo, a neo-Platonist in the tradition of Plotinus, tended to congratulate Plato's anti-poeticism as an effective means of shoring up the moral fibre of society against the kinds of narcissism, hedonism and licentiousness that characterized much Greek literature and culture. "Plato, who would not allow poets to dwell in a well-governed city," writes Augustine, "showed that his sole worth was better than those gods that desire to be honoured with stage-plays."[191] Taking a similar view, though expressing an opposing opinion, Lewis Mumford describes the would-be intellectual environment of Plato's republic after the expulsion of the poets as

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on contemporary Athens as it is the hypothetical construction of an ideal state. See Plato, *The Republic*, 64/373b.

[191] St. Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Harper Publishing, 1949), 63.

"restrictive, puritanical, authoritarian … Given his way," writes Mumford, "he would turned the urban dialogue into the sterile monologue of totalitarian power."[192]And according to Bertrand Russell's reading of Plato, the impetus behind Plato's exile of the poets from his republic comes from his cultural conservatism with respect to popular culture and the fragility youthful minds. "There must be no stories in which the wicked are happy or the good unhappy," writes Russell, "the moral effect on tender minds might be most unfortunate."[193]

While there may be some truth to these all of these views, these responses nevertheless tend to be overly idealistic in nature – in the sense that Plato's view on this matter is simply traced to his personal psychology – and myopically focused on the content of the poetry at the expense of its form. Influenced as they undoubtedly are by the socio-political conditions in which they were expressed, these perspectives nonetheless all view Plato's criticism of poetry in a singular fashion: namely, they all view his expulsion of the poets as an act of state censorship that is designed to *limit* the overall discourse within the city in an attempt to contain dissent and reinforce orthodoxy. Yet a close examination of the *Republic*, I argue, does not necessarily conform to this interpretation, but rather suggests that it something in the formal character of poetry itself that Plato finds unworthy, rather than the contents of the poems themselves.

The first appearance of anti-poeticism in the *Republic* is found in the text's third chapter, titled "Education: The First Stage," which, in contrast to a subsequent chapter in the *Republic* that deals with the education of the

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[192] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt Press, 1961), 180-181.
[193] Russell, *History of Western* Philosophy, 98.

philosopher-kings, is concerned with the educational curriculum for the general

population as a whole. While initially concluding that the curriculum must

invariably comprise "stories," Plato draws a significant distinction between what

he calls "true stories and fiction" – and in this respect he is speaking specifically

of Homer and Hesiod[194] – and decides that only true stories should be told to the

youth. Yet Plato is still critical of such true stories insofar as they have the

tendency of "misrepresenting the nature of gods and heroes, like a portrait painter

whose portraits bear no resemblance to their originals."[195] In effect, Plato initially

takes a position that, as Russell suggested, is somewhat similar to that of a modern

conservative cultural critic concerned about the effects of sex or violence on the

minds of the young. Yet a close reading reveals that, for Plato, the problem is not

so much the inclusion of sex and violence *per se*, but rather the fact that the epic

poems are rife with *injustice*, which signified more in terms of "imbalance" for

the classical Greeks than it does the morally-loaded notion inherited to us through

Judeo-Christian influence. Specifically, Plato argues that the poems are full of

injustices insofar as evil deeds are often rewarded and good deeds tend to result in

misfortune:

> I am afraid that we shall find that poets and storytellers are in error in matters
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> of the greatest human importance. They have said that unjust men are often
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> happy, and just men wretched, that wrong-doing pays if you can avoid being
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> found out, and that justice is what is good to someone else but is to your own

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[194] Plato, *The Republic*, 72/377d.
[195] Plato, *The Republic,* 73/378e.

disadvantage. We must forbid them to say this sort of thing, and require their

poems and stories to have quite the opposite moral.[196]

Initially, Plato's critique of poetry in the third chapter of the *Republic* does seem

concerned with the *contents* of the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod. In particular, he

is concerned about the questionable mores contained in the poems, though

predominately from the perspective of *justice*, or proper balance, rather than the

salacious or violent contents of narratives in their own right. Yet it is crucial to point

out here that so long as the discussion of the poetry is confined to the contents alone,

Plato does not find it necessary to ban poetry outright, nor exile the poets. As the

passage reads above, Plato will simply "forbid [the poets] to say" such things, and

demand "their poems and stories to have quite the opposite moral," i.e., morals in

accordance with a proper notion of justice.

However, prior to concluding the third chapter, Plato offers a second critique

of poetry that goes beyond the mere level of literal content, as it were, and strikes

more at the heart of the poetic medium itself. After coming to the above conclusion

concerning the appropriate contents of poetry, Plato then decides that it is necessary to

make a further distinction between two types of poetry, what he calls "simple

narration" and "representative" poetry. Simple narration, for Plato, is simply poetry in

which "the poet is speaking in his own person, and does not attempt to persuade us

that the speaker is anyone but himself,"[197] and with this form of narration, Plato has no

problem. Representative poetry, on the other hand, in which the poet *re-presents*

characters in the narrative in his or her own person and voice, is not something Plato is

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[196] Plato, *The Republic,* 90/392b.
[197] Plato, *The Republic*, 91/393b.

prepared to accept, on two distinctive grounds. First, his rejection of this type of

poetry is related to Plato's already established principle that his republic will only

include *specialists*: everyone will undertake the task best suited to them, according to

their natural endowment, and it will be forbidden for anyone to dabble in many trades

or occupations: "ours is the only state in which we shall find (for example) the

shoemaker sticking to his shoemaking and not turning pilot as well, the farmer sticking

to farming and not taking on court work in the bargain, and the soldier sticking to his

soldiering and not running a business as well, and so on."[198] In the first instance, then,

Plato argues that the representative poet undermines this principle insofar as she is

compelled to represent all occupations and subject-positions in the course of the poetic

performance and not stick to one position or occupation.[199]

The second reason for Plato's criticism of representative poetry is likewise

related to its multifaceted or many-sided character, and on this count Plato has the

education of the Guardians specifically in mind. In short, Plato argues that

representative poetry damages one's moral character insofar as it requires good men to

take on the person or position of bad men (since all narratives are likely to have

villains of some kind) and, according to Plato, a truly just man should be unwilling to

present himself as an evil or unjust man: "we will not allow [the Guardians] to take the

parts of … bad men who are cowards and whose behaviour is just the opposite of what

we have just described. Such characters indulge in comic abuse and use of foul

language, drunk or sober, and say and do other typical things that are an offense

against themselves and their neighbours … Our Guardians must recognize that there

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[198] Plato, *Republic,* 98/397e.
[199] Plato does not seem willing to accept the logic that it is precisely the poet's role – her singular
occupation – to perform many persons in narrative as satisfying the rule of specialization.

are men and women who are mad and bad, but they must not represent them in poetry."[200] Yet as one reads further, it seems that the moral character of the various persons portrayed in poetry is in fact incidental to Plato's criticism, and what he really finds problematic with representative poetry is simply the fact of representing other persons as such. For when Adeimantus, immediately following Socrates' statement about unjust men cited above, asks Socrates "[can we] tolerate representations of smiths or craftsmen at work, or men triremes or in command of them, or anything else of the kind?," Socrates responds, "No: because none of these are occupations to which our Guardians are allowed to pay any attention."[201] It is at this point that Plato comes to the general conclusion that while poetry as simple narration may be permitted, so long as it respects the limits imposed on it by the requirements of justice, representative poetry, on the other hand, is corrupt in its very form. It is *unjust* by the simple fact that it compels persons (and the Guardians specifically) to pretend to be persons they are not, and it is thus with representative poetry specifically in mind that Plato argues that the poets should in fact be exiled from the republic:

> If we are visited in our state by someone who has the skill to transform himself
> into all sorts of characters and represent all sorts of things, and he wants to
> show off himself and his poems to us, we shall treat him with all the reverence
> due to a priest and giver of rare pleasure, but shall tell him that he and his kind
> have no place in our city, their presence being forbidden by our code, and send
> him elsewhere, after anointing him with myrrh and crowning him with fillets
> of wool. For ourselves, we shall for our own good employ story-tellers and

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[200] Plato, *The Republic,* 95/395e, 396.
[201] Plato, *The Republic*, 95-96/396b.

> poets who are severe rather than amusing, who portray the style of the good
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> man and in their works abide by the principles we laid down for them when we
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> started.[202]

The third chapter of the *Republic* thus begins with a simple critique of the contents of poetry, one which is very much along the lines one might expect from any conservative critic or institution tasked with preventing what we could call the liberal arts from corrupting cultural or national values. In the concluding section of the chapter, however, Plato moves on to a much more fundamental and, to modern ears, somewhat strange sounding criticism of poetry, in which he argues that the true deficiency of poetry is really not about the contents at all, but is most fundamentally about the formal act of representation that is characteristic of the poetic performance. To put it in Deleuzian terms, Plato simply does not approve of the one becoming multiple: for Plato, the one is not the same as the multiple and thus representative poetry is a violation of truth and justice at an inherently philosophical level.

That such a heavy-handed and absolute criticism of poetry might be ill-received by Plato's contemporaries, given the centrality of the oral tradition in classical Greece, was apparently not lost on Plato, and it is for this reason that he returns again to the problem of poetry in the tenth and penultimate chapter of the *Republic*, titled "Theory of Art," which, most scholars agree, has the appearance of an appendix designed to reinforce Plato's earlier criticism in the third chapter. For it is in this tenth book that Plato more stridently argues that the formal character of representative poetry is unworthy of the republic because, in quite explicit terms, *poetry*, for Plato, is antithetical to *truth* itself. Indeed, so thoroughgoing is Plato's

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[202] Plato, *Republic,* 98/398.

criticism of poetry in this chapter that he feels compelled to at least offer a few kind words about Homer before beginning his attack. "The love and respect I've always had from a boy for Homer makes me hesitate," states Plato, "for I think he's the original master and guide of all the great tragic poets. But one must not respect an individual more than the truth."[203] As Plato thus forecasts, the criticism of poetry that follows in this chapter will, indeed, be one in which poetry is contrasted with truth in a philosophical sense.

To properly grasp the logic of Plato's criticism in this chapter, a few words must be said about Plato's *Theory of Forms* or *Ideas*, arguably the most influential and fundamental metaphysical notion in Platonic philosophy as a whole. In brief, Plato's entire philosophical outlook, his entire metaphysic, rests on a distinction between appearance and reality, such that the objects that we perceive around us are not understood as "true" objects but are merely pale, shadowy and particularistic copies of an original and real but transcendent "form" or "idea," invented by God or nature, and which is accordingly inaccessible to direct human perception. To borrow from some of the examples Plato uses in the tenth chapter of the *Republic*, that there are many beds or tables in the world, and that these beds and tables have many distinct and particular qualities of their own, is uncontroversial; yet what is of interest to Plato is that despite the multiplicity of tables that *actually* exist, we are nonetheless able associate them all, or capture them all in thought (or language), with the "idea" of the bed or the table *in general*. For Plato, this is evidence that there is a "true" or universal form or idea of the "bed" or "table" – or of "bedness" or "tableness" – that, while beyond the limits of our perception, we can nonetheless infer using reason by the fact that we can gather,

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[203] Plato, *Republic,* 360/595c.

without contradiction, many different beds or tables under the general concept of the bed or table as such.

The critique of the poetic form that Plato offers in the tenth chapter is inseparable from his underlying theory of the forms. Using the example of a bed made by a carpenter, Socrates states in the tenth chapter "didn't [we] agree that what [the carpenter] produces is not the form of bed which according to us is what a bed really is, but a particular bed?"[204] As mentioned, a particular object for Plato is never "real" but is a copy: it is through the practice of *mimesis* that the carpenter makes a particular bed, and it is in this sense that the carpenter's bed is one step removed from reality. If, however, the carpenter's bed is understood as one step removed from reality, or from the "truth," then the object of the artist, Plato argues, is even further removed from reality, insofar as the painter or the poet does not take the "true" form as its inspiration, but rather takes the already unreal particular objects found in phenomenal or empirical reality as their objects of reproduction. "We have seen then that there are three sorts of bed," asserts Plato, "the first exists in nature, and we would say, I suppose, that it was made by god … the second is made by the carpenter … and the third by the painter ... [hence] the artist's representation stands at a third remove from reality."[205] Insofar as the artistic object is furthest removed from the realm of truth, then poetry – and indeed all the arts – is for Plato particularly unsuited to a republic that is to be ruled by philosopher-kings for whom the truth is paramount. Indeed, Plato goes on to suggest that inasmuch as the painter or the poet who, unlike the carpenter or farmer who only deal with a restricted domain of the "unreal" empirical world, claims

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[204] Plato, *Republic,* 362/597a.
[205] Plato, *Republic,* 362/597b, 363597e.

to be able to accurate represent any and all objects of human experience, then the artist must be viewed as even more distanced from the truth than the average worker (never mind the Guardians or philosophers). For at least the carpenter or the farmer might be able reflect on their narrow and strictly defined practice and thereby potentially acquire some genuine knowledge about the true form of their objects, despite the fact that they only has access to copies. The artist, one the other hand, because he deals with not one domain of experience but everything under the sun, can never expect to even approach the truth inasmuch as a good artist tends not to be judged by her narrow field of vision but by the expansive scope or breadth of his represented objects. "The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from truth," argues Plato, "and is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance."[206] For this reason, Plato argues that we must re-think the entire enterprise of poetry, and ask ourselves if this practice is really the best method to understand ourselves and the world around us, particularly in the context of a republic that is dedicated to notions of truth and justice:

> We must go on to examine the claims of the tragedians and their chief, Homer. We are told that they are masters of all forms of skill, and know all about human excellence and defect and about religion; for – so the argument runs – a good poet must, if he's to write well, know all about his subject, otherwise he can't write about it. We must ask ourselves whether those who have met the poets have, when they see or hear their works, failed to perceive that they are representations at the third remove from reality, and easy to produce without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances and not realities …

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[206] Plato, *Republic,* 364/598b.

We won't, then, expect Homer or any of the poets to explain medicine or any skilled activity to us: for example, if they claim to be real doctors and not merely imitate doctors' talk, we won't ask them to name any poet, ancient or modern, who has performed cures like Aesculapius, or founded a school of medicine to follow him as he did … We may assume, then, that all the poets from Homer downwards have no grasp of the truth but merely produce a superficial likeness of any subject they treat, including human excellence … Strip it of its poetic colouring, reduce it to plain prose, and I think you know how little [poetry] amounts to."[207]

This final criticism – that the artist, because she is compelled by her craft to reproduce anything in the phenomenal or empirical world and, concomitantly, has little or no real knowledge of anything – is the final nail in the coffin in terms of the complete inadequacy of poetry in Plato's view, and therefore for fundamental reasons of philosophical truth, not mere morality, poetry, for Plato, must be excised from the republic entirely.

Thus concludes Plato's criticism of poetry in the *Republic*. In the first instance, then, it seems clear that the problem that Plato has with poetry has very little to do with his supposed Spartan austerity or his advocacy for state totalitarianism. Rather, Plato's criticism of poetry is fundamentally philosophical in nature. If it is the aim of the philosopher, and philosophy, to discover and act in accordance with the truth, then according to the logic that follows from Plato's theories of the forms or ideas, poetry – and indeed the arts in general – deviates from the path to enlightenment as a function of its representative character. Yet even if Plato's criticism is directed at all the

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[207] Plato, *Republic,* 364, 365, 367/598b, c, 600e.

representative arts in general, a reading of the *Republic* clearly demonstrates that it is

poetry – indeed the poetry of Homer and Hesiod in particular – that is most directly in

Plato's mind when conducting his criticisms. And the reason that Plato is so squarely

attuned to poetry specifically in his criticism of representation is that poetry, unlike

painting or sculpture, does not just fulfill an aesthetic role, but it functions as the

central epistemological and pedagogical medium for Greek culture as such. By

demonstrating, in the next section of this chapter, the specific ways in which poetry

functioned as the dominant social and epistemological medium in fifth-century

Greece, and the effects poetry wrought on the kinds of knowledge that was stored and

disseminated in Greek culture, it becomes possible to interpret Plato's philosophical

criticism of poetry as an attempt to *expand*, rather than *contract*, the discourse of the

republic, and accordingly, it becomes possible to theorize Platonic philosophy as a

manifestation of the introduction of the technology of the written word within an

otherwise oral Greek culture.

The Poverty of Poetry

While I have briefly mentioned in the opening section of this chapter that

poetry is one, if not the, principle means of storing, processing and transmitting

information in a social environment without writing technology, it is worth re-iterating

the profound distinction between the function of poetry for an oral culture and the

function of poetry in a modern society. For the term "poetry," in the context of a

modern industrial society, invariably signifies as an exclusively aesthetic activity, and

a particularly rarified one at that, which, in more precise sociological terminology, is

articulated by Pierre Bourdieu as occupying a position closest to what he calls the

"autonomous pole" of the field of cultural production more generally. As outlined in

The Field of Cultural Production (1993), Bourdieu argues that the general field of

cultural production, which encompasses all forms of modern aesthetic practice, is best

conceptualized as a field of forces and counter-forces that, in contrast to most activity

within the context of a modern capitalist society, is "relatively autonomous" with

respect to the larger system of power and class relations that structures the social order

as such. Put differently, cultural production is *relatively* autonomous inasmuch as it

gains cultural prestige or credibility – or capital – for its producers by resisting the

normal processes of economic valorization otherwise characteristic of capitalist

society. "The specificity of the literary and artistic field," writes Bourdieu, "is defined

… by the degree of recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion of

legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize … Thus, at least in the

most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, where the only

audience aimed at is other producers, the economy of practices is based, as in a

generalized game of 'loser wins,' on a systematic inversion of the fundamental

principles of all ordinary economies."[208] Poetry, then, according to Bourdieu, is

situated within this already semi-autonomous field of production nearest to what he

refers to as the "most perfectly autonomous sector" within the field of cultural

production, given its very limited audience and concomitant disinterestedness with

normal processes economic valorization. "It can be seen that poetry," argues Bourdieu,

"by virtue of its restricted audience (often only a few hundred readers), the consequent

[208] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 38, 39.

low profits, which make it the disinterested activity *par excellence*, and also its prestige, linked to the historical tradition initiated by the Romantics, is destined to charismatic legitimation which is given to only a few individuals, sometimes only one per generation."[209]

While couched in structuralist terminology, Bourdieu's description of poetry is nonetheless an entirely normative definition that is more or less universally adopted as the natural function and posture of the art form in the context of a modern, highly literate society. Yet it is precisely this normative or natural view of poetry as a peripheral and rarified activity of strictly aesthetic producers that is, generally speaking, at the root of most problems of interpretation with respect to Plato's denunciation of poetry in the *Republic*. For were it the case that Plato was indeed referencing an aesthetic practice essentially similar to modern poetry, one would be justified in articulating Plato's distain for poets and poetry in the discourse of ideology and state repression, as so many of Plato's commentators have done. Yet this type of universal and naturalized conception of poetry lends itself to the same kind of anachronistic reading that rendered Aristotle's writing on physics completely nonsensical from the perspective of a modern scientist like Thomas Kuhn. For the function and utility of poetry in an orally mediated society could not be more different than that function which it performs for us moderns. Indeed, poetry in an oral society cannot really be viewed as a strictly aesthetic practice almost by definition, insofar as the very notion if the strictly "aesthetic" is a product of Western modernity and not a universal feature of human societies as such. Rather, poetry, in the context of an oral society, is more analogous to an encyclopaedic reference library than it is to an

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[209] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 51.

aesthetic practice. Poetry, in other words, functions as the dominant or hegemonic medium through which information, or the cultural tradition of any given oral society, is stored, processed and transmitted from one generation to the next. Thus far from being "relatively-autonomous" from the processes that structure and orient the larger social order, as Bourdieu put it, poetry in the context of an oral culture is anything but autonomous: rather, it is the core medium through which cultural tradition, and thus the cohesion of the society itself, is possible at all.

Yet despite the scholarly recognition accorded to the importance of oral poetry for storing, processing and transmitting information in the context of a society without the use of the written word, there is nonetheless a marked tendency within much of the literature on oral-poetics to view this mode of communication in a fashion similar to post-industrial digital information and communication technologies: namely, as *a medium that does not involve mediation, or a medium that doesn't mediate* (See Chapter 2). Writing on the socio-dynamics of oral-poetics in contradistinction to that of writing, for instance, anthropologist Jack Goody argues that "writing automatically involves *distance* between the teller of tale and the audience in quite a different way from oral storytelling. Both the teller and the reader have time to reflect on what they are doing, either writing or reading, whereas the [oral] speaker is in *immediate* contact with the audience."[210] While there is a sense in which Goody is merely describing the close spatio-temporal proximity between the storyteller and the audience under conditions of oral communication, it is but a short step from these kinds of descriptive statements to the more problematic conception of oral communication as somehow

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[210] Jack Goody, "From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling." *The Novel: Volume 1: History, Geography and Culture*. Eds. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17, emphases added.

involving, or evoking, a natural communion amongst human beings in which language

and meaning is clear and direct, and thus not manifesting any media bias at all. For

instance, after describing the importance of poetry for transmitting information, Goody

subsequently articulates the way in which the technology of the written word, in

contrast, interpellates a sense of "distance" and "privacy" whereby "we do not face the

problem of direct, *unmediated* communication with an audience [or] the problem of

interruption or its authoritarian suppression; we have the peace and leisure to

construct."[211] Implicit in this all too exemplary conception of oral communication as a

medium that involves an *unmediated* relationship between speaker and audience is a

view of speech as a kind *natural* means for humans to communicate, whereas writing

tends to be endowed, in binary fashion, with artificiality. In other words, whereas the

technology of the written word allows us the privacy and distance to "construct," oral

communication, with its "unmediated" communicative relationship, is implicitly

endowed with a direct naturalness and transparency that eschews, almost by definition,

the necessity for interpretation, and is hence understood as a mode of discourse

without media bias or mediating effects. It is effectively an ideological notion of clear

and transparent speech that, in the words of Jacques Derrida, manifests a "relationship

of essential and immediate proximity with the mind."[212]

Of course the fundamental problem with implicitly – or explicitly, as the case

may be – endowing speech with this kind of transparency, directness and proximity is,

in the first instance, that it runs counter to what I've described as the principle axiom

of media analysis, namely that *media forms always mediate* (see Chapter 2). Put

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[211] Goody, "From Oral to Written," 16.
[212] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 11.

differently, all media forms contain or exhibit specific formal biases that encourage, or discourage as the case may be, modes of discourse, social and political association, and even epistemological regimes themselves. In the specific context of Plato and his criticism of poetry, then, the tendency to imagine speech as *immediate*, or not involving processes of mediation, risks glossing over the particular ways in which oral-poetics shapes and selects the information or knowledge it stores and transmits and, concomitantly, the way in which this medium contributes to a specific mode of knowledge or epistemology appropriate to its media bias. In other words, so long as one imagines speech or oral poetics as not involving mediation, one risks conflating what Walter Ong calls "orally-based thought" with simply human thought itself. Yet as Ong and other media theorists have effectively argued, orally based thought, which tends to be highly rhythmic and repetitive in character, not only determines what kind of information is communicated, but it also shapes the very thought processes of those epistemologically habituated through this particular medium itself. "In an oral culture," writes Ong, "restriction of words to sounds determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes":[213]

> Protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall … Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all … "The clinging vine," "the sturdy oak," "Chase off nature and she returns at a gallop." Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be "looked up" in books of sayings, but in

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[213] Ong, *Orality and Literature*, 33.

oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them.[214]

Thus far from eschewing processes of mediation as such, oral poetics involves a medialogical process in which information is selected and processed in very specific ways. Information, if it is to conform to the parameters of the oral medium, must be highly formulaic and context-specific, and it must resist the kind of abstraction or universality more characteristic of information that circulates in cultures mediated by the written word or print technology. In short, the formulas of oral-poetics simply cannot be generalized across the breadth of an entire epistemological field, but are rather rooted narrowly within the specific contexts with which they are meant to literally speak (to use a paradoxical pun). Drawing on Harold Innis' dualistic theoretical framework in which media forms can be assessed as being either biased toward *space* or *time* (or some combination of both),[215] Ong thus argues that even if it were possible for oral societies to think in patterns and forms characteristic of print culture, for instance, such thought would not be adequately processed or transmitted because it simply exceeds the necessary parameters for temporal transmission facilitated by oral poetics. "In an oral culture," writes Ong, "to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It

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[214] Ong, *Orality and Literature*, 35.
[215] See Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964).

would not be abiding knowledge [but] simply a passing thought, however complex."[216]

Returning to our functional distinction, then, poetry produced in an oral culture will thus resemble poetry produced in a modern industrial society only in the most superficial sense. Whereas modern poetry will apply rhythm and meter as an aesthetic tool or device designed to widen the epistemological or affective register of the audience or reader beyond that which straightforward representative prose is generally considered capable, these same characteristics perform an entirely different function under conditions of dominant orality: specifically, they perform an absolutely necessary mnemonic function that facilitates the storage and transfer of large amounts of information with the greatest degree of felicity possible. And it is a concomitant effect of this specific process of mediation that the epistemological mode or regime characteristic of an oral society will operate in a unique way. Specifically, it will privilege information or knowledge that is highly formulaic, repetitive and context-specific and will, according, resist – or simply fail to retain – any information or knowledge that verges toward universality with respect to its epistemological application.

It is with respect this medialogical conception of oral poetics that it is possible to interpret Plato's criticism of poetry in a fashion different than with reference to mere ideology. For rather than viewing Plato as attacking a strictly aesthetic practice, it is now possible to view his criticism of poetry as a more fundamental attack on the hegemonic medium responsible for what he viewed as the problematically limited epistemological character of his society as such. In *Preface to Plato* (1963), for

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[216] Ong, *Orality and Literature*, 35-36.

instance, Eric Havelock argues that Plato's attack on the Greek poetized tradition can

even be viewed as the something of the nucleus, or as a pure and condensed instance,

of a more profound and all encompassing cultural revolution in which "the Athenians

became historically self-conscious" and began to "recognize [that] something new had

intruded into their language and their experience, something they began to call

philosophy."[217] Like Ong, Havelock bases his view on the fact that, unlike its modern

counterpart, the performance of poetry in classical Greece was not confined to an

especially gifted class or strata of producers or performers who travelled around the

Peloponnese putting on theatre shows for large audiences in way similar to that of

modern theatre production. Rather, the poetic form, as the principle medium in which

the Greek heritage and culture was stored and transmitted, was simultaneously more

profound and quotidian than its modern predecessor: specifically, it is a medium in

which everyone must participate if it is to function as a viable system for both

indoctrinating and educating Greek culture as a whole. In other words, poetic

performance or recitation must be no more specialized than is general alphabetic

literacy under the medialogical conditions of our present society. Yet unlike the

contemporary literate, who has access to a world of books and digital technologies

from which vast amounts information can be recalled, the general population of

illiterate Greeks had no such reference technology. While books certainly existed

during this period, as discussed above, they were but manifestations of a nascent and

minor technology adrift in a sea of oral-poetics. And because the average Greek did

not read as a habitual practice, they were therefore compelled to commit their

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[217] Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 304, tense
altered.

respective curriculum to memory, and memorization on this scale meant performance and recitation. "All memorization of the poetized tradition depends on constant and reiterated recitation," writes Havelock, "you could not refer to a book or memorize a book. Hence poetry exists and is effective as an educational instrument only as it is performed."[218]

Yet in order for every Greek to adequately absorb, process and re-transmit the vast amounts of information contained in the Homeric epics, which constituted the bedrock of the Greek curriculum, it is unlikely that the listener and performer of the poetized medium would be able to adopt an approach similar that which one takes in the context of written literature. Rather, it is generally assumed that one must adopt a condition of total personal involvement and emotional identification with the contents of the poem; for it was only by committing and mobilizing the totality of one's psychological resources, argues Havelock, that the listener of Greek poetry would be able to memorize the entirety of the Homeric epics, not to mention the rest of the Greek canon. Only a state of total subjective commitment and identification with the contents of the epic poem would enable the vast amounts of information contained in what Havelock calls the "Homeric Encyclopedia" to be retained to the degree necessary for accurate recall in the future:

> A modern student thinks he does well if he diverts a tiny fraction of his psychic powers to memorize a single sonnet of Shakespeare [yet] he is not more lazy than his Greek counterpart. He simply pours his energy into book reading and book learning … His Greek counterpart had to mobilize the psychic resources necessary to memorize Homer and the poets, or enough of them to achieve the

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[218] Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 43.

necessary educational effect. To identify with the performance as an actor does with his lines was the only way it could be done. You threw yourself into the situation of Achilles, you identified with his grief and anger. You yourself became Achilles and so did the reciter to whom you listened."[219]

Without widespread literacy and access to the written word, argues Havelock, the only way through which one could retain the totality of the oral-poetic tradition sufficiently to be able to recall these contents years after one's formative education was through total psychological commitment to the characters, and thus the kind of epistemology that would have been characteristic of this mode of education would have been of a highly conservative character, in the sense that deviation from the received canon would run counter to the basic facticity of its transmission. Identification, in its core etymological sense, tends not to produce improvisation and deviation.

Despite the conservative character of this media system, however, it is conceivable that this pedagogical and epistemological model might have yielded definite sociological and psychological benefits, particularly in contrast to the rigours of book learning characteristic of a highly literate society. That is to say that in contrast to modern pedagogy – which for the past 500 years was centered around the solitary experience of book reading (until the past twenty years or so) – the pedagogical model of the ancient Greek must have demanded a highly interactive and intimate connection between not just the learner and the instructor, but also between the learner and one's peers and indeed the cultural group as a whole. As Havelock argues, recognition of the specific process involved in oral-poetic communication may in fact account for what he calls the "baffling quality of the Greek experience":

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[219] Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 45.

The Greeks, we feel, were both controlled in their experience and yet also

unfettered and free to an extent we cannot share. They seem to enjoy

themselves. They seem to take natural pleasure in fine shape and sound which

we too sometimes recognize as beautiful but only after we have pulled

ourselves up by our own boot straps to an educational level of perception.

Another thing noticeable about [the Greeks] in this period is their capacity for

direct action and sincere action and direct and sincere expression of motive and

desire. They almost entirely lack those slight hypocrisies without which our

civilization does not seem to work. All this is explicable if the learning process

by which the proprieties of life were mastered was itself a highly sensual

experience – as it had to be, in order to be effective – so that proper action and

diction were inseparably associated in the Greek consciousness with

pleasurable memories.[220]

While there may be something here of the stereotypically Occidental tendency to

overly idealize the civilization of classical Greece,[221] there is some sense in which,

examined from a strictly media basis, that the categories of "education" and

"entertainment" – which, if one takes as exemplary the testimony of the vast majority

of contemporary undergraduate students, are currently separated by a veritable chasm

– would not have existed to the same extent, if at all, under the conditions of oral-

poetics. That is to say that whereas within a modern industrial environment one

attends the theatre, sees a film or watches television in the evening in order to entertain

oneself as a palliative for the deadening experience of the processing abstract

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[220] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 158.
[221] See, for instance, E.M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

information in some form or another during the rigours of the day, the Greek

education system may not have experienced this type of dichotomy. In other words,

the synonymity of entertainment and education – or, more radically, the virtual

ignorance that these two processes or epistemologies could exist as separable forms or

processes at all – would, as Havelock puts it, have meant that "there was no warfare

possible between body and spirit."[222] It is small wonder, then, that the German

Romantics and Idealists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so often looked to

the classical Greeks for inspiration. For the very modern problem of wrestling with the

push and pull between the "pleasurable inclination to act in one way and the

unpleasant duty to act in another way,"[223] which effectively describes the general

problematic that motivated Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, may have been largely

unknown to the ancient Greek mind under the medialogical conditions of hegemonic

oral-poetics.

Yet for all the pleasures that may have attended the Greek educational system,

this mode of processing information would not have come without definite

epistemological costs, and it was these costs specifically that we can infer were most

in Plato's mind when he condemns the poetic experience in the *Republic*. For what

Plato seems to have begun to realize with respect to the medium of poetic experience

was that the necessity of identifying completely with the contents of the Homeric epic,

for instance, of committing oneself totally in psychological and even physiological

terms to the narrative of the poeticized information that one must memorize,

necessarily resulted in an almost total loss of objectivity on the part of speaker and

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[222] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 158.
[223] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 158.

listener alike with respect to the contents of the lessons themselves. That is to say that insofar as one was forced to identify completely with the characters and events which one was committing to memory, it may not be an exaggeration to say that in a very real sense, there was no separation at all between the "subject" of knowledge and the "object" of knowledge, and thus no way in which the subject who was absorbing this knowledge could evaluate the contents he or she was hearing, speaking and even feeling, from an even partially objective or "distanced" position. "You did not learn your ethics, politics, skills and directives by having them presented to you as a corpus for silent study, reflection and absorption," argues Havelock, nor were you "asked to grasp their principles through rational analysis. You were not invited to so much think about them. Instead, you submitted to the paideutic spell. You allowed yourself to become 'musical' in the functional sense of that Greek term."[224] Thus insofar as poetic memorization required total subjective commitment and identification, the ancient Greek did not really "learn" or even "know" in the sense that we understand these concepts today; they merely tapped into the stream of consciousness of which they belonged and repeated and rehearsed the tried adages of the oral tradition.

It is in this strictly media-epistemological sense, then, that it is possible to understand why Plato, interested as he was with developing philosophical – which is to say universal – conceptions such as truth and justice, seems to find poetry so unacceptable. For not only would oral-poetics be virtually inseparable from a kind of torpid and clichéd conventional wisdom at a formal level, but, relatedly, even the very contents of the poems themselves would have been an almost total affront to the philosophical mind. This is because the epic poems, if they were to be properly

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[224] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 159.

memorized, must employ narrative devices that constantly simplify otherwise complex

historical events for purposes of recitation. In other words, instead of a multifaceted

and multi-casual explanation for the events of the past that were documented in the

Homeric epics – such as the Trojan War – the contents of these epics were rendered

into highly simplified, linear cause-and-effect sequences attributable to the deliberate

actions of conspicuous anthropomorphic agents (i.e., gods representing nature forces).

In Havelock's terminology, instead of multivalent events, one thus gets a narrative that

progresses through a series of "doings" or "happenings" (though today's humanities

scholar might prefer a terminology that speaks of constant "becomings). "It can fairly

be generalized," writes Havelock, "that the saga considered from the standpoint of a

later and more sophisticated critique is essentially the record of an event-series, of

things-happening, *never a system of relations or of causes or of categories and topics*.

Only a language of act and of event is amenable to the rhythmic-mnemonic

process."[225] Thus insofar as the contents of the oral-poetic medium tends to be highly

metaphorical and anthropomorphic in character, the paratactical arrangement of the

epic poem, of its consisting of a succession of personified actions embedded within a

seeming endless chain, renders the information provided in the narratives highly

"time-conditioned."[226] That is to say that while the Homeric epics were certainly

designed to convey a variety of ethical attitudes and mores, the paratactial or

sequential character of the contents rendered it extremely difficult, if not impossible,

to generate abstract or universal principles from continuous nature of the narrative

flow. "None of [the events]," writes Havelock, "can be cast into a syntax which shall

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[225] Havelock, *Preface to Plato,* 173, emphases added.
[226] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 180.

simply be true for all situations and so timeless; each and all have to be worded in the language of the specific doing or the specific happening."[227] In other words, the knowledge that one gained from the rhythmic-memorized medium was one in which ethics and mores were entirely dependent on the specific contexts in which they appeared. It was thus entirely unproblematic, for those habituated to this epistemological mode, that the ethic or political actions of the heroes or gods of the Homeric epics were remarkably contradictory from a modern perspective. For instance, there are any number of contradictory events or episodes in the *Iliad* in which Achilles declares that it is proper to back out of a dangerous situation for reasons of self-preservation, while at other times he asserts that standing up against a foe is essential for ensuring one's honour and self-respect; and likewise one encounters moments when Odysseus declares that one must be forever confrontational, while in other episodes it appears as if he is saying that co-operation is a sacred duty.

It is precisely this contradictory and even anti-universalizing logic that is ultimately what is most incompatible with Plato's project in the *Republic*, and, I argue, best accounts for why he so harshly condemns and even exiles the poets from his ideal city-state. For from the very beginning of the *Republic* (as in most of Plato's dialogues), it is clear that the elemental drive of the Platonic discourse is fuelled by the desire to construct, through the process of Socratic dialectic, universal or context-free categories that are simply "true" in all instances. For the Platonic philosopher, unlike the poet, does not revel in the play of multiplicity, in the unending series of constant "becomings" that is so characteristic of oral-poetics, but rather trains attention

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[227] Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 180.

squarely on that which is not variable but is universal. "One of the traits of the philosopher," states Socrates in the *Republic*, "is his love of any branch of learning that reveals eternal reality, the realm unaffected by the vicissitudes of change and decay."[228] Indeed the very genesis of the project in the *Republic* finds its impetus in Socrates' discontent with a conventional definition of justice, or "doing right," that is recalled and legitimized through reference to the poetic tradition. For after an initial discussion about the perils of old age, the opening conversation of the *Republic* quickly turns to the topic of wealth, and specifically, to what optimal use is wealth during one's later years. And when Socrates asks his companion Cephaleus "what do you think is the greatest advantage you have gained from being so rich?," Cephaleus argues that the most important thing in old age is *comfort* – which Cephaleus justifies by citing a few lines from a poem by Pindar, specifically the well-known line "the comfort of old age" – and yet comfort can only be achieved, argues Cephaleus, if one has sufficient wealth to make sure one's debts have all been paid:

> Now it is chiefly for this that I think wealth is valuable, not perhaps to everyone, but to good and sensible men. For wealth contributes very greatly to one's ability to avoid both unintentional cheating or lying and the fear that one has left some sacrifice to God unmade or some debt to man unpaid before one dies. Money as many other uses, but taking one thing with another I reckon that for a reasonable man this is by no means the least.[229]

And while Socrates, in typical style, admits that there may be some truth in this, he retorts by stating "are we really to say that 'doing right'" – by which Socrates refers to

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[228] Plato, *Republic*, 217/485b.
[229] Plato, *Republic*, 7/331b.

all those things described by Cephaleus as contributing to one's comfort in old age –

"consists solely in truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed?,"[230] upon

which time Socrates provides a number of examples that suggest the contrary (that not

returning a borrowed item, such as a weapon, might be better than returning it in some

instances), and from this retort, the discussion snowballs into a conversation of what is

exactly meant by "justice," or "doing right," *per se*, which eventually leads to the

larger exercise in political philosophy for which the *Republic* is most renowned.

While it is perhaps not incidental that a poem from Pindar is essentially the

catalyst for the initial discussion of justice itself in the *Republic*, what is more

significant, I argue, is that the opening dialectical interaction – in which Socrates

poses a questions, provides a counter-example to the answer given, and then proceeds

in this back and forth fashion until an seemingly essential or universal position is

reached – is an absolutely exemplary instance of the fundamental epistemological

practice in which poetry, for Plato, is utterly incapable of participating. For as was

articulated in the last section, the ultimate problem that Plato has with poetry does not

concern the literal contents of the poems themselves, but rather his criticism is always

grounded in the way in which the poetic medium resists the kind of critical and

philosophical universality he is attempting to achieve and inculcate in his fellow

Greeks. Poetry, as Plato articulates in both the third and tenth chapters of the *Republic*,

is problematic because it refuses to be one, true thing, because it is always many

things at once. For insofar as Hegel is correct in describing the epistemological project

of the classical Greeks as "freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity so as to give

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[230] Plato, *Republic*, 7-8/331c.

actuality to the universal,"[231] then poetry is simply a media form that impedes the kind of self-reflexivity that rendered Greek civilization so spectacular that "until very recent times, men were content to gape and talk mystically about the Greek genius."[232] Thus the rigid and uncompromising stance Plato takes against poetry, ultimately arguing that the poets must be exiled, would seem to be a recognition of sorts that the refusal to be one thing is not conditional for poetry, but is in fact essential: it is simply a fact of its media bias and its attendant epistemological mode. In other words, it's not that poetry *refuses* to be one thing, but that poetry, as a fundamental fact of its medium, *cannot* be one thing. And it is for this reason that Plato, ultimately, argues that poetry cannot be reformed and therefore must be exiled.

Philosophy Between Speech and Text

In *Of Grammatology* (1967)*,* Jacques Derrida also takes the relationship between orality and the written word as his object of analysis – or rather this relationship is the "problematic" that is submitted to deconstruction in the text, insofar as the notion of stable subjects taking direct objects runs counter to the ethos of Derridean criticism. In any case, Derrida's text exhaustively demonstrates the way in which the Western tradition, specifically philosophy and science, is in some sense built around the subordination of the written word to speech, or rather *full speech*. According to Derrida, any and all branches of Western philosophy and science in which language, rhetoric or mathematics is epistemologically operative manifests a systematic tendency to "confine writing to a secondary and instrumental function" in

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[231] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 20.
[232] Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 13.

contrast to the complete presence that, it is imagined, once expressed itself in the fullness of speech:

> [Writing is the] translator of a full speech that was fully *present* (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general), technics in the service of language, *spokesman*, interpreter of an originary speech itself shielded from interpretation … writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos."[233]

For Derrida, the ontological and epistemological priority given to speech over writing is most problematic insofar as it produces what he calls throughout *Of Grammatology* (and in other of his contemporaneous works[234]) a *logocentric metaphysics*, which, as succinctly explicated by Gayatri Spivak in her lengthy preface to the text, manifests itself in terms of a generalized, if unarticulated, "longing for a center, an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchical oppositions."[235] Derrida's intervention in *Of Grammatology* can thus be understood as both epistemologically and politically motivated: for as Derrida argues throughout the text, a logocentric metaphysics in which full speech is equated with *presence* is, in his view, co-terminus with a profound *ethnocentrism* – indeed, it produces what Derrida calls "nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism"[236] – that, while historically manifested in such foundational philosophical oppositions as "inside and outside, ideality and nonideality,

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[233] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 8, 35.
[234] See, for example, the essays contained within both *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) and *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
[235] Gayatri Spivak, "Translator's Preface." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), lxix.
[236] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 3.

universal and nonuniverasl, transcendental and empirical, etc.,"[237] also results in various modes of political doctrine and ideology legitimizing all manner of racial, colonial, sexist and class exploitation. It is thus for both epistemological and political reasons that Derrida finds good reason to critique and undermine a conception of writing, in contrast to the seeming fullness and vitality of speech, as "the dead letter."[238]

To the above catalogue of philosophical and epistemological distortions that Derrida ultimately traces back to the subordination of writing to speech, it is now possible to add another: namely the tendency, as described above, within media studies to implicitly condone or propagate a conception of speech as *immediate* or as not involving processes of mediation. As outlined above, this tendency produces a conception of oral communication that cancels out one's ability to grasp the specific ways in which orality not only selects and shapes information in certain ways, but also the way in which this media form conditions the very categories of thought itself. And as I have argued above, far from acting as simply a neutral and transparent vehicle for direct human thought, what Derrida calls the "Voice of Being,"[239] oral communication mediates both human relationships and the epistemological field upon which it operates in very marked and definite ways, and I think there is good evidence to suggest that it was precisely the epistemological regime characteristic of oral thought and culture against which Plato set himself in the *Republic*.

Yet if it is possible, on the one hand, to label Plato as an opponent of an oral tradition that is incapable of making the epistemological leap from poetry to

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[237] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 8.
[238] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 17.
[239] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 20.

philosophy, what ultimately makes Plato of most value from the perspective of media

theory is that he is also one of the most vocal opponents of the written word itself. For

perhaps the text that looms largest in Derrida's account of the subordination of writing

to speech, particularly in genealogical terms, is the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato most

explicitly condemns the written word as an alien, inhuman and ultimately degenerative

technology with respect to the powers of human cognition. "The *Phaedrus*," writes

Derrida, "denounced writing as the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a

totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*,

breaching into the interiority of the soul."[240] Plato's remarks about the technology of

the written word are occasioned in the *Phaedrus* through Socrates' attempt to convince

his eponymous interlocutor about the dangers of accepting the truths of sophistic

speeches without submitting their contents to the rigours of the philosophical method,

and it is in this context that Plato's Socrates recalls the tale of the Egyptian god

Theuth, who, it was said, was the first to discover number, calculation, geometry,

astronomy and "to cap it all," as Socrates puts it, *writing*. Theuth, recounts Socrates,

told the Egyptian king Thamus that his final and greatest discovery, namely writing,

had the power to "make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory, [for] what I

have discovered is an elixir of memory and wisdom."[241] Yet Thamus, according to

Socrates, wisely rejects Theuth's claim by stating that, much like the biased judgment

of a parent evaluating their children, Theuth has in fact described writing as having

"the opposite of [its] real effect. For your invention will produce forgetfulness in the

souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as

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[240] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 34.
[241] Plato, *Phaedrus* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 62.

through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from within, themselves by themselves."[242] It is then after recounting this tale that Socrates returns to his direct dialogue with Phaedrus and directly and explicitly denounces the written word:

> I think writing, [Phaedrus,] has this strange feature, which makes it truly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask [it] something, [it] preserves a quite solemn silence. Similarly with written words: you might think that they spoke as if they had some thought in their heads, but if you ever ask them about any of the things they say out of a desire to learn, they point to just one thing, the same each time. And when once written, every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and not those it should not. When it is ill-treated and unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help; for it is incapable of either defending or helping itself.[243]

Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* thus effectively positions Plato squarely between two competing media forms, and it is this intersticial position that, I argue, is most instructive when it comes to understanding the way in which media forms epistemologically condition their respective environments. For Plato's criticism of the Greek oral tradition was fundamentally based on his philosophical objection that the poetic medium was incapable of stretching itself toward universality, and yet Plato's criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus* suggests a conception of philosophical

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[242] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 62.
[243] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 63.

universality that is not simply synonymous with being – or speaking – one thing. For the fundamental inadequacy of writing for Plato is that it cannot engage in the dialectic process necessary to arrive at universality because, plainly put, writing does not speak. In other words, pure speech – which is to say oral-poetics – is problematic for Plato because it is always many things at once and thus refuses to abstract its content in order to engage in dialectical analysis; and yet at the same time, writing is also problematic for the opposite reason, namely it is the same thing too much, and can never be something else. In other words, for Plato speech is not enough like writing, and writing is not enough like speech. In this respect, then, the combined reading of the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* demonstrates that a new media technology can have a profound, even revolutionary, epistemological effect within a new environment despite the protestations of the potential agents through which this re-organization is achieved. For it was not only the case that Plato was unintentionally propagating an epistemology of the written word – which bore the name "philosophy" – but, in fact, he propagated this revolutionary epistemology is spite of his explicit objections to writing as such.

A case study of how media forms can alter an entire epistemological field that is confined to a single actor is not, however, going to be as convincing as one that takes a larger purview. However, to dedicate the same attention to other Greek thinkers that I have given to Plato in this chapter would constitute an entire dissertation in its own right, and would accordingly preclude the comparative analysis of media forms and political ontology in which I want to engage in the next chapter. However, a brief overview of the larger classical Greek episteme does, I think, lend

support to the overall thesis that was generated out of this reading of Plato. For instance, one can already detect this shift toward context-free or universal thinking in the poetry of Hesiod himself. For while the *Theogony* and the *Work and Days* are formatted in the paratactical narrative flow associated with the works of Homer, it is clear that the contents of these two works are moving away from the temporally-embedded and contradiction-ridden construction of knowledge that is characteristic of the oral-poetic medium, insofar as these texts attempt to construct a fixed and correct genealogy of the gods and demi-gods populating the Peloponnese and a didactic catalogue of proper moral behavior respectively. Yet Hesiod still employs poetry that employs a good deal of paratactical narrativity, and so we are still some distance from the technological change linked to Platonic philosophy. It is also possible, I would argue, to view the epistemological innovations of many of the pre-Socratics as a nascent effect of writing's universality. Pythagorean mathematics, for instance, certainly encourages a form of knowledge that is understood as true *per se*, or in-itself, and not relative to different contexts, narrative or otherwise, and Heraclitus' conception that there is a world of static truth or reality existing outside and beyond the ever-shifting world of appearance or *mimesis* can also be viewed in the same vein. And yet even if the contents propagated by Pythagoras and Heraclitus can be said to have been influenced by the universality characteristic of society infiltrated by the written word, both of these thinkers were, at a level of intention and form, still products of an oral culture insofar as both philosophers never communicated their ideas in any other form but that of poetry.

But perhaps the best example of the paradoxical influence of the written word during this period, in addition to Plato, is found in one the work of one of Plato's contemporaries and a fellow Athenian aristocrat. In his *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides – who is considered by modern historians to be the father of both scientific or objective history and political realism (*realpolitik*)[244] – attempted to construct an account of historical events that, unlike the vague, confusing and mythological tales of the ancient past that are handed down to modern Hellenes in the Homeric epics,[245] was an objective account divorced of the whims of gods or any other such *deus ex machina* that clouded the study of human history and politics. And thus it is perhaps unsurprising that we find Thucydides, like his compatriot Plato, explicitly contrasts his methodology against the less reliable, if nonetheless emotionally powerful, words of the poet:

> In investigating the past history, and in forming the conclusions which I have
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> formed, it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has
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> come down to us by way of tradition. People are inclined to accept all stories
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> of ancient times in an uncritical way … However, I do not think that one will

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[244] The father of *history*, without qualification, is on the other hand usually considered to be Thucydides' predecessor, Herodotus. However, while the work of Herodotus can be considered more "historical" than that of Homer, for no other reason that Herodotus is at least considered to be an actual empirical person who attempted to documented actual Greek events and histories, even if they occurred many years before his lifetime, Herodotus does not make any historical or documentary distinction between empirical and supernatural actors or events, and thus the gods exist in Herodotus' *The Histories* as epistemologically equal with humans. Thucydides' account, on the other hand, explicitly divorces everything supernatural and attempt to explain historical events by reference to human actions alone.

[245] It is worth mentioning that while Thucydides was critical of the means through which knowledge was passed down through the Homeric epics, he did not question the veracity of the events *per se*, just dubious about the accuracy of many of the particulars: "There is no reason why we should not believe that the Trojan expedition was the greatest that had ever taken place … [though] it is questionable whether we can have complete confidence in Homer's figures, which, since he was a poet, were probably exaggerated" (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 41).

be far wrong in accepting the conclusions I have reached from the evidence
which I have put forward. It is far better evidence than that of the poets, who
exaggerate the importance of their themes […] whose authorities cannot be
checked, and whose subject-matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost
in the unreliable streams of mythology … And it may well be that my history
will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element.
It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by
those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past
and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in
much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of
writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last
forever.[246]

Both Plato and Thucydides, then, attempt to escape from the "unreliable streams of
mythology" and assert, or in this case record, truths not confined to specific spatio-
temporal contexts but truths that are universal, or truths that will last, as Thucydides
puts it, "forever." Yet the similarity between Plato's philosophy and Thucydides'
history does not end there. For as much as Thucydides, like Plato, strives to escape the
problematic immediateness and unreliability of poetic transmission, he cannot help but
still locate the wellspring of truth in the spoken word. For what immediately strikes
the modern reader of *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is that the most
methodologically problematic and narratively jarring element of the account, namely
the speeches given by all the Greek politicians and generals, is afforded the most
voluminous amount of time, or rather space, in the text. What is worse, from the

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[246] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 46, 47, 48.

perspective of the modern historian, is the fact that not only did Thucydides

reconstruct and re-interpret the speeches either from personal memory or from

accounts by informants, but he also altered the speeches based on what he thinks the

relevant actors *should have said* given their concrete situation.[247] Thus the modern

reader of Thucydides is confounded to discover that, first of all, the *least* accurate and

reliable element of Thucydides' historical methodology is, paradoxically, given the

most attention in his historical account, and, secondly, that "the passionate search for

truth did not take Thucydides to [written] documents, the foundation of all modern

historical writing."[248]

However the paradox of Thucydides' simultaneous distrust of oral-poetics as a

vehicle for historical documentation and his compulsion to assign the spoken word

greater epistemological weight than written documents in his history – to the point that

he effectively makes up what he thinks the various speakers *should have said* given

their political situation at the time the speeches were performed – is rendered less

paradoxical when examined through the same medialogical lens though which Plato's

confrontation with poetry in the *Republic* was examined above. For inasmuch as

Thucydides existed within a culture still largely dominated by the spoken word, in

which speech is not only equated with truth but was also understood as a great act of

politics in itself, it is almost inevitable that his objective history, a form of knowledge

to some extent made possible by the influence of writing technology, would still look

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[247] "In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for in each situation" (*The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 47).

[248] M. I. Findlay, "Introduction." Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 19.

to speech to fill out its contents. Thucydides' attempts at scientific history thus placed

him in the same intersticial hollow, somewhere between speech and writing, in which

Plato likewise worked out his philosophical project.

      Plato and Thucydides thus bear testament not only to the profound

epistemological changes that can potentially be wrought by the introduction of a new

media technology, but the example of their work provides evidence of the "ground-

up" fashion in which these changes can occur. For neither thinker, in any kind of

positive, active or explicit fashion, demonstrated any sense that their work might have

been affected by this new medium – indeed, Plato goes so far as to denounce the

medium entirely – and yet both thinkers can be interpreted or read as manifesting the

spirit of the written word within the deep epistemological structure of their thought as

such. The value of this exercise, I argue, thus far exceeds the disciplinary boundaries

in which Plato and Thucydides are usually confined. First, it demonstrates the degree

to which new media forms tend not to simply alter the *means* by which information is

disseminated, but that new media forms have the potential to alter the very definition

of information or knowledge as such. Now this assertion, in itself, is not entirely

novel, if it is somewhat neglected in much media commentary. Indeed, one finds it

scattered throughout Marshall McLuhan's writings on media, such was when he

observes that, for instance, "the printed book did not extend the older forms of

[scholastic] education to a wider public – it dissolved the dialogue and created wholly

new patterns of political power and personal association."[249] Likewise, it is possible to

say that the written word did not extend the power and reach of the oral-poetic

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[249] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews* (Toronto: McClelland &
Stuart Limited, 2005), 25.

discourse of ancient Greece, but rather introduced an entirely new way of thinking that was fundamentally incompatible with the prior medium. But more than just underscoring this medialogical axiom, the analysis in this chapter also, I think, radicalizes this assertion insofar as it demonstrates that even those most hostile to a new medium may, unbeknownst to themselves, in fact be the prime movers of a new epistemology spawned by the new medium they so explicitly reject. And if the examination in this chapter effectively demonstrates the capacity for new media forms to change their epistemological environment a fundamental way, it also opens a pathway for an analysis of media that argues that political thought and association, which one cannot formulate without an underlying and corresponding epistemological framework, is also subject to profound transformation as a result of media shift. By building from the conclusions reached in this chapter, the fourth chapter of this dissertation examines more closely the relationship between media forms and political ontology – or what defines the essential quality or "being" of the political subject – under conditions of Greek secondary orality and modern print culture respectively, and through this comparative method, attempts to work out a more historically-informed conception of how the information and communications revolution currently driving processes of post-industrialization might yield a further shift in political ontology and, accordingly, a new conception of politics for the post-industrial era.

Coda: On Deleuze's Anti-Platonism

While the principle aim of this chapter has been to gain some insight into the kind of deep epistemological changes that can potentially be produced by new media

technologies, I would feel remiss if I did not include a short commentary that speaks to the relevance of this chapter for contextualizing the anti-Platonism characteristic of Deleuzian thought. It is no secret that Deleuze, or Deleuzian theory, exerts an almost hegemonic force within much contemporary humanities scholarship, whereby the categories of "being" "identity" and "negation," categories that were once central to Western philosophy, have been subordinated to the concepts "becoming," "difference" and "creativity" or "production" respectively. Given the hostility of Deleuzian thought to concepts such as identity and negation, it is unsurprising to find that, in the first instance, Hegel, or Hegelianism, is often articulated as the principle adversary of the Deleuzian project. "In his early investigations into the history of philosophy," writes Michael Hardt, "we can see an intense concentration of the generalized anti-Hegelianism of the time":

> Deleuze attempted to confront Hegel and dialectical thought head-on … with a rigorous philosophical refutation; he engaged Hegelianism not in order to salvage its worthwhile elements, not to extract "the rational kernel from the mystical shell," but rather to articulate a total critique and a rejection of the negative dialectical framework so as to achieve a real autonomy, a theoretical separation from the entire Hegelian problematic.[250]

Yet if Hegel or Hegelianism constituted the immediate or front line adversary "of the time" as Hardt puts it – which is to say the immediate adversary of post-1968 French post-structuralism – the more entrenched and genealogical powerful enemy of post-structuralist thought, the philosopher that effectively stands behind Hegel's imposing system, is generally considered to be Plato himself. "[Hegel] determined a horizon, a

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[250] Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), x-xi.

language, a code," argues French historian of philosophy François Chatelet in 1968,

"that we are still at the very heart of today. Hegel, by this fact, is *our* Plato: the one

who delimits – ideologically or scientifically, positively or negatively – the theoretical

possibilities of theory."[251] The same link between Plato and French post-structuralism,

is made by Brian Massumi who, in his translator's foreword to Deleuze and Guattari's

A Thousand Plateaus (1987), argues that it was most fundamentally Plato, rather than

Hegel, who is responsible for a pernicious and pervasive "State philosophy," which he

describes as simply "another word for the representational thinking that has

characterized Western metaphysics … but [which] has suffered an at least momentary

setback during the last quarter century at the hands of Jacques Derrida, Michel

Foucault, and poststructuralist theory generally."[252] Thus while there is no question

that Hegelianism constituted one of the prime targets of French post-structuralism,

Platonism constitutes at least an equally profound adversary, and perhaps even more

so given its genealogically antecedent, almost autochthonous, influence for the entire

history of Western philosophy.

Turning then to the work of Deleuze himself it is hardly difficult to encounter

scores of references to the philosophico-historical error of Platonism within his

various monographs on Bergson, Nietzsche, Hume, Spinoza, etc., as well as embedded

throughout his collaborative work with Félix Guattari. However, the richest source of

Deleuze's anti-Platonism is found in his two original, single-authored philosophical

texts, *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and *The Logic of Sense* (1969). In *Difference*

and Repetition (1968), Deleuze takes Plato to task principally for his preference for the

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[251] François Chatelet, *Hegel* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 2.
[252] Brian Massumi, "Translator's foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xi-xii.

One over the Many, which forms the basis of Platonism's representationalist character. It is "the task of modern philosophy," writes Deleuze in explicit terms, "to overturn Platonism," primarily because of the way in which it "represents the subordination of difference to the powers of the One, the Analogous, the Similar and even the Negative."[253] "The whole of Platonism," argues Deleuze,

> is dominated by the idea of drawing a distinction between 'the thing in itself' and the simulacra. Difference is not thought in itself but related to a ground, subordinated to the same and subject to mediation in mythic form. Overturning Platonism, then, means denying the primacy of the original over the copy, of model over image … Plato gave the establishment of difference as the supreme goal of dialectic. However, difference does not lie between things and simulacra, models and copies. Things are simulacra themselves, simulacra are the superior forms, and the difficulty facing everything is to become its own simulacra, to attain the status of a sign in the coherence of eternal return.[254]

The necessity of overturning Platonism, in *Difference and Repetition*, is thus related to Plato's conception of the true or ideal forms, and the mimetic and fallen nature of empirical reality. Difference, in this model, is always understood as subordinated to identity, and the copy is always inferior to the original. For the Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition*, the task of modern philosophy – or rather postmodern philosophy – it to create a conception of *pure* difference, or of *difference-in-itself*, that breaks the Platonic notion of difference produced by the mimetic-binary relationship between the real and the copy.

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[253] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), 59.
[254] Gilles Deleuze, 66, 67.

And in *The Logic of Sense*, published a year after *Difference and Repetition*, one finds the same basic critique, but with an added emphasis. In the first appendix of *The Logic of Sense*, titled "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," Deleuze argues, as he did before, that "the Platonic model is the Same, in the sense that Plato says that Justice is nothing more than just, Courage nothing more than courageousness, etc. – the abstract determination of the foundation as that which possess in a primary way."[255] And thus to "reverse Platonism," as he often refrains throughout this text, is, again, to reject this mode of representationalist thinking and think of difference in purer terms. In an earlier chapter, however, Deleuze frames his anti-Platonism in a more vertical or hierarchical fashion. This is not to say, of course, that the notion of the Platonic mimesis, of the original and the copy, does not involve hierarchy, which it most certainly does. Yet in the eighteenth chapter of *The Logic of Sense,* titled "Three Images of Philosophers," Deleuze more explicitly describes Platonism as a *philosophy of height*, as opposed to a more properly Nietzschean philosophy of depth, and thereby articulates his critique of Plato in terms of his well-known preference for immanence rather than transcendence in explicitly spatial and vertical terms. "The popular and the technical images of the philosopher seem to have been set by Platonism," writes Deleuze, "[and this] philosopher is a being of ascents":

> He is the one who leaves the cave and rises up. The more he rises, the more he
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> is purified … The popular image of the philosopher with his head in the clouds
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> depends up it … Height is the properly Platonic Orient. The philosopher's
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> work is always determined as an ascent and a conversion, that is, as the
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> movement of turning toward the high principle from which the movement

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[255] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1990), 259.

proceeds, and also of being determined, fulfilled, and known in the guise of such a motion. We are not going to compare philosophies and diseases, but there are properly philosophical diseases. Idealism is the illness congenital to the Platonic philosophy and, with its litany of ascents and downfalls, it is even philosophy's manic-depressive form. Mania inspires and guides Plato. Dialectics is the flight of ideas, the *Ideenflucht*.[256]

Deleuze thus offers two critiques of Plato: one grounded in the concept of *mimesis* and the binary-hierarchical relationship between the real and the copy, and the other is grounded in the concept of *transcendence* and frames its critique in terms of verticality or height. And it is with respect to the latter that Deleuze argues for a philosophy of immanence, rather than transcendence, in which the philosopher "is no longer the being of the caves, nor Plato's soul or bird, but rather the animal which is on a level with the surface – a tick or a louse."[257]

While there can be little doubt that Platonism is indeed a philosophy of representation that epistemologically privileges a transcendent idea or form over the play of representations located at the surface, the general image of Plato one obtains from reading Deleuze is not, I argue, essentially dissimilar to those critics of Plato who view his expulsion of the poets as simply ideologically motivated. In other words, and despite the charge of "idealism" with which Deleuze diagnoses the congenital illness called Platonism, the image of Plato we get from Deleuze, with the help of Nietzsche, is that of a philosopher who simply decided that the One or the Same is preferable to the multiple and the different, or that Being trumps becoming, and as a result of this

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[256] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 127-128.
[257] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense,* 133.

error Plato lead Western philosophy down a wrong and dangerous path for over two millennia. Now my intention here is not to argue for Plato over Deleuze, for Being over becoming, or that the singular is preferable to the multiple, for this, I argue, would merely be to commit the same error in reverse. For while, as mentioned above, there is no question that the content of Platonic philosophy involves the privileging of the transcendent over the empirical, and the One over the Many, I think that the media-analysis of Plato, and specifically his quarrel with the poets, demonstrates that the genesis of this epistemology was not a mere product of Plato's psychology or personal preference, but was rather a very specific and logical outcome of the media environment in which Plato found himself in fifth-century Athens. For while the privileging of the One over the many or the multiple seems to ring with totalitarian and even fascist undertones[258] within the socio-historical context of late capitalism and early postmodernity, the same privilege takes on an entirely different valence in the context of a society epistemologically ruled by a crude national mythology that refuses to submit to critical examination. For when the hegemonic discourse operative in one's society consists in constantly repeating well-worn and often jingoistic formula's about the nature of human life in the polis, asking the seemingly simply question "What really is X?," and demanding an answer that verges toward universality, takes on an entirely critical function. Thus by examining Platonism in this more immanent rather than idealistic fashion – which is to say from a media-materialist perspective rather than through reference to the contents of philosophical texts alone – I think it is

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[258] This seems to at least been Michel Foucault's view as articulated in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, in which he states of all the implicit adversaries that *Anti-Oedipus* critiques, fascism is the "major enemy," in comparison to which all others are "more of a tactical engagement." It is in this respect that Foucault suggests that a proper subtitle to *Anti-Oedipus* might be "Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life" (*Anti-Oedipus*, xiii).

possible to re-interpret the supposed error of Platonism as a necessary and strategic

philosophical manoeuvre designed to help the Greeks think critically about themselves

and their society rather than simply and continuously sing their own praises *ad

infinitum*; and thus perhaps Plato did not have his head so high in the clouds after all.

Chapter 4: Print Capitalism and Political Philosophy: Kant's Reading Public

When attempting to assess the polarized positions structuring contemporary debates about the social and political impacts of new information and communications technologies – particularly the more conservative positions that suggest that these new media technologies are irrevocably undermining a more literate and substantive book culture – it is always worthwhile to step back and recall that very similar arguments were offered with respect to the deleterious effects of print technology as well. For while the classical Greeks may have looked with suspicion upon the technology of the written word and asserted its damaging effects on human cognition and memory (see Chapter 3), it was likewise not uncommon for modern Europeans to speak of printing technology – and even the practice of reading itself – with such distain and disparagement that reading was even, at times, likened to a physical disease. The rapid intensification of print production and circulation in Germany during the eighteenth century, for instance, was so alarming that many of Germany's most prominent intellectuals and commentators began to speak of a *Lesesucht* – a *reading mania* or *addiction* – or even a *Leseseuche* – a *reading plague* – afflicting the German population. For the sudden rise of a middle class in Germany, which invariably destabilized, however slowly, the political absolutism characteristic of German culture, also "increased dramatically the demand for reading material" and produced an abundance of new literary forms and institutions, such as "the novel, reviews and periodicals, circulating and lending libraries to facilitate distribution, and the professional writer."[259] Thus not entirely unlike the oft-drawn connection between

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[259] Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), 22.

digital media technologies and political upheaval in the early twenty-first century, the

changing political climate of eighteenth-century Germany was invariably associated,

in the minds of some of its more conservative observers, with the rapid saturation of

society with this new and dangerous media form, and thus many Germans believed

that the increasingly lack of deference shown to the traditional political establishment

was being caused by an "epidemic of compulsive reading," which produced

"physiological, psychological, and social disabilities" and to which "disrespectful

servants, over-trained teachers, nervous youth, and loose women were especially

susceptible."[260]

If the diagnosis of the *Lesesucht* in eighteenth-century Germany is one of the

more extreme responses to the rise of print technology in Europe, it should not,

however, produce the false impression that the perceived dangers of reading or book

learning was confined to sectors of European society espousing reactionary or

conservative politics. "Few studies of the era," observes Elizabeth Eisenstein, "fail to

cite relevant passages from Marlowe or Rabelais indicating how it felt to become

intoxicated by reading and how bookish knowledge was regarded as if it were a magic

elixir conferring new powers with every swallow."[261] Indeed, it is one of the great

ironies in the history of media technologies that the underlying and structuring

narrative premise of what is often considered to be the first modern novel, *Don

Quixote* (1605), is that reading novels is a very perilous and addictive activity that

should be avoided, least it irreversibly warp the mind of reader. In one of the novel's

more memorable passages, the reader encounters the ingenious hidalgo's friends and

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[260] James Sheenhan, *German History: 1770-1866* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1989), 215.
[261] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 48.

neighbours attempting to rescue the eponymous hero from his print-induced delusions by destroying the source of his madness: his library. Assisted by Quixote's niece and housekeeper, the town's priest and barber enter the hero's home with a sinking feeling in their stomachs as they encounter a library filled with "more than a hundred large volumes, finely bound, and some small ones."[262] Upon viewing this unseemly horde, Quixote's housekeeper immediately runs to fetch a bowl of water and, in desperation, pleads for the priest to bless the water and "sprinkle the room," least one of the enchanters that she believes contained within the books "put[s] a spell on us as a punishment for the torments they'll undergo once we've wiped [the books] off the face of the earth."[263] Amused by the simple-mindedness of the housekeeper, the priest merely requests that the barber hand him the books one by one for inspection, in the event that he discovers one or two that "didn't deserve to be committed to the flames."[264] Following a veritable index of every chivalrous tale printed in Spain prior to the publication of *Don Quixote* itself, along with a brief summary of some the more notable publications, the priest soon grows tired of the tedious inspection and, to the delight of Quixote's niece and housekeeper, "ordered all the rest to be burned in one fell swoop."[265]

I've opened this chapter with this brief vignette on the perils of print to underscore the utility of theorizing media technologies in a comparative fashion. Far too often, claims about the effects of contemporary media technologies simply assume that past and habituated media forms, along with their various sociological and

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[262] Miguel de Cervantes, *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 52.
[263] Cervantes, *Don Quixote,* 52.
[264] Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 52.
[265] Cervantes, *Don Quixote,* 58.

epistemological effects, are a natural part of human social life and, accordingly, that new technologies are little more than contrived artifice. If there is theoretical or analytical value to the comparative study of media technologies, then, it is first of all manifest in the ability of this approach to demonstrate that no media form – even the spoken word – is ever simply natural, nor is any media technology a neutral vehicle for pure thought or raw data: media technologies always mediate. Furthermore, a comparative approach to the study of media also demonstrates that the ways in which new media technologies alter their emergent environment is rarely a matter of pure quantitative augmentation with respect to the prior system of mediation. Rather, as the previous chapter on Plato's *Republic* was intended to convey, the introduction of a new medium might also dissolve and reconstitute the categorical structure of a given social order on an entirely new basis. It is with these two media axioms in mind that this chapter argues that beyond merely constituting the technological background of modern political philosophy, print technology actually fulfils an important conceptual or categorical position in liberal political philosophy itself. Before discussing the connection between print technology and political philosophy directly, however, this chapter begins with an analysis of Greek political subjectivity in order to demonstrate, in the first instance at least, that Greek politics offers an important counterpoint to the contemporary political norms and demonstrate that different media backgrounds can produce very different modes of political ontology and subjectivity. After a brief excursus on the *longue durée* of media technology and its socio-political effects between the decline of classical civilization and rise of Western modernity, the remainder of the chapter then builds on Benedict Anderson's concept of "print

capitalism" in order to demonstrate how print technology, in conjunction with a capitalist mode of production, can be theorized as producing an increasingly individualized and privatized conception of modern subjectivity. The chapter then concludes with an analysis of the political philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which argues that print technology is not merely part of the technological background of Kant's political thought, but rather fulfils an important conceptual or categorical function within Kant's political philosophy itself. Through a comparative analysis that contrasts the absolutist character of political power in the political theory of Thomas Hobbes with the more republican views of Immanuel Kant, this chapter demonstrates how Kantian political philosophy – which is in many ways still hegemonic in terms of liberal political norms – uses print technology to politicize the modern liberal subject without cancelling out or disabling its privatized and individualistic ontology. In this respect, then, this chapter argues how print technology enables the continued reproduction of capitalist society by limiting political participation to the impoverished sphere of the atomized and privatized individual.

Oratio Activa, or Politics as Speech

Before discussing the connection between print technology and modern political subjectivity, I want to begin this chapter by returning to the Greek polis in order to demonstrate the degree to which the medialogical conditions characteristic of Greek antiquity (as outlined in Chapter 3) produced a concept of political subjectivity very, or even radically, different from the modern political subject. This opening section should thus serve as an important counterpoint when theorizing the

constitution of the modern subject under conditions of print capitalism. In her account

of the essential – and essentially different – characteristics of Greek politics, Hannah

Arendt argues that it is difficult for moderns to understand the ontological basis of

Greek political subjectivity because of the absence of the category of the "social," and

by extension of "society," for the classical Greek and Roman mind. "The emergence

of the social realm," argues Arendt, "which is neither private nor public, strictly

speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence

of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state."[266] Arendt's

account of the modern concept of the "social" anticipates, in a sense, Foucault's notion

of *biopolitics* insofar as Arendt argues that the genesis of social realm should be

understood as the imposition of the quasi-biological (or biologically-rooted) logic of

domestic governance – i.e., the family – onto an altered political sphere in which

"everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic nation-wide administration of

housekeeping":

> The scientific thought that corresponds to this development is no longer
>
> political science but "national economy" or "social economy" or
>
> *Volkswirtschaft*, all of which indicate a kind of "collective housekeeping." The
>
> collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-
>
> human family is what we call "society," and its political form of organization
>
> is called "nation."[267]

Without digressing into a drawn out discussion of Arendt's account of the modern

nation-state, Arendt argues that the lack of genealogical antecedent to the modern

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[266] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 28.
[267] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28-29.

notion of the "social" is the consequence of the modern inversion of the binaristic

conception of the "private" and "public" spheres as they previously functioned in the

context of Greek antiquity. Arendt's analysis of the genesis of the social realm under

conditions of modernity thus hinges on the degree to which politics was not

considered an ancillary duty for the Greeks, but was rather that activity in which one

experienced human freedom at its fullest extent.

      Greek politics, and its attendant notion of the political sphere proper, can be

inferred, in Arendt's view, from Aristotle's famous description of the human being as,

in essence, a "political animal" (*zoon politikon*).[268] While Aristotle's dictum has often

been taken to simply mean that the human being is an inherently *social* creature,[269]

Arendt argues against such a translation of Aristotle insofar as the equation of *political*

with *social*, in this context, overlooks the fact that while neither Plato, Aristotle, or any

other Greek philosopher thought it irrelevant that humanity was irrevocably social, the

social character of the species was not what was most characteristic or essential to

humanity for the Greek mind. Rather, as Arendt points out, the essential axiom

underwriting the political philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and Greek political culture in

general was the hegemonic understanding that the definition of the human, or the

essential characteristic of the human agent, rested on a distinction between the human

and the animal. For the Greeks, in other words, it was precisely those activities that

humanity shared with the rest of the animal kingdom that was considered most

inessential when it came to defining the human, and it was reciprocally those activities

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[268] Aristotle, *Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.
[269] As in Thomas Aquinas' influential reading of Aristotle in the *Summa Theologica*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), in which he quotes Aristotle as stating that "man
is by nature political, that is social" (37).

of which humanity was capable, but the rest of the animal world was not, that shone

most brightly in the Greek anthropological imagination. "It is not that Plato or

Aristotle was ignorant of, or unconcerned with, the fact that men cannot live outside

the company of men," writes Arendt, "but they did not count this condition as among

the specifically human characteristics; on the contrary, it was something human life

had in common with animal life, and for this reason alone it could not be

fundamentally human."[270]

It was from this axiomatic distinction that the respective notions of the *private*

and the *public* were formed in the Hellenic world, and privilege given to the public, or

political sphere, over the private or domestic realm. For insofar as what most

essentially defined the human subject was that which most differentiated human life

from animal life, the private or domestic sphere was subordinated in Greek culture

insofar as it was in the domestic sphere that human beings were most concerned or

preoccupied with satisfying their biological drives or demands. "The distinctive trait of

the household sphere," writes Arendt, "was that in it men lived together because they

were driven by their wants and needs,"[271] and in this respect the private sphere, in

sharp contrast to its significance today, was not considered a space in which the

human subject could properly "be oneself." In other words, one's private life was not

considered a refuge or sanctuary from the deadening imperatives of economic or

public life, as it often is today, but rather quite the opposite: it was the space in which

humanity was compelled, by biological necessity, to fulfill its animal needs, and to this

degree was a space marked by *compulsion* rather than *freedom*. And if the private

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[270] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24.
[271] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 30.

sphere was, for the Greeks, a sphere of life defined by biological necessity and compulsion, then the public sphere – or the polis – came to be reciprocally understood as the sphere of life in which the human subject exercised its truly human essence and thus experienced a kind of freedom that is uniquely human. "The rise of the city-state," writes Arendt, "meant that man received beside his private life a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*":

> It was not just an opinion of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the *polis* was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship … Natural community in the household therefore was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all activities performed in it. The realm of the *polis*, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom in the *polis*."[272]

Thus far from functioning as a place of refuge from an alienating society, the Greek household was considered an entirely unremarkable sphere wherein the human being most closely resembled animal life, and it was according to this very fact alone that what was most essentially human could not belong to this realm. Thus the "good life," as Aristotle defined it, could never be found strictly, or even predominantly within the private realm, insofar as the good life was not a function of wealth, property or accumulation, but was rather understood as something qualitatively different and beyond the mere possession of objects. The good life was "good," as Arendt puts it, "to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, and therefore by

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[272] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 24, 30.

being freed from labour and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living

creatures for their own survival, [*bios politikos*] was no longer bound to the biological

life process."[273]

When it comes to the Greek ability to "master" of the biological necessities of

sheer life and or become "free" from labour and work, I would be remiss if I failed to

disclose the fact that this kind of human freedom would have been categorically

unavailable to the vast majority of those who populated the Hellenic world. As Perry

Anderson argues, the remarkable ingenuity and innovation that so distinguishes Greek

culture from other ancient civilizations was not confined to the fields politics, art,

philosophy and science, but also manifest in the ability of the Greeks to systematize

and codify the ancient practice of slave labour. "While the ancient world was never

continually or ubiquitously marked by the predominance of slave labour," writes

Anderson, "it was the Greek city-states that first rendered slavery absolute in form and

dominant in extent, thereby transforming it from an ancillary facility into a systematic

mode of production."[274] The *slave mode of production*, as Anderson describes it,

should thus be viewed as one of the decisive inventions of Greek antiquity insofar as it

constituted the economic base upon which both the Greek renaissance and expansion

of the Roman Empire some centuries later were built.[275] Yet just as the inverted

significance of the public and private spheres was simply axiomatic within Greek

culture itself, so too was the necessity of a massive slave population for enabling

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[273] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 36-37.

[274] Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1974), 21.

[275] "[The] great *classical* epochs, when the civilization of Antiquity flowered – Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. and Rome from the 2nd century B.C.E. to the 2nd century C.E. – were those in which slavery was most massive and generalized, amidst other labour systems. The solstice of classical urban culture always also witnessed the zenith of slavery; and the decline of one, in Hellenistic Greece or Christian Rome, was likewise invariably marked by the setting of the other" (Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, 22).

political freedom. As an effect of "the meager development of the productive forces in the ancient economy," writes Herbert Marcuse on this point, it simply "never occurred to philosophy that material practice could ever be fashioned such that it would itself contain the space and time for [freedom],"[276] and thus political freedom, for the Greeks, had to be purchased at a cost that meant servitude for most. Hence Aristotle asserts unremarkably in his *Politics* that "cities will [always] likely contain a large number of slaves,"[277] while Xenophon likewise constructed a modest proposal to restore fortune to Athens by ensuring that "the state would possess public slaves, until there were three for every single Athenian citizen"[278] (though the reality was closer to three slaves for every two Athenian citizens).[279]

If the public, rather than the private, sphere was understood by the Greeks as the sphere of life that was both genuinely human and the sole location in which one could feel truly free, then the defining activity or practice of the public sphere, or the *polis*, was *reasoned speech* or *communication*, since it was this faculty that the Greeks viewed as most singularly human. As mentioned in Chapter One with respect to Aristotle's conception of *techne* and *logos,* that speech and communication formed the

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[276] Herbert Marcuse, *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 96.
[277] Aristotle, *Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 261.
[278] Xenophon, *Ways and Means*, IV, 17.
[279] As Andrew Nikiforuk suggests in *The Energy of Slaves* (Vancouver: Greystone Publishers, 2012), slavery can almost be considered a universal feature of human civilizations, prior to the discovery of fossil fuels and the concomitant invention of industrial machines: "Alfred René Ubbelohde, a Belgian-born physicist, argues in 1955 that slavery probably prevented the invention of the steam engine some 1,700 years before its British arrival. Both pistons and the forceful properties of steam were known to ancients, but given healthy economic returns, slaveholders weren't interested in alternative technologies. Their apathy delivered 'incalculable consequences' for world history, says Ubbelohde. 'The economic incentive for developing the inanimate power was neutralized by facile harnessing of animate [slaves] in the ancient world. When the new technology findally appeared, the power generated by the steam engine made slavery redundant … It was no coincidence that that Thomas Clarkson, the great English anti-slavery leader, launched his campaign for abolition just twelve years [after the invention of the steam engine]. The poet Samuel Coleridge telling called Clarkson 'a Moral Steam-Engine'" (20).

basis of human ontology for the Greeks was articulated in Aristotle's *Politics*

immediately following his definition of the human subject as a political animal. "It is

thus clear that man is a political animal," writes Aristotle, "in a higher degree than

bees or other gregarious animals. Nature, according to our theory, makes nothing in

vain; and man alone of the animals is furnished with the *faculty of language* …

language serves to declare what is advantageous and what is the reverse, and it's the

peculiarity of man, in comparison with other animals, that he alone possesses a

perception of good and evil, of the just and unjust, and other similar qualities."[280] For

Aristotle, then, as for Greek political culture in general, the ability of the human

subject to transcend the natural world and engage in specifically political relations – to

become a "political animal" – is thus inextricably tied to the faculty of language. To

exist in a polis was to act through speech, and to act through speech was to exercise

human freedom to its greatest extent. Whereas command, authority and hierarchy

reigned in the domestic realm, as in the animal world, reasoned speech was what most

defined the political environment in which persuasion between formatively equal and

free citizens was the Greek *summa bonum*:

> In the experience of the *polis*, which not without justification has been called
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> the most talkative of all bodies politic … to be political, to live in a *polis*,
>
> meant that everything was decided by words and persuasion and not through
>
> force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to
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> command rather than persuade, were pre-political ways to deal with people
>
> characteristic of life outside the *polis*, of home and family life, where the
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> household ruled with uncontested, despotic, powers, or of life in the barbarian

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[280] Aristotle, *Politics*, 10-11, emphasis added.

empires of Asia, whose despotism was frequently linked to the organization of the household.[281]

The Greek polis, as Arendt outlines, is thus a political system founded on three fundamental and interlinked concepts: *speech, equality* and *freedom*. Speech, as articulated above, is the defining feature (for Aristotle at least) of the human being itself, and since the definition of human activity, of human freedom, is to be political, which in turn assumes the faculty of language, the very concepts of "human" "speech" and "politics" are effectively synonymous in Aristotelian political philosophy, and Greek political culture in general. But for speech to function as the primary human action in the polis, then the polis must be devoid of inherent privilege or hierarchy, and hence it must be comprised of formally equal actors. Only by founding an environment of formal equality can reasoned speech, rather than hierarchical position, function as the deciding factor in the organization and direction of city life, and only through this specific discursive concatenation does politics, for the Greeks, become the apex of human freedom.

While the principle intent of this discussion of Greek ontology and politics has been merely to offer a counterpoint to the normative assumptions underwriting modern political subjectivity, I would like to close this section by suggesting that where the previous chapter argued that linked Platonic philosophy to the medialogical conditions of classical Greek, so too is it possible to articulate Greek politics as related to, or an outcome of, the same medialogical conditions structuring Platonic thought. In Chapter 3, I argue that Platonic philosophy can be theorized as not merely a product of a single hegemonic media technology, but as rather being produced out of a

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[281] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 26-27.

medialogical hollow formed by the collision of two competing media technologies. Platonism, I argued, is at once characteristic of a universalism beyond that which is generally associated with orality alone, but at the same time Plato accords speech a preeminent position over written words in terms of his philosophical methodology. The Socratic dialectic, in this view, precisely embodies this specific intermix of these two media forms: it demands that the epistemology characteristic of pure orality abandon its formulaic and contradictory clichés through a process of constant dialogical repetition and clarification designed to produce conclusions that are universal rather than narratively-specific or embedded; and at the same time, this philosophical method derides the written word for its inability to say anything but a single thing, least its parents come to its rescue, as Plato disparagingly put it. Thus the Socratic dialectic – and Platonism as a whole – can be viewed as an emergent epistemology that cuts across both media while embodying characteristics of both at the same time.

It is possible then, I argue, to also theorize the specific constitution of the Greek polis as situated in the same medialogical hollow as Platonism, namely as a product of both orality and of the written word. Beginning with the influence of orality, matters are relatively straightforward. As described in the previous chapter, societies that can be described in terms of secondary orality are ones in which the vast majority of the population remains functionally illiterate – save for a handful of prominent signs which generally indicate proper nouns and therefore "read" more like *symbols* than proper linguistic signs, according to Ferdinand de Saussure's technical

distinction[282] – and to this extent the written word does not tend to exert much influence in empirical or pragmatic terms. Put different, whereas a highly literate society tends to view speech predominantly in terms of its *representative* function – in which, as J.L. Austin puts it, "the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact,' which it must do either truly or falsely"[283] – a society of either pure or secondary orality takes a much more active and performative stance when it comes to speech: to borrow Austin's phrase, oral societies don't simply reference things with words, they *do things with words*. It is this view of speech as an action in its own right, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was at the root of Thucydides' tendency to include long speeches in his account of the events leading up to the outbreak of war between Sparta and Athens, despite the highly problematic character of these speeches according to the norms of modern historiography. Yet Thucydides included the speeches because, in strictly epistemological terms, the speeches are fundamentally no different, for the Greeks, than the actual or physical battles themselves; one is not strictly "linguistic" and the other "physical," so to speak, but both are rather understood as equally affective actions in their own right. As Arendt puts it, "speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and kind":

> And this originally meant not only that most political action, in so far as it
> remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more
> fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart
> from the information or communication they may convey, is action. Only sheer

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[282] See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court Publishers, 1972).
[283] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 1.

violence is mute, and for this reason violence alone can never be great. Even when, relatively late in antiquity, the arts of war and speech (*rhetoric*) emerged as the two principle political subjects of education, the development was still inspired by this older pre-*polis* experience and tradition and remained subject to it.[284]

If it can be said that the utility of speech as the principle political act in the Greek polis conforms to the axis or side of the Greek mixed-media environment made up by the influence of the oral, then the necessity of *formal equality* characteristic of Greek politics can, I argue, be viewed as a manifestation of the influence of writing technology, in a fashion not dissimilar to the universalizing epistemology of Platonic philosophy. For if the epistemology of the written word influenced the genesis of Platonic universalism, whereby, through the method of Socratic dialectic, Plato attempt to pry essential definitions from the context-specific stream of consciousness characteristic of the Greek oral tradition, then it is possible to argue that an effectively similar process at work in the operation of Greek democracy. In a discussion of the nature of philosophical concepts, for instance, Gilles Deleuze effectively makes this very argument by linking Platonic *ideas* or *forms* with the democratic organization of the Greek polis itself. "Plato doesn't proceed haphazardly," argues Deleuze, "he didn't create [the] concept of the Idea by chance," but rather he found himself "in a given situation" that, for Deleuze, demanded something like the idea of a universal measure. And it is this same imperative for finding a universal measure that was revolutionary with respect to Greek democracy:

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[284] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26.

The problem for Plato is not at all what is the Idea? That way, things would just remain abstract. Rather it's how to select *claimants,* how to discover among them which one is the valid one. It's the Idea, that is, the thing in a pure state, that will permit this selection, that will select the claimant who is closest to it … [Now] if you haven't found the problem to which a concept corresponds, everything stays abstract. If you've found the problem, everything becomes concrete. That's why in Plato, there are constantly these claimants, these rivals … Why does this occur in the Greek city and why is it Plato who invents this problem? The problem is how to select claimants, and the concept is the Idea that is suppose to provide the means of selecting the claimants, however that would occur … But why did this problem and this concept take form in the Greek milieu? It begins with the Greeks because it's a typically Greek problem, of the democratic, Greek city. Even if Plato did not accept the democratic character of the city, it's a problem of the democratic city.[285]

In Deleuze's view, then, part of general milieu from which Plato's critical philosophy emerges is a problem inherent in the nature of Greek democracy itself. For insofar as formal equality was one of the defining characteristics of Greek democracy, in which "the *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals,' whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality,"[286] the very operation of Greek democracy required a kind of context-free means of evaluation similar to that at work in Plato's philosophy. For if Plato could only achieve the concept of the "idea" by prying the embedded contents of the Greek oral tradition out of their specific contexts

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[285] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet (dir. Pierre-André Boutang), *Gilles Deleuze: From A to Z* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012): Disc 2, 40:09 – 44: 56.
[286] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 32-33.

in order to push them toward universality, Greek democracy could likewise only function by prying the human subject out of its embedded hierarchical context in the domestic sphere, and situating this properly political subject on a higher plane in which formal equality is the rule, where one's background or originating context doesn't matter. For Deleuze, what the "idea" is to Platonic philosophy, the "free citizen" is to Greek democracy.

If it is possible, then, to theorize the uniquely public nature of Greek politics, and its association with freedom, as an outcome of the specific medialogical environment characteristic of Greek civilization, then the rest of this chapter is dedicated to arguing that, in a similar fashion, the intensely private and individualized construction of the modern liberal subject is also a product of its emergent media environment. Prior to moving onto a discussion of print technology and modern political ontology and subjectivity, however, I want to stress here that the intent of this chapter is not to construct a kind of linear or teleological series that lines media forms up in a direct causal line, in which the Greek polis functions as an originary ground. Rather, the comparative approach I am employing here views all media environments as effectively *sui generis* and not causally linked in any inherent or transcendent way, despite the empirical fact of their sequential historical development. It is in this sense, then, that the principle value of the above discussion of the Greek polis is to offer a counterpoint that demonstrates how a change in the ontological assumptions about human beings, assumptions about which I argue media technologies are influential and to some degree determinate, can create a radically different conception of political subjectivity. In the following sections of this chapter, then, I want to move on to the

context of European modernity and the rise of print technology in order to argue how

the combination of print technology and market capitalism combined to produce a

form of political ontology and subjectivity that is effectively the inverse of the

classical model. By building on Benedict Anderson's notion of "print capitalism," the

remainder of the chapter theorizes the infrastructural tendencies associated with print

technology – such the genesis of an atomized reading public and the modern

conception of individual authorship, as influencing the genesis, consolidation and

reproduction of modern liberal subjectivity.

Excursus: the Longue Durée of the Written Word

While this analysis, as mentioned above, is strictly comparative rather than

teleological, the vast tract of time separating the Greek polis and the rise of print

culture in Europe does, I think, warrant some attention. Following the decline of the

Greek polis and Greek hegemony in the Mediterranean, the general trend is one in

which the written word became increasingly predominate at the expense of the older

oral tradition. According to Harold Innis, the expansion of the written word was

facilitated by increased access to papyrus, and this resulted in an epistemological

preference for law over philosophy in the Roman world, particularly as large

centralized bureaucracies increasingly replaced the smaller and oral-based city-states

as the preferred model for exercising political power. The importance of Roman legal

bureaucracies and the underlying intensification of writing technology is the subject of

Cornelia Vismann's *Files: Law and Media Technology* (2008), for instance, in which

Vismann argues that "reference to Rome models Western law as well as its historical

representation ... [and] contributes to the formation of the three major entities on which the law is based: truth, state and subject."[287] According to Vismann, Rome's ability to create a centralized bureaucratic filing system through increased production, transmission and storage of the written word was especially influential in terms of the influence that "official records [would] have in the emergence of the notions of truth, the concept of state, and the constructions of the subject in Western history."[288]

The approximately eight hundred to one thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance is not, comparatively speaking, a particularly rich period in terms of media development, even if political upheaval and transformation in the West was relatively constant. Western media development during this period was confined to the production of parchment and paper in a pre-mechanical phase and, according to Innis, the production of parchment and paper, rather than papyrus, is commensurate with a shift in civilizational development from the Mediterranean to continental Europe. "In contrast with papyrus," writies Innis, "which was produced in a restricted area under centralized control to meet the demands of a centralized bureaucratic administration and which was largely limited by its fragile character to water navigation, parchment was the product of a widely scattered agricultural economy suited to the demands of a decentralized administration and to land transportation."[289] Parchment, observes Innis, was much more durable than papyrus (or more *time-biased* according to his technical distinction), and thus "the parchment codex was adapted to large books […] emphasizing facility of reference

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[287] Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xiii, xii.
[288] Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology,* xii.
[289] Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 138.

and consequently lent itself to religion and law in the scriptures and the codes. A permanent medium suited to use over wide areas facilitated the establishment of libraries, and the production of a limited number of large books which could be copied."[290] Parchment, for Innis, thus encouraged the "demands of monasticism [and] contributed to the development of a powerful ecclesiastical organization."[291] The subsequent development of paper, however, viewed in the context of a parchment-based environment, thus tended to initially function as vehicle for peripheral knowledges operating outside of the hegemonic monastic network: "the monopoly of knowledge built up under ecclesiastical control in relation to time and based on the medium of parchment was undermined by the competition of paper."[292] Initially developed in China and introduced to Europe through the Middle East, the technique for producing paper was most advanced in the Arabic world and played an important role in the growth and spread of Islam. "The impact of Mohammedanism," writes Innis, "which followed its abhorrence of images, was enormously strengthened by [the] new medium in which the written word became a more potent force."[293] Thus while the power of the written word via the technology of paper production achieved an advanced position in the culture of the Near East around the 6th century, it wasn't until the commercial revolution in 1275, in which "paper facilitated the growth of credit in the use of documents for insurance bills of exchange,"[294] that the production of paper intensified in Europe. In macro-political terms, then, paper, according to Innis, should be viewed as much more urban and centralizing in character than the

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[290] Innis, *Empire and Communication,* 138.
[291] Innis, *Empire and Communication,* 145-146.
[292] Innis, *Empire and Communication,* 162.
[293] Innis, *Empire and Communication,* 146.
[294] Innis, *Empire and Communication,* 150-151.

more rural and diffused culture of parchment: "in contrast with parchment, which could be produced over wide areas, paper was essentially a product of the cities in terms of cheap supplies of rags and of markets. The control of monasteries in rural districts over education was replaced by the growth of cathedral schools and universities in the cities … dialectical discussion in class characteristic of a bookless age [thus] declined with the increasing importance of the authority of the textbook."[295]

The next major development in media transformation is the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. This new mechanical medium not only began to exert powerful social and political effects – the Italian Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment are all, for instance, historical episodes in which the widespread transmission of ideas through print is considered to have played a major role – but began to fundamentally alter the categorical and epistemology structure of Western society in a deep and profound way. "By 1450 Gutenberg had developed his techniques far enough to exploit them commercially," writes John B. Thompson, and by "1480 presses had been set up in more than one hundred towns and cities throughout Europe and a flourishing book trade developed."[296] At a quantitative level alone, the rise in the production of the written word as a result of commercialized print technology was staggering in historical comparison. "By the close of the fifteenth century," writes Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, "about fifty years after printing began, at least 35,000 editions

[295] Innis, *Empire and Communication*, 152, 161.
[296] John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 54-55.

had been produced, amounting, at the lowest estimate, to 15 or 20 million copies,"[297]

and all of this on continent of approximately 100 million persons of which only a

minority could actually read. While citing somewhat lesser numbers, Michael

Clapham nevertheless aptly articulates the enormity of this media shift: "a man born in

1453, the year of the fall of Constantinople, could look back on his fiftieth year on a

lifetime in which about eight million books had been printed, more than all the scribes

in Europe had produced since Constantine founded his city in 330 C.E."[298] The vast

and unprecedented rise in the amount of information stored, processes and transferred

via the printed word is thus often regarded as a prime example of quantitative change

cum qualitative transformation, whereby the cumulative effect of print technology is

seen have caused Western Europe to not merely have increased its output of

information but "to have experienced the cultural equivalent of a chemical change of

phase."[299] And while this dissertation does not permit the kind of scope required to

articulate the enormity of this cultural change in phase in anything nearing its entirety,

I think there is good reason to argue that print technology, alongside the rise of the

capitalist mode of production in Europe, has contributed much to the normative

conception of the political subject – if not modern subjectivity in general – that is

remarkably different from its classical predecessor. In the next section, then, I expand

on Benedict Anderson's concept of print capitalism in order argue that in addition to

fostering a new imagined community that formed the basis of the modern nation-state,

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[297] Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800* (London: Verso, 2010), 186.

[298] Michael Clapham, "Printing." *A History of Technology, vol. 3, From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution*. Ed. Charles Singer, A.R. Hall and Trevor Williams. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 37.

[299] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 125.

print capitalism also reinforced a conception of modern subjectivity in general, and the

role of the individual in liberal political philosophy in particular, as both intensely

privatized and individualized. Following this more general theoretical analysis of print

capitalism, the final section of the chapter examines the important role that print

technology plays in the political philosophy of Immanuel Kant for enabling a form of

popular political participation that does not cancel out the privatized notion of the

individual, and which therefore functions as an important practical and ideological

mechanism for the continued reproduction of a market society.

Print Capitalism, Nationalism, Individualism

While it is conventional within media and cultural theory to link print

technology with the genesis of two of the dominant political categories of Western

modernity, namely *nationalism* and *individualism*, the connection between print

technology and the latter has not benefitted from the scholarly attention that has been

paid to the former. While the idea that print technology lead to the development of

nationalism garnered brief mention in the work of Harold Innis,[300] it was through the

wider-reaching work of Marshall McLuhan that the relationship between print

technology and political nationalism was initially theorized. And while McLuhan's

media theory can, at times, verge on the mystical, the connection he drew between

print technology and nationalism was much more concrete and sociological in nature.

Specifically, McLuhan argued that the rise of political nationalism was a matter of

linguistic-demographics, in which print technology permitted the ascension and

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[300] See "Paper and the Printing Press," *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007) and "Minerva's Owl," *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

development of local or regional vernaculars, caused the concomitant decline of Latin as the *lingua franca* of the written word in Europe and opened the way for new forms of political organization outside the structures of medieval Christendom. "Of the many unforeseen consequences of typography," writes McLuhan, "the emergence of nationalism is, perhaps, the most familiar. Political unification of populations by means of vernacular and language groupings was unthinkable before printing turned each vernacular into an extensive medium. The tribe, an extended form of a family of blood relations, is exploded by print."[301]

McLuhan's (and Innis') conjectures concerning the connection between print technology and political nationalism has since been the subject of more systematic analysis in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), in which Anderson argues that political nationalism is not the product of print technology alone, but rather the product of the combined media-economic entity Anderson refers to as *print capitalism*. Echoing McLuhan's view that "the [printed] book was the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity,"[302] Anderson argues that the veritable explosion of the printed word in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries profoundly transformed the geo-political configuration of Europe by producing new "imagined" communities of a historically unprecedented sort. "What made the new communities

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[301] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 176-177.
[302] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 34. Instances of the same assertion can be found scattered throughout McLuhan's published works on media: "The reader of print … stands in an utterly different relation to the writer from the reader of manuscript. Print gradually made reading aloud pointless, and accelerated the act of reading till the reader could feel 'in the hands of the author.' We shall see that just as print was the first mass-produced thing, so it was the first uniform and repeatable 'commodity.' The assembly line of movable types made possible a product that was uniform and as repeatable as a scientific experiment" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 125). For a more detailed description of the day to day operations of printing as a capitalist enterprise, see Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800* (London: Verso, 2010), 109-127.

imaginable," argues Anderson, "was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human languages."[303] Specifically, Anderson argues that print capitalism can be said to have produced political nationalism in *three* predominant ways: first, print capitalism effectively displaced Latin as the preferred language of trans-European discourse and communication and thereby opened the way for new national languages. It created what Anderson calls "unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars."[304] Second, print capitalism lent a new and unprecedented fixity to language. It stabilized language to the extent that "our seventeenth-century forebears are accessible to us in a way that to Villon his twelfth-century ancestors were not."[305] And third, print capitalism codified select regional national vernaculars as the language of public discourse and political power within the burgeoning bureaucratic systems of the nascent nation-states, to the extent that European peoples "gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands,

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[303] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 42-43. The "fatality of human languages," refers to Anderson's view that human linguistic diversity an essential characteristic of human existence which capital will never overcome: "the element of fatality is essential. For whatever superhuman feats capitalism was capable of, it found in death and languages two tenacious adversaries. Particular languages can die or be wiped out, but there was and is no possibility of humankind's general linguistic unification. Yet this mutual incomprehensibility was historically of only slight importance until capitalism and print created monoglot reading publics" (*Imagined Communities,* 43). For Anderson, then, political nationalism is something of a comprised product, the middle outcome of the collision between the hard irreducibility of human linguistic diversity and the endless fluidity of capitalism. And while Anderson has been proven empirically correct on this point to date, Jonathan Crary's analysis in *24/7* (New York: Verso, 2013) demonstrates that even the physiological need for sleep could not stand up to the relentless power of capitalist subsumption; and if the Western sci-fi imagination is any judge, the "after globalization" of a species, its extension beyond its planetary boundaries, is always accompanied by general linguistic unification.

[304] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.

[305] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45.

or millions, belonged."[306] It was in this fashion, argues Anderson, that print technology and nascent industrial capitalism undermined the older religious-based political order in Europe and substituted for it "a new imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage of the modern nation."[307]

While Anderson's account is the most direct and systematic exposition of the co-genesis of print capitalism and political nationalism, the same connection between print technology and nationalism, in the context of languages, politics or culture, is demonstrable across a wide array of cultural theory. Around the same time McLuhan was writing on the subject of print-induced nationalism, for instance, Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution* (1961) likewise exposes a connection between print technology and nationalism, if from a more literary perspective. "The first half of the eighteenth century," writes Williams, "is a critical period in the expansion of English culture, and the newspaper and periodical are among its most important products, together with the popular novel and the domestic drama."[308] In an account which gives special attention to the class character of English culture and society, Williams' demonstrates the degree to which "it is impossible to accept the extreme view … that a national literature [and culture] is wholly autonomous, unaffected by various institutions, audiences, social and educational opportunity, and available methods of living."[309] Thus while stressing the fundamental role of class politics in the development of an ostensibly universal national culture, William's account nonetheless underscores the important role of print technology for "the expansion and

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[306] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.
[307] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 46.
[308] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan: Parthian Press, 2011), 213.
[309] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 279.

organization of [a] middle class audience [that] can be seen to have continued until the

nineteenth century, drawing in new writers from varied social origins, but giving them,

through its majority institutions, a general homogeneity."[310] In Williams' view, then,

print technology is an indispensible infrastructural condition for constructing a

relatively homogenous national culture from the varied and heterogeneous cultures

that originally comprised the territories that were incorporated into the modern nation-

state system. Along similar lines, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis in *Language and

Symbolic Power* (1991) argues for the inextricable connection between the nation-state

and the ascension of a regional vernacular into a national language and discourse of

power. "Only when the making of the 'nation,' an entirely abstract group based on

law, creates new usages and functions," argues Bourdieu, "does it become

indispensible to forge a *standard* language, impersonal and anonymous like the

official uses it has to serve, and by the same token to undertake the work of

normalizing the products of the linguistic habitus."[311] And as if building from

Bourdieu's connection between language and the nation-state, Ben Kafka's recent *The

Demon of Writing* (2013) documents the degree to which the standardization of

language spawned a whole new system of national bureaucracy that produced what he

calls a "psychic life of paperwork" unique to modern nationalism. One of "the most

important features of [the genesis of nationalism]," argues Kafka, is "the emergence of

a radical new ethics of paperwork, one designed to sustain a state whose legitimacy

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[310] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 282.
[311] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 48.

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was founded on the claim to represent, at every moment, every member of the nation."[312]

If there is no shortage of scholarship that links print technology with the genesis of political nationalism, matters are somewhat scarcer when it comes to the relationship between print technology and modern individualism. This asymmetry in scholarship can, it seems to me, be at least partially accounted for by the fact that the connection between print technology and nationalism taps into our ideological Herderian understanding that linguistic groups and geographical-political bodies entities ought to coincide. In other words, the idea that a medium like print permits or releases the political power of ostensibly already established linguistic-cultural groups and facilitates their institutionalization in the form of the nation-state runs along an ideological track laid in one's (or our) political subconscious by the omnipresent processes of nationalistic indoctrination that is unavoidable for those inhabiting modern nation-states. Matters are more difficult when examining the connection between print technology and modern individualism then, not because the notion of the autonomous, bourgeois, liberal individual is any less naturalized than is nationalism at present, but rather that the individual is simply not generally understood as a linguistic unit in the way in which a national population is.[313] For instance, if we return to McLuhan, who stressed the individuating powers of print at least as much as he stressed its nationalistic qualities, one finds that the epistemological basis for the

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[312] Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 21.
[313] The only sense in which the naturalized category of the individual might be described as ideological is in the form of the "perfectly competent speaker" characteristic of linguistic analysis of the Chomskyan variety, whereby, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws … the unity of language is fundamentally political." (*A Thousand Plateaus,* 101).

linkage between print technology and individualism is very different from that through

which McLuhan linked print technology to nationalism. Whereas the former is

grounded in a sociological or demographic process, the link McLuhan draws between

print technology and individualism is rather *phenomenological* at base, insofar as

individualism is viewed as an outcome of the materiality of the book itself and the way

in which the user of this medium is interpellated by its material form. "Before the

printing press," writes McLuhan in the context of pedagogy, "the younger learned by

listening, watching, doing … students memorized. Instruction was almost entirely oral,

done in groups."[314] For McLuhan, however, the previously social character of learning

was profoundly transformed with the coming of the printed book: "the book [is] an

individualistic form – individualistic because it isolated the reader in silence and

helped to create the Western 'I.'"[315]

Thus the connection between print technology and individualism requires a

kind of philosophical, or speculative disposition that the connection between print and

nationalism does not. Whereas the latter can be measured at a statistical level, there is

no way to empirically verify the relationship between solitary book learning and

genesis of the Western "I," expect through a correlative and isomorphic methodology

in which the connection is inferred through reference to its symptoms alone.

Additionally, it requires a conception of print technology as a fundamentally *anti-*

social medium. Anti-social not in the normative psychological sense, nor in the sense

that print did not create social ties – for one of the essential definitions of the concept

of an information medium as such is a minimal social setting in which communication

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[314] Marshall McLuhan, "Classroom without Walls." *Explorations in Communication*, ed. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 1.
[315] McLuhan, "Classroom without Walls," 1.

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can occur – but rather anti-social in the sense that print technology isolate it's subjects

on a mass scale and renders the act of information transfer an isolating and

individualistic practice like no other medium before it. "Like any extensions of man,"

argues McLuhan, "typography had psychic and social consequences that suddenly

shifted previous boundaries and patterns of culture":

> Physically the printed book, an extension of the visual faculty, intensified
> perspective and the fixed point of view. Associated with the visual stress on
> point of view and the vanishing point that provides the illusion of perspective
> there comes another illusion that space is visual, uniform and continuous. The
> linearity precision and uniformity of movable types are inseparable from these
> great cultural forms and innovations of Renaissance experience. The new
> intensity of visual stress and private point of view in the first century of
> printing were united to the means of self-expression made possible by the
> typographic extensions of man … Print released great psychic and social
> energies in the Renaissance … by breaking the individual out of the traditional
> group while providing a model of how to add individual to individual in
> massive agglomeration of power.[316]

Thus unlike the linkage between print and nationalism, which is based on a more or

less concrete and empirically-verifiable sociological-linguistic shift, the connection

McLuhan constructs between print technology and Western individualism is of a much

more speculative-philosophical character. Grounded in a phenomenological

conception of the medium of print as a uniquely isolating and individualistic

experience, McLuhan expands his argument and asserts that, isomorphically, print

[316] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 171, 172.

technology is responsible for spreading a certain ethos of individualism throughout the social field. Print technology, in McLuhan's view, is essentially the first hegemonic information and communication medium that does not function principally by bonding otherwise disaggregate units into a social collective, but rather works the other way around: it is a medium that paradoxically separates an already bonded collective into separate and atomistic individual units.

While the metaphysical – or even at times mystical – discourse through which McLuhan theorizes the political effects of media technologies has a tendency to leave the reader simultaneously intrigued and frustrated, subsequent scholarship nonetheless supports his connection between print technology and modern individualism. In terms of socio-historical analysis, Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (1983) offers the most thorough analysis on the subject of European print culture and comes to similar conclusions about the connection between print technology and modern individualism.[317] According to Eisenstein, McLuhan's thesis on modern individualism can be substantiated on two counts in particular: (1) print technology produced a reading public that was highly atomized and disaggregated and

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[317] In her introduction, Eisenstein describes the impetus for her research as originating in a reading of McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). "In sharp contrast to the American historian's lament," writes Eisenstein, "the Canadian professor of English seemed to take mischievous pleasure in the loss of familiar historical perspectives. He pronounced historical modes of inquiry to be obsolete and the age of Gutenberg at an end … McLuhan's book seemed to testify to the special problems posed by print culture rather than those produced by newer media."[317] Yet if McLuhan's unique perspective on media theory and history provoked Eisenstein, she was nonetheless dissatisfied with the lack of historical rigor characteristic of his aphoristic style, and thus her analysis in *The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe* attempts to substantiate – or challenge – McLuhan's various positions with respect to media history and transformation. And while it is beyond the scope of this chapter to summarize Eisenstein's account in any detail, it is worth mentioning that her historical research produced its own media axiom: specifically that the genesis of print culture in Europe, like all paradigmatic media transformations, is an extremely multifaceted and complex event and, therefore, "the cultural metamorphosis produced by printing [is] much more complicated than any single formula can possibly express (*The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe,* 40).

(2) print encouraged the new conception of individual authorship and intellectual

property rights. On the first count, Eisenstein is of course not alone in marking the

connection between a reading public and the genesis of the bourgeois liberal subject.

The most influential work on this topic is Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural*

Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), yet Habermas has very little to say about

the disaggregate or atomistic character of the reading public as such. While Habermas

certainly stresses the way in which a *public* sphere capable of voicing the concerns of

the citizenry is paradoxically dependent on a privatized notion of the individual

citizen, Habermas' discussion of the privatized substrate underpinning the public

sphere focuses most of its attention on the domestic family as its preferred unit of

analysis. "The privatized individuals who gathered to form a public were not reducible

to 'society,'" writes Habermas, "they only entered it, so to speak, out of a private life

that had assumed institutional form in the closed space of the patriarchal conjugal

family."[318] Thus while Habermas' conception of the bourgeois public sphere – not

unlike Arendt's genealogy of the modern notion of "society" as such – is mostly

characterized by an inversion whereby private domesticity function the basis or model

for public action and governance, Habermas' account does not describe the way in

which a reading public, or print culture, unlike a community bound by the oral

medium, is imbued with a certain sense of anonymity and isolation as a result of

individualistic means by which print information is absorbed. For even if much of the

institutional basis of a reading public was formed, in Habermas' view, by new

communal forms such as reading clubs or *Tischgesellschaften,* these new forms of

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[318] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962), 46.

print-mediated collectively can hardly be said to be sufficient to counter the predominately disaggregating effects of print technology. "The displacement of pulpit by press," writes Eisenstein, "is significant not only in connection with secularization but also because it points to an explanation for the weakening of social ties":

> To hear an address delivered, people have to come together; to read a printed report encourages individuals to draw apart. "While the orators of Rome and Athens were in the midst of a people *assembled*," said Malesherbes in an address of 1775, "men of letters are in the midst of a *dispersed* people." His observation suggests how the shift in communications may have changed the sense of what it meant to participate in public affairs. The wide distribution of identical bits of information provided an impersonal link between people who were unknown to each other. [Thus] by its very nature, a reading public was not only more dispersed; it was also more atomistic and individualistic than a hearing one.[319]

Thus while print can be viewed as contributing the modern ethos of individualism in a very materialistic fashion, it bears repeating that the disaggregating effects of print did not cancel out collectivity as such, but rather promoted a paradoxical mode of collectivity in which social links are only imagined, but not practiced. In the context of reading the daily newspaper, for instance, Anderson likewise stresses the privative character of print-mediated forms of community: "the significance of this mass ceremony – Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for prayers – is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull."[320]

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[319] Eisenstein, *The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 105.
[320] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 35.

For as Anderson continually stresses, modern imagined communities are not merely

modes collectivity in which one *does not* personally interact with the other members

of the community, but it is a mode of collectivity in which there is no expectation that

one *should* act in this way, insofar as a modern print culture is comprised of

anonymous readers who are explicitly understood as *private* citizens. Thus the socio-

political transformation affected by print technology is not one in which collectivism

is opposed to individualism as such, but rather one in which, paradoxically,

collectivity is achieved through disaggregation and individuation. Thus "the notion

that society may be regarded as a bundle of discrete units or that the individual is *prior*

to the social group," writes Eisenstein, "seems to be more compatible with a reading

public than with a hearing one."[321]

If the mode of collectivity characteristic of print culture promotes a sense of

political individualism as an effect of the disaggregating nature of a reading public,

Eisenstein also observes that print culture reinforces the atomistic character of modern

society by providing the nascent category of the individual with a new sense of depth

produced by new norms concerning individual authorship, propriety and possession.

Initially, Eisenstein argues that this shift in politico-legal subjectivity can be detected

in the changing contents of print itself, insofar as print "made it possible to supplement

tales of saints and saintly kings by biographies and autobiographies of more ordinary

people pursuing heterogeneous careers."[322] At the initial level of content, then, print

culture promotes a new depth of individualism insofar as it permits the narrativization

of specific individuals rather than general cultural archetypes, which are the standard

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[321] Eisenstein, *The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 106, emphasis added.
[322] Eisenstein, *The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 146.

fair of oral literature. "Paradoxically," writes Eisenstein on this point, "we must wait

for impersonal type to replace handwriting and a standard colophon to replace the

individual signature, before singular experiences can be preserved for posterity and

distinctive personalities can be permanently separated from the group or collective

type."[323] But more than simply promoting a sense of individualism at the level of

content, print, or rather print capitalism, codified the category of individual in a much

more definite way through new notions of copyright and intellectual property. For

prior to the advent of print culture, notions of individual possession over works of the

intellect, so to speak, was an almost entirely alien concept. For the means by which the

written word was disseminated in manuscript culture demanded endless copying, and

thus scribal culture simply did not permit room for conventions such as copyright or

intellectual property to arise. Even in the domain of the visual arts, individual

authorship was simply not an ethos that shaped the production of visual images. "A

given master might decide to place his own features on a figure in fresco or on a

carving over a door," observes Eisenstein, "but in the absence of written records, he

would still lose his identity in the eyes of posterity and become another faceless artists

who performed some collective task."[324] Within the conditions of manuscript culture,

then, it is thus hardly an exaggeration to observe that the contemporary notion of

authorship, of individual possession over a piece of intellectual or artist production,

simply did not exist in anything near the same form or extent prior to the introduction

of print technology. For insofar as the dominant practice of scribal culture involved

copying texts that were themselves already copied many times over, notions such

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[323] Eisenstein, *The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 149.
[324] Eisenstein, *The Print Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 147-148.

"originality," "authenticity," and "individuality" that loom so large in modernity

would simply have ran counter to facticity of scribal culture as such. "Much of the

prestige and glamour with which we moderns invest in the term [authorship]," writes

E. Goldschmidt,

> [as that] which makes us look upon an author who has succeeded in getting a
>
> book published as have progressed a stage nearer to becoming a great man,
>
> must be [seen] as a recent accretion. The indifference of medieval scholars to
>
> the precise identity of the authors whose books they studied is undeniable. The
>
> writers themselves, on the other hand, did not always trouble to 'quote' what
>
> they took from other books or to indicate where they took it from; they were
>
> diffident about signing even what was clearly their own in an unambiguous
>
> manner and unmistakable manner.[325]

The same conclusion is reached by Augustine Birrell, who, writing at the turn of the

twentieth century, argued that copyright or intellectual property rights are unique in

the annals of Western law because they are a singularly modern conception.

"Whatever charm is possessed by the subject of copyright," writes Birrell, "is largely

due to the fact that it is a bundle of ideas and rights of *modern origin*":

> It is not like the majority of legal conceptions lost in an antiquity about which
>
> we can only guess, and about which each generation guesses differently. The
>
> Homeric Poems as poetry are beyond reproach, but they were never copyright.
>
> You may search through the huge compilations of Justinian without lighting
>
> upon a single word indicative of any right possessed by the author of a book to

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[325] E. Goldschmidt, *Medieval Texts and Their First Appearance in Print* (London: Oxford
University Press, 1965), 116.

control the multiplication of copies; and yet books abounded even before the

invention of printing.[326]

For Birrell, then, the invention of movable type, which "rendered the reproduction of

copies an easy, because mechanical, process," effectively marks the "epoch in which

the Western world recognized the right of an author as such to levy dues upon the

published product of his own brain and intellectual industry," and, accordingly, print

technology thus helped cement a specific Western political disposition "to recognize

the right of individuals to the exclusive possession of certain things, and these rights it

has clustered together, recognized, venerated, worshipped, under the word

property."[327]

Both Goldschmidt and Birrell's accounts underscore how substantially print

technology altered the political, legal and ideological landscape in terms of

individualism and property rights. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the

pre-Gutenberg scribe who copied manuscripts effectively lived in a word of simulacra

avant la lettre. For while Jean Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum spoke more

directly to the conditions of postmodernity and the nascent hegemony of digital

information and communications technologies as producing an environment in which

the existence of "a real without origin" negated the "sovereign difference, between one

and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction,"[328] the very same indifference

between the real and the copy that Baudrillard saw creeping into postmodern life

virtually defined manuscript culture before the advent of print. The medieval scribe

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[326] Augustine Birrell, *The Law and History of Copyright in Books* (London: Cassell and Company, 1899), 9, emphasis added.
[327] Birrell, *The Law and History of Copyright in Books,* 10-12.
[328] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1, 2.

lived in a world populated by copies of copies of copies in which the sense of original or authentic text was irrelevant to the conditions of the reproduction of knowledge. Thus while Baudrillard's discussion of the procession of simulacra spans from Byzantine icons to Disneyland, I think it is possible to argue that seeming universal or "sovereign" difference between the original and the copy was far from a near timeless condition of Western thought or metaphysics, but rather a product of print culture and the attending notions of individuality, authorship and possession fostered by this mechanical medium.

Thus for Eisenstein, and others, there is a very real sense in which print culture can be theorized as promoting a new politics or ideology of individualism to a degree at least commensurate as that accorded to the capitalist mode of production in more Marxian analyses. And, indeed, when one turns to examine the major correlating shift in political philosophy during the rise of print culture in Europe, one finds that the principle axioms or elements characteristic of modern political ontology correspond to those shifts promoted by print technology, or print capitalism: *namely, the paradoxical sense of collectivity in which the individual is thought to somehow precede or prefigure the society, and the growing idea that the pre-social individual is defined by the qualities of ownership or possession.* In his influential analysis of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, for instance, C.B. Macpherson argues that the dominant innovations of Hobbes and Locke was based in their "discarding of traditional concepts of society, justice and natural law" in favour of "deducing political rights and obligations from the interest and will of dissociated

individuals."[329] In sharp contrast to the Greek polis, in which political action was principally manifest through communicative dialogue with one's peers, Macpherson argue that what characterizes the political ontology of the modern subject is not merely its individualism, its separation from natural and political society, but also the sense in which this individuality is most fundamentally grounded in a sense of *ownership* or *possession* of property, even if it is only the products of one's hands or brain. "[The individual's] possessive quality," writes Macpherson, "is found in [the] conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, owning nothing to society for them":

> The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual … The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their own exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange.[330]

For Macpherson, then, the core condition of the modern liberal subject is not merely his radical individuality, his sense that his person somehow antedates the social world,

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[329] C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.
[330] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 3.

but also that the idea that his individualism, and the means through which his prior individualism is linked to the social world, is based on a notion of personal ownership or property. Unlike the Greek, who achieved freedom by passing from the private realm into the light of publicity, the modern Hobbesian or Lockean subject achieves freedom by shunning the public realm and retreating ever farther into a private sphere defined by ownership, possession and economic command.

The idea that the possession of one's labour is one of the core defining features of the modern subject is likewise asserted in Michel Foucault's study of the birth of political economy in the eighteenth century, which demonstrates the way in which the modern individual is a mode of subjectivity that was increasingly understood as little more than a producer of value. Stating more generally that "European culture [invented] for itself a depth in which what matters is no longer identities … but great hidden forces,"[331] Foucault observes that the simple practice of exchange, the age old system of barter, ceased to be the principle concern of Europe's political economists who, in accordance with the vast universe of productive potentiality opened by the industrial revolution and the new and astonishing power of fossil fuels, were now concerned with the deeper and more fundamental phenomenon of the creation of wealth itself. Thus after an initial period of physiocratic hegemony in which nature – or agriculture more specifically – was considered the ultimate source of wealth, the field of political economy, as Foucault argues, came to be founded on the basis of a consensus in which labour, or labour power, was now viewed as that from which all wealth sprung. "Whereas in Classical thought," writes Foucault, "trade and exchange serve as an indispensible basis for the analysis of wealth, after Ricardo, the possibility

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[331] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 251.

of exchange is based upon labour; and henceforth the theory of production must always precede that of circulation."[332] In other words, if Hobbes and Locke could re-formulate the field of political philosophy by grounding it in the axiomatic presupposition that what renders the human subject social is, first and foremost, the alienation of her property, i.e., her labour power, Foucault documents the degree to which the possession and exchange of labour, a century later, is now understood as the foundation of all of society itself: possessive individualism thus spills outside the confines of political philosophy and now forms the basis of all modern notions "value" entirely. "Value ceased to be a sign," argues Foucault, "it has become a product … any value, whatever it may be, has its origin in labour."[333]

Thus far I have argued that while it is undeniable that the rise of market capitalism, and the industrial-ethos of production, was to some degree determinate in shaping modern liberal political philosophy and placing the atomized and pre-social individual at its core, the same underlying processes can be see to have infiltrated the social and ideological terrain through the rise of print technology and print culture, and it is on this basis that it is possible to extend or augment the explanatory power Anderson's notion of "print capitalism" beyond nationalism and the nation-state. That is to say that if Anderson is able to argue that printed book, as "the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity," acted something like the molecular nuclei through which Western Europe experienced something analogous to a chemical change of phase, I argue that it is also possible to view the hegemony of possessive individualism alongside the rise of nationalism as one of most important of the

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[332] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 254.
[333] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 254.

combined effects of print capitalism. However, the importance of print technology for modern liberal political philosophy does not begin and end with the atomized character of the reading public or the new kind of possessive individualism that print promotes. Rather, as I argue in the final section of this chapter, it is possible to theorize print technology as facilitating the continued reproduction of modern capitalism, at least in ideological terms, by offering a means by which popular politicization can be achieved without undermining the essentially privative nature of modern political subjectivity. By contrasting Immanuel Kant's republican political theory with Thomas Hobbes' more absolutist position, I argue it is possible to view Kant's discussion of print culture and its associated institutions as offering a "safe" or "domesticated" means of politicizing the modern subject without subverting the privatized ideology necessary for capitalist accumulation.

Print Capitalism and Kant's Political Philosophy

It is hardly novel in and of itself to argue that Kant's philosophy, political or otherwise, can be theorized as a product of its times (as all philosophical works invariably are). In his socio-philosophical analysis of Kant's three *Critiques*, for instance, Lucien Goldmann argues that "Kant's world-view constituted, even in his lifetime, the philosophical system most representative of the German bourgeoisie, and, with the single exception of the Hegelian period, remains so today."[334] Specifically, Goldmann argues that the three hegemonic virtues of the European bourgeoisie – *freedom*, *individualism* and *equality before the law* – find their highest and purest philosophical exposition in Kant's epistemological, aesthetic and practical criticisms.

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[334] Lucien Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant* (London: Verso, 2011), 33.

Freedom, as Goldmann recognizes, constituted the foundational basis of the political

and philosophical morality of an embattled German bourgeoisie attempting to slough

off the fetters of European feudalism, and thus freedom in this socio-historical context

invariably took on negative or critical form: freedom was thus associated with

individualism, understood as the freedom *from* all forms of coerced bondage. This

negative or critical conception of freedom is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the

Critique of Practical Reason (1788) in which Kant asserts that one's capacity for

"universal lawgiving" – as opposed to laws imposed on one from without – ought to

serve as the fundamental ground of an individual morality "altogether independent of

the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of

causality," and for Kant, "such independence is called *freedom* in the strictest, that is,

in the transcendental sense."[335] It is insofar as Kant theorizes the individual in what

Charles Taylor describes as "a radical sense of self-determination by the moral will"[336]

that Goldmann argues that it is in the context of a rising bourgeoisie that "the Kantian

system appears as the most profound and relevant expression of classical philosophy,

and which we may still take as our point of departure today, provided, of course, that

we overtake it on the road it has opened for us."[337]

    Another notable attempt to link Kant's philosophy to its socio-economic

environment is Alfred Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1978) which,

using a Marxian epistemology based on the "secret identity of commodity form and

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[335] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 26 [Part 1, Section 5].
[336] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 32.
[337] Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant*, 47.

thought form,"[338] argues that there is an isomorphic relationship between the categories of capitalist exchange and the categories of Kant's epistemology. Contrary to the traditional view of Western metaphysics and philosophy, which understands abstraction as the exclusive privilege of thought or of the mind, Sohn-Rethel attempts to ground the categories of Kant's critical philosophy in what he calls the "real abstraction," as opposed to mere cognitive or idealistic abstraction, that was only fully developed under the conditions of widespread and systematic capitalist production and exchange. For if, as Sohn-Rethel asserts, "the form of commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit," what is most unique about capitalist abstraction is that it is not a mental abstraction, it is not "thought-induced," but is rather borne unintentionally from the social interactions mediated by economic exchange whereby "a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service"[339] is the *modus operandi.* It is in this sense that Sohn-Rethel defines commodity abstraction as a "real abstraction": it does not arise from mental efforts of the individual, but is rather the objective net effect of a system of social interchange and is accordingly quite independent of the minds of actors who participate in its actuation. It is this process of real abstraction pervading capitalist society that, in Sohn-Rethel's view, determines "the conceptual mode of thinking peculiar to societies based on commodity abstraction,"[340] and which permits Sohn-Rethel to define the relationship between commodity abstraction and Kant's epistemology as isomorphic in nature. Describing Kant's project in the *Critique*

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[338] Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1977), xiii.
[339] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 19, 20.
[340] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 23.

of Pure Reason (1781) as an attempt to determine whether "objective knowledge of nature is possible from sources other than manual labour,"[341] Sohn-Rethel argues that just as Marx grasped modern society as fundamentally an "immense collection of commodities"[342] whose cellular form, the commodity, was a synthesis of exchange-value and use-value with exchange-value ultimately exerting hegemony over the commodity form as a whole, Kant likewise grasped the notion of "knowledge" as a synthesis of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge with *a priori* judgements – which are "the part of our being which is underivable from our physical and sensorial nature, and which carries the possibilities of pure mathematics and science – ultimately exerting hegemony over the field of knowledge in general. For Sohn-Rethel, then, Kant stands at the epistemological apex of a Western scientific tradition whose basis in pure, if idealistic, formal abstraction was prompted by the "real abstraction" at work in the field of social exchange in which a pure, or *transcendental*, notion of quantity or value structures the entire system. "Before thought could arrive at the idea of a purely *quantitative* determination," as Slavoj Žižek paraphrases, "pure quantity was already at work in money, that commodity which renders possible the commensurability of the value of all other commodities notwithstanding their particular qualitiative determination. Before physics could articulate the notion of a purely abstract *movement* going on in a geometric space, independently of all qualitative determinations of the moving objects, the social act of exchange had already realized such a "pure," abstract movement.[343] For Sohn-Rethel, then, the "transcendental

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[341] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 30.
[342] Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol.1* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 125.
[343] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 17.

subject" that binds the entirety of Kant's epistemology together is something like a mirror image or a "fetish concept" of the function of money in a capitalist society: it is the pure and empty form through which the unity of particular use-values or *a posteriori* judgements are welded together through the transcendental hegemony of exchange-value and *a priori* knowledge respectively.

Thus while both Goldmann and Sohn-Rethel provide cogent arguments linking Kant's philosophy to the economic conditions form which it arose, in both sociological and philosophical registers, the aim of this chapter is not simply to connect Kant to his economic conditions of existence, i.e. industrial capitalism, nor merely to link him to the the medialogical conditions of his existence as well, but to demonstrate that print technology actually takes on a important conceptual or categorical role in Kant's political philosophy as such. Focusing primarily on Kant's political writings – specifically his essays "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," "The Metaphysics of Morals," "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice" and "What is Enlightenment?" – my aim in this concluding section is to show that the individualizing tendencies of print technology discussed above are also manifest in the actual categorical structure of Kantian political philosophy itself.

However, before discussing Kant's writings directly, it is worth noting that the historical period in which Kant produced all of his greatest work was also the period in which Germany began to not only develop a genuine print culture, but it was also the period in which Germany began to surpass the rest of Europe in terms of its output of

the printed word. Driven primarily by the literary figures of the German

Enlightenment, or *Aufklärer*, during the mid-eighteenth century, the last decades of the

eighteenth-century saw "the demand for reading material had insufficiently increased

to entice, if not support, an astonishing number of would be writers."[344] Indeed,

Germany's print culture had become so prolific that by the 1780s, London Bookseller

James Lackington was awed by the fact that there were "seven thousand living authors

in that country," which he described as an "army of writers" operating in a nation in

which "every body reads."[345] The sentiment of Germany supremacy over England

when it came to literary output was also such that German scientist, satirist and

Anglophile Georg Christoph Lichtenberg satirically asserted that if England was a

country known for its racehorses [*Rennpferde*], Germany was, by the end of the

eighteenth century, a country known for its "race pens" [*Rennpfedern*].[346] And while

Germany was, in general, becoming one of the most literary societies in Europe by the

end of the eighteenth century, Kant was by no means shielded from this trend by his

self-imposed isolation in Königsberg. "Literary societies were all the rage in Germany

during the last third of the eighteenth century," writes Manfred Kuehn in his biography

of Königsberg's most famous citizen, and Kant was often placed at the at the forefront

of this local movement insofar as it offered important opportunities for realizing

popular Enlightenment. "That Kant felt it necessary to participate in [literary societies]

shows how seriously he took the concerns of the Enlightenment … even if Kant would

have found at least some of goings-on tasteless and might have felt uncomfortable at

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[344] Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market*, 24.
[345] qtd in Albert Ward, *Book Production, Fiction, and the German Reading Public, 1740-1800*
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 88.
[346] qtd in Ward, *Book Production, Fiction, and the German Reading Public, 1740-1800*, 61.

times, there he was."[347] Thus while it is certainly possible to understand *why* Kant

might have understood print technology, and its associated institutions, as a vehicle for

enlightenment and politics, what I am more concerned here with is the function that

print technology plays within the categorical structure of Kant's political philosophy

itself.

In the first instance, Kant's political writings share the same ethos of

possessive individualism advocated by both Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Indeed,

the underlying anthropological premise animating Kant's political theory is virtually

identical to that of Hobbes himself. For just as Hobbes' view of human nature was

such that were the legal and cultural barriers that prevented humans from acting on

their more immediate and base desires removed, human society would devolve into a

war of all against all, Kant likewise describes human nature in terms of innate

antagonism. Specifically, Kant describes the human condition in his essay "Idea for a

Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" using the term *unsocial sociability*:

> The means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate
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> capacities is that of antagonism in society, in so far as this antagonism becomes
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> in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order. By antagonism, I
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> mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to
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> come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which
>
> constantly threatens to break this society up. This propensity is obviously
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> rooted in human nature. Man has an inclination to *live in society*, since he feels
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> in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural
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> capacities. But he also has a great tendency to *live as an individual,* to isolate

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[347] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164-165.

himself, since he also encounters in himself the unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas.[348]

It does not take a great leap of political imagination to interpret Kant's anthropological conception of human nature and society as providing legitimation for the continued growth of a market society in Europe, and therefore as a kind of philosophical justification for the rise of the bourgeoisie as such. For while Kant certainly argues that human societies are necessary and beneficial, he is of the opinion that these societies must be imbued with the kind of continual resistance characteristic of market competition, for it is this resistance that "awakens all man's powers and induces him to overcome his tendency to laziness."[349] Without the constant resistance and competition enabled by a market society, human beings, in Kant's view, would remain in a primitive and "dormant state" whereby "men, as good natured as the sheep they tend, would scarcely render their existence more valuable than that of their animals," and it is for this reason that "nature should be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, envious competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power."[350]

Yet however much Kant seems, initially, to provide the justification for a market society by endowing human nature itself with the hegemonic values underpinning the rising European bourgeoisie, we must recall that, unlike his English counterpart, Kant does not define human nature as purely *unsocial* but rather describes it as being *unsocially social*. And it is with respect to the *social* aspect of this

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[348] Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose." *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44.
[349] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 44.
[350] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 45.

ontological conjunction that, I argue, Kant turns to print technology. For if the

naturalization of market competition facilitated by Kant's anthropological conception

of resistance and antagonism accounts for the *unsocial* element of Kant's composite

view of human nature and society, the act of mutual communication, facilitated by the

medium of print and through the institution of a reading public, exercises an explicitly

political and hence *socializing* function in Kant's political thought, but one that does

not negate the founding and more determinate premise of unsociality. Indeed, it is for

this reason, I argue, that one finds no similar discussion of the socializing function, or

political necessity, of communication in Hobbes political theory, if only because

Hobbes' solution to the politics of the market society is simply to abolish politics

outright. For while many of Hobbes' contemporaries championed his preference for a

free market society that "permits individuals who want more delights than they have,

to seek to convert the natural powers of other men to their use,"[351] almost none of

Hobbes' contemporaries could agree with his uncompromising view that sovereign

political power must be both absolute and self-perpetuating. "What both Harrington

and Locke thought unnecessary" writes Macpherson, "was that the sovereign power

should be put irrevocably in the hands of a person or a body of persons with the

authority to appoint his or their own successors":

> Yet Hobbes had insisted that the person or persons who held sovereign power
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> at any moment should be self-perpetuating. This of course put the holders of
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> sovereign power always beyond the control of the people or of any section of

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[351] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 58-59.

the people; and this, however unfortunate, was in Hobbes' view unavoidable[352]

… No one after Hobbes, however much they agreed with Hobbes' estimate of

men as self-interested calculating machines and however much they accepted

the values of a market society, could agree that this required men to

acknowledge the sovereign authority of a self-perpetuating body.[353]

For Hobbes, then, there is simply no political problem arising in the state of

governance under which the sovereign Leviathan rules. Once the signatories of the

social contract abdicate their natural rights and freedoms in order to end the war of all

against all and henceforth enjoy a more commodious life, they have, in Hobbes view,

necessarily submitted to an absolutist form of government in which "power consists of

giving the law to subjects in general without their consent."[354] For Hobbes, then, there

is no need to theorize a form of inter-subjective or inter-citizenry governance or

power, since the disaggregating effects of a privatized and possessive market society

can be managed through the sheer political force of the Leviathan itself. It is

accordingly unsurprising, following this premise, that when the subject of media

technology appears in Hobbes – which is to say the subject of language and writing –

the communicative potential of print media for disseminating information within the

commonwealth is dismissed as of little consequence in Hobbes' view. In the fourth

chapter of the *Leviathan*, titled "Of Speech," Hobbes flatly states that "the invention of

printing, though ingenious … is of no great importance."[355] After some reflection on

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[352] "There is no perfect form of government where the disposing of the succession is not in the present sovereign." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 124 [Part 2, Chapter 19, Section 15].

[353] Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 92.

[354] Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty: Four Chapters from the Six Books of the Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23.

[355] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 15 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 1].

the origins of the written word and its appearance in Greek antiquity, Hobbes argues that it is *speech,* rather than writing or printing, that is "the most noble and profitable invention,"[356] insofar as speech, rather than writing, is that which most clearly and directly represents thought itself:

> The general use of speech is to transfer our mental discourse into verbal, or the train of our thoughts into a train of words; and that for two commodities, whereof one is the registering of the consequences of our thoughts, which being apt to slip out of our memory and put is to a new labour, may again be recalled by such words as they were marked by. So that the first use of names is to serve as *marks*, or *notes* of remembrance.[357]

So consequential is speech for the operation of the human mind that Hobbes even goes so far as to argue that a man without speech would not be able to "conclude universally that [an] equality of angles is in all triangles whatsoever" because the man would not be able to "register his invention in these general terms;"[358] indeed, Hobbes even goes so far as to argue that "*true* and *false* are attributes of speech, not things."[359] Thus when Hobbes turns to the topic of print technology and book learning, he voices a criticism, similar to that of Plato in the *Phaedrus*, that asserts that books can be just as full of errors as truths, and because books can never alter what they say, because they cannot speak in the true sense, these errors are simply repeated and multiplied *ad infinitum* with every reading, thereby leaving the reader in a veritable maze of

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[356] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 16 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 1].
[357] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 16 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 3].
[358] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 18 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 9].
[359] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 18 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 11].

confused and uncertain data. "Form whence it happens that they which trust to books," writes Hobbes,

> do as they that cast up many little sums into a greater, without considering whether those little sums were rightly cast up or not; and at last finding the error visible, and not mistrusting their first grounds, known not which way to clear themselves, but spend time fluttering over their books, as birds that entering by the chimney, and finding themselves enclosed in a chamber, flutter at the false light of a glass window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in.[360]

Thus while Hobbes' preference for speech over writing is generally accounted for as a general conservatism with respect to a new media form, I argue that it is also possible to account for Hobbes distain for print technology by reference to his political philosophy more directly: namely, he does not speak well of print because mutual communication as a means of political discourse was redundant under the absolutist conditions he espoused. In other words, Hobbes finds no inherent problem of politics arising from the atomized nature of a market society because political power is situated squarely at the top, and thus he has no cause to ponder how one might render the private subjects of market capitalism political without cancelling out the radical individualism that a market society demands. Therefore when Hobbes turns to the

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[360] Hobbes, *Leviathan,* 19 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 13]. Before disabusing Hobbes entirely for his criticism of the printed word, there is a sense in which Hobbes' preference for speech over writing serves a political function after all, if only implicitly: specifically, his criticism of book learning is partially a criticism of religious doctrine. For later in the chapter Hobbes argues that "the right definition of names lies the first use of speech, which is the acquisition of science; and in wrong or no definitions lies the first abuse, from which proceed all false and senseless tenets, which make those men that take their instruction from the authority of books, and not from their own meditation, to be as much below the condition of ignorant men as men endued with true science above it (Leviathan, 19 [Part 1, Chapter 4, Section 13].

subject of media analysis, to put it somewhat anachronistically, he is invariably more concerned about how isolated individuals represent things, through the medium of the spoken word, to themselves, rather than theorizing communication as a means of linking these otherwise disaggregated units together. "Hobbes acknowledges communication," writes John Guillory on this point, "but implicitly, by relegating the 'transfer' of ideas to a secondary purpose of speech, conceived primarily (and defensively) as rational discourse with oneself."[361] Thus while it is always possible to argue that Hobbes' distain for print technology is simply the product of a general technological conservatism – that Hobbes antedates the institutions of print culture described by Habermas and print, therefore, appears to Hobbes as an interesting invention but not of real political, philosophical or epistemological consequence – this criticism misses the way in which the political organization of the Hobbesian commonwealth simply does not require a public sphere on the eighteenth-century model, and therefore Hobbes invariably produces a media analysis in the *Leviathan* that not only reinforces individual privatism, but understands this privatism as not demanding any ancillary political mechanism. In other words, print technology is for Hobbes a solution without a problem.

It is for precisely the same, if opposing, reason, however, that print technology plays such a contrastingly important role in the late eighteenth-century political philosophy of Immanuel Kant. As already described above, both Hobbes and Kant share a similar conception of human nature as to some degree inherently egoistic and selfish. Yet where this anthropological premise leads Hobbes to argue that citizens of

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[361] John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 36, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 330-331.

the commonwealth must abdicate their political rights to the sovereign entirely, Kant's politics is more republican in character: while Kant argues that the antagonism and resistances characteristic of the state of nature must be maintained in political society if we are to "overcome [our] tendency to laziness," he also argues that humans have an inclination to live in a more cooperative setting so that we can "develop [our] natural capacities."[362] Thus far from simply submitting our political rights to the authority of a self-perpetuating absolutist, republican politics in Kantian form is virtually defined by a paradox or contradiction of how to politicize private subjects, or how to render private subjects public, in a sense similar to the Greek model, without depriving them of their more determinate privation. As Kant puts it, in contradistinction to the unimaginative absolutism of Hobbes, "the greatest problem for the human species, the solution to which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally."[363] Thus unlike the more simple Hobbesian scenario, in which the privatism of a market society is maintained through the sheer political force of a sovereign who is not compelled to act justly whatsoever, Kantian political philosophy is animated by the more complex problem of rendering private citizens public, without actually doing so.

That Kant is committed to a republican form of government that maintains the privatism necessary for a market society is uncontroversial. In his essay "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," for instance, Kant argues that a republican constitution is the "purest" because it "springs from the pure [or *transcendental*]

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[362] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 44.
[363] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 45.

concept of right"[364] and, accordingly, offers the best opportunity for developing a

stable and perpetually peaceful political society. Kant's ideal republic is therefore

necessarily *representative* in character, since a representative form of government is

the only form of government that maintains the privatism of a market society without

concentrating political power in an absolute sovereign. "*Republicanism*," as Kant puts

it, "is that political principle whereby the executive power (the government) is

separated from the legislative power. Despotism prevails in a state if the laws are

made and arbitrarily executed by one and the same power, and it reflects the will of

the people only insofar as the ruler treats the will of the people as his own private

will."[365] Thus while Kant is clearly here opposed to the absolutism characteristic of the

Hobbesian commonwealth because it is not democratic enough – it mistakes the will

of the sovereign for the will of the people – Kant is just as critical of an expansive and

direct form of democracy because it is, to put it somewhat tautologically, too

democratic. "*Democracy*," writes Kant, "is necessarily *despotism*, because it

establishes an executive power through which all the citizens may make decisions

about (and indeed against) the single individual without his consent, so that decisions

are made by all the people and yet not by all the people; and this means that the

general will is in contradiction with itself, and thus also with freedom."[366]

Kant's criticism of democratic government underscores the degree to which the

privatized individual – or rather a multitude of privatized individuals – is the

privileged political unit of Kant's political thought in general. If autocracy is

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[364] Immanuel Kant. "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch." *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 100.
[365] Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," 101.
[366] Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," 101.

problematic for Kant because it concentrates this multitude of individuals within a

single person, or single body of persons, democracy is equally problematic because it

"may make decisions about the single individual without his consent." It is clear, then,

that the problem of political society for Kant hinges on the degree to which the private

individual can be partially politicized without negating the prior condition of privation

which, in Kant's terms, is fundamentally equated with freedom itself. This view of

political society as comprised of isolated private individuals is further reinforced in his

essay, "The Metaphysics of Morals," in which Kant describes the function of politics

in his ideal republic as essentially involving "a relationship between a universal

sovereign" – which, as Kant describes it, is "if considered in the light of laws of

freedom, can be none other than the united people itself – and "the scattered mass of

the people as subjects."[367] For Kant, then, the fundamental basis of a republican and

free society is through the constitution of society as a mass of scattered, isolated and

privatized citizens compatible with the imperatives of eighteenth-century market

capitalism. If the subjects of Kant's republic are to be politicized, it will not be at the

expense of the market society: only once the ontological demands of the market

system are guaranteed can a political order be built.

It is in this pragmatic sense, then, that print technology and the institutions of

print culture take on an explicitly political function in Kant's political philosophy. For

if Hobbes could denigrate print technology because his commonwealth had no

political need for a mechanism of connecting private citizens to one another within a

public or civil sphere, print technology is reciprocally championed, implicitly and

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[367] Immanuel Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals." *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140.

explicitly, throughout Kant's political writings because it solves the political problem

inherent in republicanism, from Kant's perspective. One of the more notable instances

of Kant's celebration of the political virtue of print for linking together private citizens

comes from his essay "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it

does not Apply in Practice," in which Kant directly critiques Hobbes' conception of

sovereign power through a discussion of the proper function of political dissent or

resistance. After initially defining his conception of political freedom in explicitly and

stereotypically *negative* terms – in which he argues that all freedom, as being based in

the notion of formal equality or equality under the law, "consist solely in the

restriction of the freedom of others" and is "perfectly consistent with the utmost

inequality of the mass in the degree of its possessions, whether these take the form of

physical or mental superiority over others, or of fortuitous external property"[368] – Kant

moves on to a direct criticism of the way in which the Hobbesian sovereign violates

the basis of this liberal conception of freedom by exerting power over the private

citizen in terms of the latter's capacity to freely *think*, or *philosophize*. "Everyone has

inalienable rights," argues Kant, "which he cannot give up even if he wishes to, and

about which he is entitled to make his own judgments." Thus, for Kant, a citizen is

only truly free if he is "entitled to make public his opinion on whatever of the ruler's

measures seem to him to constitute an injustice against the commonwealth."[369] It is on

this point, as Kant further remarks, "Hobbes is of the opposite opinion." "According to

[Hobbes]," writes Kant, "the head of state has no contractual obligations toward the

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[368] Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply
in Practice." *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2010), 75.
[369] Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in
Practice," 84.

people," and hence the Hobbesian sovereign can "do no injustice to a citizen"; and for Kant, a sovereign who is unaccountable to notions of justice is "quite terrifying."[370] It is with respect to his criticism of Hobbesian absolutism that Kant argues that it is only by virtue of print technology and the institutions of a reading public that Hobbesian privatism can be maintained without concentrating power in the hands of a self-perpetuating and structurally unjust sovereign:

> Thus *freedom of the pen* is the only safeguard of the rights of the people, although it must not transcend the bounds of respect and devotion toward the existing constitution, which should itself create a liberal attitude of mind among the subjects. To try to deny the citizen this freedom does not only mean, as Hobbes maintains, that the subject can claim no rights against the supreme ruler … For his will issues commands to his subjects (as citizens) only in so far as he represents the general will of the people. But to encourage the head of state to fear that independent and public thought might cause political unrest is tantamount to making him distrust his own power and feel hatred towards his people.[371]

For Kant, then, the political solution, or the means by which the private citizens of a bourgeois-capitalist republic can be adequately politicized is through the mechanism or institution of a reading public and, by extension, the medium of print. For only the *freedom of the pen*, as opposed to the more direct and pernicious freedoms that have a tendency to lead to rebellion or even revolution, has the capacity to both maintain the

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[370] Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice," 84.
[371] Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice," 85.

privatism of the individual while permitting a degree of citizen politicization

commensurate with the representative character of a liberal republic. For just as Kant's

political philosophy is based on an anthropological premise concerning humanity's

unsocial sociability, he also believes that it is "a natural vocation for man to

communicate with his fellows, especially in matters affecting mankind as a whole."[372]

Thus whereas Hobbes dismisses print technology as a little more than a quaint

gimmick, Kant reciprocally celebrates print technology and its communicative

function as not only politically indispensible, but even as a kind of technological

outgrowth of human nature itself.

If Kant argues in his essay on Theory and Practice that print technology – and

the associated institutions of a developed print culture – is the *only* mechanism by

which a privatized, liberal, bourgeois citizenry can exert political influence without

undercutting the negative freedom from which freedom in general is for Kant defined,

then Kant's remarks in his famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" puts the matter

even more strongly. As Kant famously argued in this essay, Europe in the last decade

of the eighteenth century was not an *enlightened* age, but it was for Kant an age of

enlightenment;[373] in other words, while the seeds of enlightenment had been sown,

there still existed many barriers preventing the public from reaching a state of general

enlightenment: "the officer says: Don't argue, get on parade! the tax-official: Don't

argue, pay! The clergyman: Don't argue, believe!"[374] As Kant thus argues, restrictions

on one's freedom abound, and it is therefore understandable why a state of general

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[372] Kant, "On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice," 85-86.

[373] Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 58.

[374] Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" 55.

enlightenment is so difficult to achieve, given the hierarchical institutions that

dominate virtually every sector of European society in this time. Yet even despite the

existence of all of these Foucauldian-disciplinary subjects commanding the public and

preventing one's escape from self-incurred tutelage, Kant argues that a general

condition of enlightenment is still possible so long as the one, essential freedom is

guaranteed:

> The *public* use of man's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring
>
> about enlightenment among men; the *private* use of reason may quite often be
>
> very narrowly restricted, however, without undue hindrance to the progress of
>
> enlightenment. But by the public of one's own reason I mean that use which
>
> anyone may make of it *as a man of learning* addressing the entire *reading*
>
> *public*. What I term the private use of reason is that which a person may make
>
> of it in a particular civil post or office with which he is entrusted … It is, of
>
> course, impermissible to argue in such case [i.e., private reason]; obedience is
>
> imperative. But in so far as this or that individual who acts as part of the
>
> machine also considers himself as a member of a complete commonwealth or
>
> even of a cosmopolitan society, and thence as a man of learning who may
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> *through his writings* address a public in the truest sense of the word, he may
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> indeed argue without harming the affairs in which he is employed.[375]

This famous passage not only demonstrates how essential Kant considered print

technology, its associated institutions and print culture more generally, in terms of its

ability to serve as the infrastructural basis for the progression of enlightenment, but it

also demonstrates the profoundly ideological role that print technology played in

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[375] Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" 55, 56.

legitimizing and maintaining the political ontology of private and possessive individualism necessary for capitalist accumulation. I have argued thus far that print technology, in the context of Kant's political philosophy, is responsible for creating a highly unique mode of politics that depends on the private character of political agents; where the Hobbesian commonwealth, in contrast, maintains political control over its scattered masses of private individuals through the brute force of the sovereign, Kant effectively substitutes print technology for the Leviathan in his political thought: in other words, what the Leviathan is to the Hobbesian Commonwealth, the reading public is to the Kantian Republic. And as this famous passage from "What is Enlightenment?" so effectively demonstrates, print technology, in Kantian political theory, ends up serving an absolutely indispensible ideological function: it enables Kant to assert, in a quite remarkable feat of logic, that the only way one can truly act in a *public* and hence *political* way is by maintaining one's existence as a private and isolated individual. In other words, print technology does not merely function, for Kant at least, as an indispensible mechanism for not only endowing capitalist society with a modicum of political agency, but as a mode of agency that actually reinforces the underlying political privation necessary for capitalist accumulation itself.

In conclusion, I should stress that the intent behind this criticism of Kantian political philosophy is not to argue that the freedom to think or publish in general is in any way an unimportant or inconsequential freedom. However, by defining it as the highest freedom of the modern subject, as Kant does, print technology ultimately reinforces the specific kind of political ontology that espouses a mode of *negative*

freedom that ultimately shields the market society from substantive critique and transformation. Yet it is precisely this intimate connection between print technology and political individualism that, I argue, should constitute a source of optimism for challenging the hegemony of market society and capitalist accumulation in the post-industrial era, particularly as the rise of new digital information and communication technologies, and the decline of print, begins to erode the hegemony of possessive individualism by re-orienting the privative nature of the print-based reading public and undermining the authorial or possessive nature of post-industrial forms of property. In the brief conclusion to this dissertation, I thus link the above discussion of print capitalism and possessive individualism with some of the defining features of the post-industrial economy and society, and suggest why the post-industrial era can be theorized as offering an important historical moment to break with the possessive and isolating ontology of the past in favour of a fundamentally new conception of what it means to act politically in a post-industrial age.

Conclusion: Beyond Negative Freedom

The original impetus for this project, as I described in the Introduction, grew out of the political optimism I encountered in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's account of the post-industrial society and its capacity for altering the capitalist mode of production from within. What sustained my interest in this this project over the past two years, however, has been the conceptual contradiction inhering in their work, one in which technological media are theorized as not mediating society politically, which, I argue, prevents a cogent theoretical account of how new information and communications technologies are altering the contemporary political landscape. Yet the problem of media without mediation in Hardt and Negri should not be understood as an isolated case, but rather one of the more acute examples of a more chronic difficultly involved in theorizing technological media in political terms. According to W.J.T Mitchell, for instance, the very media concept, as it is presently functions, exhibits a seemingly inherent ambiguity that renders it very difficult to integrate the concept within other academic disciplines or constitute its own systematic discipline. There is a "fundamental paradox built into the concept of media as such" writes Mitchell, that "arises when we try to determine the boundaries of the medium":

> Defined narrowly, confined to the space or figure of mediation, we are
> returned to the reified picture of materials, tools, supports, and so forth.
> Defined more broadly, as a social practice, the medium of writing clearly
> includes the writer and the reader, the medium of painting includes the
> painter and beholder – and perhaps the gallery, the collector, and the

museum as well. If media are middles, they are ever elastic middles that

expand to include what look at first like their outer boundaries. The

medium does not lie *between* the sender and receiver; it includes and

constitutes them … [This] vagueness built into the concept of media is one

of the main stumbling blocks in the way of a systematic discipline of

"media studies."[376]

John Guillory has documented a similar difficulty when it comes to integrating

the media concept into disciplines such as cultural theory, literary theory, political

philosophy, sociology, etc. According to Guillory, the problem these disciplines

have experienced when it comes to absorbing the media concept is a function of

the way the concept has developed sporadically and unevenly across a variety of

different intellectual fields and pursuits. While the media concept originally

entered the canon of Western intellectualism via Aristotle's description of artistic

mimesis,[377] which describes the processes whereby different physical materials

and artistic forms are used to reproduced natural objects, the utility of the media

concept shifted radically in the seventeenth century when European

Enlightenment thinkers urgently sought to discover a means of both representing

and communicating the contents of thought or cognition with as little bias or

transmission error as possible. This new concept of media (and mediation), now

denoting an idealistic and neutral vehicle for felicitously facilitating

communication, is manifest in the philosophies of Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Mill,

the linguistics of Pierce and Saussure, and the mathematical-information theories

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[376] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 204-205.
[377] See Aristotle, *Poetics* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), 7 (section 3).

of Shannon and von Neumann. And in yet a third genealogical offshoot, the media

concept gained further theoretical purchase as a consequence of the technological

innovations of the nineteenth and twentieth century – telegraph, phonograph,

photograph, radio, telephone, film, television, Internet, etc., – and the various

institutions associated with these new mechanically reproductive technologies. In

this permutation, the media concept increasingly lost its plural significance and

was rather rendered as simply "the media," which denotes both a technological

regime for cultural dissemination and what Edmund Burke referred to as the

"fourth estate."[378] Given the diverse origins and uses of the media concept, it is

hardly surprising that, for Guillory, a "disciplinary division between media and

communication studies and, on the one hand, and the cultural disciplines, on the

other, has had the unfortunate effect of inhibiting the development of a general

sociology of culture on the basis of communication and the correlative processes

of mediation."[379]

And if the ambiguous and multivalent character of the media concept has

posed definite challenges at a theoretical and conceptual level, similar difficulties

have likewise been encountered at a more empirical plane, in which conversation

is concerned with the concrete effects of media technologies in terms of political

organization or struggle. On the one hand, there is no shortage of academic

commentary that speaks to the remarkable potential of new digital information

and communication technologies for advancing the causes of global democracy

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[378] The term "fourth estate" is merely attributed to Burke, specifically a speech Burke made to the British parliament in 1787, by Thomas Carlyle. See Thomas Carlyle, "The Fourth Estate." *The French Revolution* (London: Griffith Farrane, 2009).
[379] John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Winter 2010),

(see Chapter Two, section one). In his recent *Networks of Outrage and Hope*

(2012), for instance, Manuel Castells argues that the unprecedented freedom of

the Internet has been instrumental in facilitating democratic struggles over the

past decade, from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement in the United States.

Stressing the *spontaneity* of these recent struggles, Castell seems to almost

suggest that Internet technologies are rendering political organization itself

increasingly unnecessary or redundant. "Networked social movements first spread

in the Arab world," observes Castells, while "other movements arose against the

mishandled management of the economic crisis in Europe":

> In Israel, a spontaneous movement with multiple demands became the
> largest grassroots mobilization in Israeli history, obtaining the satisfaction
> of many requests. [And] in the United States, the Occupy Wall Street
> movement, as spontaneous as all the others, and as networked in
> cyberspace and urban space as all the others, became the event of the year,
> and affected most of the country, so much so that *Time* magazine name
> 'The Protester' the person of the year. And the motto of the 99 percent,
> whose well-being had been sacrificed to the interests of the 1 percent, who
> control 23 percent of the country's wealth, became mainstream topic in
> American political life.[380]

The stress Castells places on the spontaneous nature of these revolts thus

underscores, in his view, the crucial function that new media technologies are

playing in contemporary political struggle. By offering a platform in which

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[380] Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 3,

political agency can be immediately and directly articulated, Castells, like Hardt

and Negri, suggests that Internet technologies are permitting an increasingly

immediate mode of political discourse and action that bypasses the traditional

representational structure of the liberal-democratic state in order to engage with

systems of power directly.

Yet if it is possible to argue, from this perspective, that Internet

technologies have acted as a positive force for expanding democracy and

facilitating popular political struggle, an equally cogent argument asserts that

these same Internet technologies merely offer the illusion of democratic agency

while facilitating an ever more intensive commodification of social life. Jodi

Dean, for instance, has convincingly argued that new information and

communications technologies not only functions as a *substitute* for politics,

insofar as one is able to perceive oneself as an active political agent simply by

linking and clicking online, but that the technology itself functions as a kind of

collective neurosis, whereby "communication functions fetishistically as the

disavowal of a more fundamental political disempowerment or castration."[381] For

Dean, the fragmentation of left politics into fractional identity groups and the

decline of the welfare-state vis-à-vis the progressive neoliberalization of the

economy – much of which took place under the watch of ostensibly left-leaning

governments (Clinton and Blair) – has created an environment in which new

information and communications technologies are increasingly deployed as a

mechanism that permits the left to continue to act politically without substantively

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[381] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 33.

addressing the traumatic political failures that culminated in the spread and
entrenchment of economic neoliberalization in the 1990s, and the concomitant
rollback of many of the political achievements of the 1960s and even the 1930s:

> The splintering and collapse of the left constitutes a political trauma.
> Technology fetishism responds to this trauma, acknowledging and denying
> it at the same time. For many, new media lets them feel as if they are
> making a contribution, lets them deny the larger lack of left solidarity even
> as their very individualized and solitary linking and clicking attests to the
> new political conditions ... The technological fetish covers over and
> sustains a lack on the part of the subject. It protects the fantasy of an
> active, engaged subject by acting in the subject's stead. The technological
> fetish "is political" for us, enabling us to go about the rest of our lives
> relieved of the guilt that we might not be doing our part and secure in the
> belief that we are, after all, informed, engaged citizens. The paradox of the
> technological fetish is that the technology acting in our stead actually
> enables us to remain politically passive. We don't have to assume political
> responsibility because, again, the technology is doing it for us."[382]

If new media technologies are functioning as fetishistic substitute for a more
substantive notion of political resistance in Dean's view, Jonathan Crary comes at
the problem of media intensification from a different yet equally worrisome
direction: specifically, he argues that digital media technologies have facilitated
such penetration of capital into all aspects of our lives that even the bio-physical
need for sleep can no longer act as an effective barrier to the non-stop circulation

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[382] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 35-36,

of capital. "The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep," writes Crary,

"freed from a morass of simulated needs, subsists as one of the great human

affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism,"[383] and yet the

saturation of social life with Internet connectedness and peer-to-peer

communication has seen this last bastion of resistance to continuous capital

accumulation finally weaken. Far from facilitating the Socratic "permanent

daylight of reason,"[384] in which the end of darkness frees humanity from error and

misconception, the permanent glow of electronic screens and the concomitant

decline of sleep has rather facilitated the near total commodification of social life

as our daily rhythms are increasingly adapted to the "24/7 operations of

information processing networks, and the unending transmission of light through

fiber-optic circuitry."[385]

At both theoretical-epistemological and empirical-political levels, the

media concept – and processes of mediation – is played out upon an unusually

open field in which confused, opposing and even outright contradictory assertions

about the effects of media technologies freely comingle. Confronted with this

unseemly tangle of confused positions and arguments at cross-purposes, the work

of this dissertation has been an attempt to gradually whittle down the field of

media theory to a manageable size and shape, such that a more systematic

conception of the contemporary politics of media can be theorized and articulated.

Upon identifying the problematic of ubiquitous technological media without

political mediation in Chapter Two, the principle aim of Chapters Three and Four

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[383] Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (New York: Verso, 2013), 10.
[384] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), 33.
[385] Jonathan Crary, *24/7*, 24.

have been to re-construct of the relationship between media theory and political philosophy from the ground up, so to speak, in order to gain a new perspective on the relationship between media technologies and political mediation. After an analysis of Plato's *Republic* that both identified the genealogical link between media theory and political philosophy and documented the profound epistemological impact that a shift in media technology can in theory facilitate, Chapter Four sought to reduce the general problematic from the larger dimension of epistemology by focusing on the more narrow framework of political philosophy, this time by articulating the relationship between print technology and political individualism by theorizing the structural importance of print technology in Kantian political philosophy. The conclusion reached at the end of the fourth chapter was that print technology or print culture, rather than simply acting as a vehicle for popular democratic agency and governmental accountability, as in Habermas' influential account, can also be theorized as an important mechanism for reproducing the structures and ideology of capitalist society by reinforcing a mode of political ontology and subjectivity in which the political actor, and even human subject, is understood as naturally individualized and privatized.

Thus the general – and at this point still tentative – conclusion with which I would like to both close this dissertation and proffer in terms of avenues for future research, is that the decline of print technology amidst the rise of digital information and communication technologies has the potential, I argue, to substantively erode the hegemony of possessive and privative individualism and

its characteristic "negative freedom"[386] within contemporary Western political

culture. For if there is an underlying thread that runs throughout this dissertation,

and throughout the last two chapters in particular, it is that most the profound

political impacts of a new media technology often has little to do with the actual

or empirical uses to which a media technology is put, particularly in its formative

years. As Eisenstein continually stresses in her account of print culture, print

technology facilitated an entrenchment and codification of traditional systems of

power and thought long before it began to act as a vehicle for subversion and

revolutionary change. For while it is surely not unimportant or inconsequential

that new information and communications technologies have facilitated a more

intensive saturation of the social field by the machinations of capital, there is good

reason to argue, based on the historical evidence, that this may not be the most

profound political impact that these technologies will yield the long run. And

while it hardly novel in-and-of-itself to observe that political philosophers like

Hobbes, Locke or Kant are advocates of privative individualism and its associated

negative conception of freedom, what have I sought to add – or begin to add – to

the scholarship on liberal political philosophy is that print technology might have

played an influential role in reinforcing this notion of human freedom in a

negative valence. Specifically, I've argued that print technology is perhaps unique

in the history of media technology in terms of its individualizing tendencies: the

relatively atomistic character of a reading public (in comparison with other media

forms), the genesis of individual authorship and concomitant intellectual property

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[386] For description of "negative" freedom, and its distinctiveness from "positive" freedom, in Western political philosophy, see Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty." *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 131.

rights that were born from the age of print, and – though this is more speculative –

the McLuhan-phenomenological contention that the practice of reading is itself an

individualistic and solitary experience in a fashion quite unlike other media

technologies. All of these tendencies or associated characteristics, I argue, when

taken cumulatively, lend weight to the thesis that it is not merely coincidental that

the historically aberrant political notion that the individual somehow precedes the

social – an assumption that axiomatically structures the social contract theories of

Hobbes, Locke and Kant – arose within the context of a print culture.

For if it can be argued that print culture and political individualism are

indeed more than mere coincidental historical phenomenon, then it follows that

there is good reason to also argue that the technological conditions characteristic

of the post-industrial society constitute an environment that is no longer

supportive and hospitable of this otherwise strange political norm. As Hardt and

Negri, and many others, continually underscore throughout their work, the

characteristic immateriality of production under post-industrial or biopolitical

conditions is fast rendering many of the individualizing tendencies of print culture

and industrial capitalism anachronistic, and is substituting in its place a new

economico-political form or category referred to as the "commons."

> Private property in the form of steel beams, automobiles, and television
>
> sets obey the logic of scarcity: if you are using them, I cannot. Immaterial
>
> property such as brands, code, and music, in contrast, can be reproduced in
>
> an unlimited way. In fact, many such immaterial products only function to
>
> their full potential when they are shared in an open way. The usefulness to

you of an idea or an affect is not diminished by your sharing it with me.
On the contrary, it becomes useful only by being shared in common. This
is what it means to say that the common is becoming central in today's
capitalist economy.[387]

According to this view of the changing character of the post-industrial economy,
economic functionality is no longer based on the adaptation of the worker to the
apparatus of production, but rather the other way around. "When it comes to
cognitive labour," writes French sociologist Pierre Veltz, "it isn't the sum of the
work of individuals that counts but the quality and aptness of the web of
communications woven around the production system."[388] Thus whereas
industrial production – founded on Fordist-Taylorist principles of efficiency,
rationalization and specialization – actively strips workers of their everyday
cultural practices, competencies and habits in order to more smoothly integrate its
workforce into a highly rigid division of labour, the post-industrial economy
contrastingly necessitates a work force that is capable of constant innovation,
improvisation, co-operation and communication. Under post-industrial conditions,
then, cultural life is no longer segregated from economic development, but rather
the two are increasingly merged into a contiguous system of creative production.
And if the nature of economic reality under post-industrialism is ultimately based
on communication rather than individual segregation, and to this extent forms a
"commons," then it also follows that commodity production under post-industrial

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[387] Michael Hard, "Two Faces of the Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen." *Polygraph 22* (2011)
[388] Pierre Veltz, "La nouvelle révolution industrielle." *Revue de MAUSS,* no 18, (2001), 72.

conditions, which is increasingly immaterial and reproducible, likewise

undermines the regime of individual authorship and intellectual property that

arose under the conditions of print technology, such that the post-industrial

economy increasingly relies on *rent* rather than profit strictly speaking, as a means

of extracting and accumulating surplus-value, which is a signal or symptom of a

deep-seated crisis in the prior laws of capitalist accumulation.[389]

Of course, the mere fact of these economic transformations will not, in and

of themselves, produce a shift in the political character of post-industrial

capitalism. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, provides an apt example in the context of

Microsoft's domination of the market in computer software during the 1990s of

an instance in which the breakdown of profit and its replacement with rent did not

fundamentally erode property rights at all. "How did Bill Gates become the

richest man in America?," asks Žižek, "his wealth has nothing to do with

Microsoft producing good software at lower prices than its competitors, or

'exploiting' its workers more successfully":

> Microsoft [instead] imposed itself as an almost universal standard, practically
>
> monopolising the field, as one embodiment of what Marx called the 'general
>
> intellect,' by which he meant collective knowledge in all its forms, from
>
> science to practical knowhow. Gates effectively privatised part of the general
>
> intellect and became rich by appropriating the rent that followed. The
>
> possibility of the privatisation of the general intellect was something Marx
>
> never envisaged in his writings about capitalism (largely because he

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[389] For a wider discussion of this shift from profit to rent, see Daniel Bell, "Introduction." *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* ((New York: Basic Books, 1999).

overlooked its social dimension). Yet this is at the core of today's struggles over intellectual property: as the role of the general intellect – based on collective knowledge and social co-operation – increases in post-industrial capitalism, so wealth accumulates out of all proportion to the labour expended in its production. The result is not, as Marx seems to have expected, the self-dissolution of capitalism, but the gradual transformation of the profit generated by the exploitation of labour into rent appropriated through the privatisation of knowledge.[390]

While the contemporary post-industrial economy is presently rife with further examples in which rent has been successfully imposed by legal measures in instances in which immaterial commodity production has exceeded the normal bounds of profitability, what I am more interested in is the longer term effect of this increasingly central economic trend for reshaping the nature of political subjectivity at a deeper level. For while the communicative nature of production and the decline of profit may seem at one level like strictly economic matters, and rather technical ones at that, the very nature of economics is such that systems of production cannot properly function by technical or scientific means alone: they require an entire catalogue of complimentary cultural narratives in order to pass from a simple means of producing objects into a universal economic system, or a mode of production properly speaking. In this respect it was one of the great insights of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) that a general condition of scarcity associated with a nascent industrial economy – a condition that applies

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[390] Slavoj Žižek, "The Revolt of the Salaried Bourgeoisie." *London Review of Books*, vol. 34, no. 2 (January 2012), 9-10.

less and less to the post-industrial economy – exceeded the bounds of the economic domain and was amplified, as it were, into a more fundamental anthropological and ontological doctrine in the minds of the founders of modern economics. "What makes economics possible," argues Foucault, "is a perpetual and fundamental scarcity … and thus economics refers us to [an] order of somewhat ambiguous considerations which may be termed anthropological … *Homo oeconomicus* is not the human being who represents his own needs to himself, and the objects capable of satisfying them; he is the human being who spends, wears out, and wastes his life in evading the imminence of death."[391] For Foucault, economic categories like scarcity, if they are to be effective in constituting a system of production like modern capitalism, in which labour itself is the supreme commodity, cannot remained confined to the economic domain but must spill outside the economic and exert anthropological and even ontological significance. In other words, if modern economics is to ground itself in the concept of scarcity, it must create an anthropological or ontological category commensurate to its character – *homo oeconomicus* – such that a capitalist economy begets a capitalist society, wherein the defining nature of politics, capitalism's political *summa bonum*, becomes how government can most efficiently and effectively ensure that the supreme political subject, the consumer, is able to consume the most with the least given the always-already insufficient, and hence scarce, funds it can draw on to privately accumulate. Yet if modern economics, founded on the concept of scarcity and private property, universalized itself through the creation of *homo oeconomicus* and thereby expanded a localized

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[391] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 256-257.

capitalist *economy* into a capitalist *society*, then it is likewise possible – and I argue necessary – that the decline of scarcity and property within the post-industrial *economy* opens a new terrain upon which a different conception of the political subject, for a properly post-industrial *society*, can emerge, one which gains its political freedom not from incessant privation but by virtue of its inherent and productive social embeddedness within the post-industrial society. Of course the formulation of a new kind of political subject for the post-industrial society will require a greater understanding of the connection between print technology and political individualism if it is to be convincing, and thus gaining a broader and more precise understanding of the relationship between print culture and modern political individualism will be the next task I will undertake. By developing a more rigorous conception of the link between print technology and political individualism, particularly as manifest in the work of the some of most influential thinkers in modern political philosophy, I hope to lay the theoretical groundwork for a fundamentally different conception of political subjectivity, for a very different, a more humane, post-industrial future.

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