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The Commodification of Abstinence

Justin Kotzé

Introduction

In his introduction to Noam Chomsky's book *Profit Over People*, McChesney (1999:8) describes neoliberalism as "capitalism with the gloves off", a more selfish and predatory iteration that has become "the defining political economic paradigm of our time" (McChesney 1999:7; see also James 2008). Geared towards the sacralisation of wealth-creation the effects of this domination are profound and by no means benign. Indeed, the costs of neoliberalism are becoming increasingly visible; accelerated ecological degradation and habitat destruction (Smaligo 2014), climate migration and conflict (Dupuy 2013), and growing inequality as the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen (Winlow and Hall 2019). Moreover, alongside rising rates of mental ill-health (James 2008; Fisher 2009), a lack of meaningful employment and the solidification of harmful working conditions and practices (Lloyd 2018a), widespread poverty and homelessness have become endemic features of the 21st century (Taylor 2013). What is more, neoliberalism has injected into every facet of the social body a deep sense of aggressive competition and symbolic violence (Taylor 2013; Žižek 2009a) which not only reproduces a competitive egoistic individualism but serves to militate against any sense of collectivism or ethical obligation to each other (Whitehead 2018).

Any collectivist conception of morality or vestigial commitment to the social has now been thoroughly eroded by a neoliberal orthodoxy that favours moral relativism and encourages the privileging of "consumer tastes and desires as a form of 'freedom' and liberal self-expression" (Smith and Raymen 2018:67). Contemporary life is now well and truly organised around consumption (Bauman 2012), and it is hardly contentious to state that consumer culture is now both pervasive and invasive (Kotzé and Antonopoulos 2019). Perhaps so much so that many of us dare not risk sacrificing even the smallest facet of our consumer lifestyle to intervene in the world, to act now to ameliorate the suffering of others (Atkinson et al. 2017). There is quite simply, as Winlow et al. (2015:14) point out, "no significant popular desire for revolution, or even serious social democratic reform of the system's economic core".

This is emblematic of what Fisher (2009) calls capitalist realism, the negative ideology that contends not only that capitalism is the only game in town but that it is impossible to even imagine anything different. But have there not been a number of significant protests against

the system, particularly since the economic crash of 2008? Are there not a plethora of subversive acts happening every day that go against the grain of capitalism? Have you not seen the growth in the conscious consumption of sustainable and fairly sourced goods that hold a big stop sign up to capitalist exploitation? Yes, but our concern should not be with the presence of these gestures of ostensible resistance but rather with their *absence*. Indeed, this chapter aims to demonstrate how common acts of ‘resistance’ become commodified and assimilated into the circuitry of contemporary capitalism and therefore secure rather than threaten its existence. The chapter therefore makes a case for participating in a gesture of refusal to partake in micro-resistance and stresses the need for an enlightened catastrophism.

Welcome to the ‘Resistance’

As previously alluded to, there is little doubt that the neoliberal order “disadvantages and damages the mass of humanity” (Taylor 2013:22). Against this backdrop the liberal myth of perpetual incremental progress cannot be sustained (Kotzé 2019; Winlow and Hall 2019). Yet there is hope we are told, “eddies of resistance” remain to combat the torrent of capitalism’s excess; rest assured, “in a grotesquely unequal society, resistance is always present” (Young 2007:77). Perhaps the English riots of August 2011 demonstrate pricelessly this. Some initial reactions were certainly quick to imbue the disorder of those taking part with the flavour of oppositional politics and protest (Hayward and Smith 2017). However, as Treadwell et al. (2013) note, the rioters displayed no discernible political orientation and did not oppose the ruling ideology but were instead animated by it. This was not the action of individuals excluded from society’s value system but of those thoroughly incorporated into capitalism’s consumer culture. That is to say, “rather than seeking to challenge the established political orthodoxy, the rioters (in the main) illustrated a deep commitment to the ideology of consumer capitalism” (Hayward and Smith 2017:318). Indeed, the anger and frustration on display was not directed towards the system but rather towards themselves for their perceived failure to get ahead *within the system* (Winlow et al. 2015).

Taking place in the same year, the Occupy movement certainly looked and felt a bit more anti-capitalist than the riots. Yet whilst it can perhaps be argued that Occupy was “anti-capitalist *in practice*” (Smaligo 2014:115, original emphasis), this ostensible ‘crack’ in capitalist rule assumed more of an individualist spread of supposedly anti-capitalist practices intended to undermine the system. However, this was instrumental to its failure as it contributed

to its inability to establish a political dissensus (Hayward and Schuilenburg 2014). Indeed, the movement could not construct and popularise a discernible alternative to the present system and failed to engage and galvanise the support of an “individualised, consumerised and depoliticised public” (Winlow et al. 2015:155). Content, for the most part, to watch events unfold through their TV screens, those who Occupy failed to mobilise certainly wanted something different, something that would represent their interests. But it turns out that they also wanted that something different to fit into the existing political framework and not require more sacrifice than the ink used to potentially mark a ballot paper (Winlow et al. 2015).

Occupy undoubtedly opened up ‘cracks’ in the system, yet far from serving to combat capitalist realism as Smaligo (2014) suggests, such cracks help perpetuate the system. In fact, as Lloyd (2017:276) points out, “capitalism endures because it ‘allows’ resistance to take place”. Rather than being threatened by acts of resistance, capitalism has the uncanny ability “to incorporate every attack by integrating the attack into the system” (McGowan 2016:12). It does this by taking the seemingly revolutionary practice and transforming it into a marketable commodity. Occupy was no exception. Any quick internet search will reveal a litany of merchandise one can purchase to demonstrate their discontent, from t-shirts, coffee cups, badges and bumper stickers to comfy sweatpants that allow you to display your activism from home. Far from serving to inspire or mobilise the masses, such commodities are purchased precisely so that one need *not* get involved. The commodity’s slogans readily convey one’s anger, abrupt designs clearly convey one’s discontent, thus the commodity itself is *already acting* on one’s behalf. As we shall see, this *interpassivity* (Žižek 2006) is now a common feature of much of what passes for contemporary resistance, much of which has followed a more atomised and individualistic template (Hayward and Schuilenburg 2014).

This new template is perhaps one of the most enduring ‘products’ of the counterculture. For Heath and Potter (2006:69) “the idea of a counterculture is ultimately based on a mistake”. Far from constituting any revolutionary doctrine, countercultural ‘politics’ have been a major driving force propelling consumer capitalism forward. Indeed, there was no real tension between the ideological requirements of capitalism and the ideas of the counterculture (Heath and Potter 2006). Both endorse a commitment to competitive hyper-individualism, conspicuous consumption (Buccellato and Reid 2014), the aggressive display of consumer items, the cultivation of envy (Raymen and Smith 2016), social distinction, narcissistic hedonism, and instant gratification (Hall et al. 2008). Accordingly, countercultural movements fall very short of the mark in resisting anything, in fact it is more useful to think of them as *hyper-conforming* to the values and drives of contemporary consumer capitalism. Moreover,

not only are they by no means anti-capitalist, but they actually negate the potential for political change in two very significant ways. First, the strong emphasis placed upon self-expression and self-fulfilment, and the commensurate erosion of collective politics, ensure that agitated energies are channelled in depoliticised and safely commodified ways (Hayward and Schuilenburg 2014; Buccellato and Reid 2014). Second, the frenetic *false activity* provides the appearance of change so that nothing has to change (Žižek 2006), “look! The system is being held to account” (Winlow 2013:30), no need to make personal sacrifices beyond the costs of consuming commodified symbols of ‘resistance’.

What this ultimately equates to is the transformation of hedonism into a revolutionary doctrine (Heath and Potter 2006). Various forms of dramatic gestures are lauded as rebellious resistance that in reality constitute nothing more than pseudo-activity succeeding only in providing marketable entertainment for the rebels (Heath and Potter 2006). The literature is replete with a litany of examples of what passes for resistance these days. For instance, Hayward and Schuilenburg (2014:23) note how even the Ibiza club and drug scene has been regarded as resistance despite it obviously being “in rather short supply in these environments” (see also Ellis et al. 2018). Moreover, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) note how bodybuilding has been construed as resistance yet, as Kotzé and Antonopoulos (2019) have shown, it is more fruitful to view this as hyper-conformity. Various forms of deviant leisure have also been considered to be intrinsically transgressive and deeply political. Indeed, Kindynis (2017) notes how the practice of urban exploration is often thought of as an inherently transgressive and subversive act geared towards taking back one’s rights to the restricted city-space. Such ideas have already emerged as a dominant narrative throughout much of the research literature, however, Kindynis quite rightly contests this.

Contra claims to its revolutionary potential, Kindynis (2017:989) argues that “the subculture arguably mirrors the hedonism, egotism and competitive individualism of a late capitalist culture of narcissism”. Whilst the practice of urban exploration, and its various offshoots such as ‘rooftopping’, may transgress liberal-capitalism’s technical law they are hyper-conforming to its Symbolic Law (Hall and Winlow 2015). Its practitioners’ thrill-seeking, risk-taking, and egoistic competitiveness are precisely those attitudes and behaviours favoured by market capitalism (Kindynis 2017; see also Kotzé and Antonopoulos 2019). Not to mention the entrepreneurial ethic associated with various forms of urban exploration which have “unhesitatingly aligned themselves with a hegemonic culture of spectacular consumption” as they become increasingly commodified and mainstreamed (Kindynis 2017:992). Similarly, Raymen (2019a) notes that there is a popular tendency to view parkour as anti-capitalist

resistance as its practitioners reclaim their right to the city, re-appropriating the physical environment and performing a rich form of spatial politics by ‘resisting’ the hyper-regulated urban space of consumer capitalism. Taking an Ultra-Realist perspective, Raymen (2019a) provides an important corrective to this optimistic narrative. Like the urban explorers, there is no tension between their ideas, drives and desires and those that capitalism endeavours to cultivate; nor is there any “‘tension’ between rebellion and conformity in the commodification of parkour” (Raymen 2019a:57). In fact it is argued that parkour has not simply been co-opted by consumerist forces but was “pre-emptively shaped by consumer identities and logic”, a pure product of *precorporation* (ibid.:58). Operating through its thinly veiled guise of *interpassive resistance* parkour is entirely conformist to mainstream values (ibid.).

Evidently, ‘resistance’ is now seen everywhere and in everything, including the simplest forms of hedonistic indulgence. Certainly, there now exists a discernible lack of specificity and definitional consensus regarding the term (Hayward and Schuilenburg 2014). However, what is becoming increasingly clear is that contemporary forms of ‘resistance’ are more concerned with *feeling* good rather than *doing* good. This is a theme which I will explore further in a moment but suffice to say for now that it constitutes a broad cultural current, one which certainly carries a seductive message: ‘keep capitalism’s destructive tendencies in check by enjoying and expressing yourself’. Yet despite the light hue of ‘active’ resistance granted to the previous examples, they remain unequivocally hyper-conformist. Their frenetic false activity is effortlessly absorbed by capitalism as it entertains our gestures of discontent; completely unthreatened it assimilates and commodifies these gestures and offers them back to us as evidence that the system is being held to account. This ultimately negates genuine political opposition by simply providing the appearance of incremental and progressive change (Winlow 2013). Perhaps what is needed then is less ‘active’ and more ‘passive’ forms of resistance capable of subverting capitalism behind its back.

Redeemed Consumers and Interpassive Resistance

We now occupy an Anthropocene age in which humankind rather than nature causes most of the negative effects on the world. We have been the architects of many disasters from wars, environmental degradation and habitat destruction, enforced population migration to rapid deindustrialisation and the destruction of livelihoods (Hall and Winlow 2015). Criminological records show quite clearly that neoliberalism has played a leading role in precipitating such disasters. However, only more recently has our own anthropocentric complicity in actively

soliciting and reproducing the very sociosymbolic order that produces such harms been highlighted (Hall and Winlow 2015; Kotzé 2019). Put simply, we have long been complicit in perpetuating both the structural conditions and ideological tenets that cause severe harm to the wider social and environmental body. Indeed Raymen (2016) drives the point home well by noting that neoliberal consumer capitalism has, over the past four decades, influenced and nurtured the development of self-interested, individualistic and potentially harmful subjectivities. Any sense of collectivism and social solidarity has been crushed under the weight of free-market ideology and in its place the culture of competitive individualism has taken front-and-centre stage of the new social order (Raymen 2016). There is now a palpable preoccupation with the self and one's quest for personal freedom and pleasure taken "right to the edge of morality's toxic core" (Hall et al. 2008:106).

But who's to say what is 'moral', 'toxic' or 'harmful'? This is precisely the questioning that liberal-postmodern subjects feel justified in posing as they guard against any suspected attempt to curtail their pursuit of self-interest (Raymen 2019b). Yet our enamoured pursuit of this freedom to reject any adjudicating authority and define our own conception of what is good has been costly. We have been untethered from any sense of symbolic efficiency as we refuse to subscribe to the collective fib of the big Other, no longer adhering to the communal network of social institutions, customs and laws into which we were once socialised (Myers 2003; Kotzé 2019). Instead, we have subscribed to the doctrine of emotivism. For MacIntyre (2011:13, original emphasis) this philosophical theory dismisses all evaluative and moral judgments as "*nothing* but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling". Evaluative utterances then seemingly have no appeal to impersonal criteria, for there apparently are none, but are simply the expression of one's own attitudes and feelings set against those of others. Conceptions of morality and the good are rendered hopelessly relativistic as emotivism becomes more deeply embodied in our culture (MacIntyre 2011). Accordingly, in the absence of any shared conception of the good, there are "only manipulatively won battles of private interests and preferences" (Raymen 2019b:141).

Against this backdrop, active citizenship takes the form of a narcissistic pursuit for self-distinction and personal gratification, ultimately turning protest into an individualised project to be enacted within the orbit of obedient rule-following (Hall et al. 2008; Raymen 2019b). 'Everyday resistance', intended to mitigate the excesses of, and fallout caused by, appropriating classes (Hollander and Einwohner 2004), descends into various forms of 'consumer redemption' (Žižek 2009b). One endeavours to mitigate the damage done to the environment and local communities by buying Rainforest Alliance Certified™ chocolate; various noble

causes can be aided by simply buying a Starbucks® coffee (Žižek 2009b); cancer can be beaten sooner by buying a Tesco bag emblazoned with a rallying message that “this is beating cancer”; developing countries can be helped to ‘develop a little quicker’ by our engagement in volunteer tourism; one can support those who suffer with mental ill-health by sharing or re-posting supportive messages on Facebook. Unfortunately, however, these acts are not combating capitalism’s deluge of destruction or resisting its exploitative tendencies, nor is it subverting capitalism behind its back. Quite the opposite in fact, they feed directly into capitalism’s self-critique which provides only the appearance of change precisely so the existing order continues *unchanged* (Winlow 2013).

Effortlessly converting potential attacks into opportunities for further commodification and thus expansion, late-capitalism has imbued consumption with a narrative of repair and conservation so that redemption is infused within the very act of consumption itself (Igoe 2013). So, one feels they are doing their part by buying a cancer-busting Tesco bag despite the fact that we remain complicit in producing the human-made carcinogens that cause cancer (Chernomas and Hudson 2007). We feel, as a recent Tesco advert averred, like we are ‘doing our bit’ to help farmers and protect the rainforest by simply buying and eating suitably branded chocolate. Yet deforestation is intimately connected to the fossil-fuelled consumer culture so extolled in the global North (Igoe 2013). Similarly, one feels vindicated from the co-responsibility for the situation of the ‘underdeveloped’ by engaging in various forms of charity (Žižek 2009a), and increasingly ‘volunteer tourism’ (Mostafanezhad 2014). In this particular “empathetic gesture of commoditized concern” (ibid. 2014:112) volunteers pay to participate in development or conservationist projects. However, demanding that friends “take my photo!” as one picks up the nearest child so as to capture an image that can almost immediately be made the next Facebook profile picture not only aestheticizes deprivation but reinforces the individuation of political action and depoliticises global economic inequality (Mostafanezhad 2014:111). Finally, despite rising levels of mental-ill health being a direct consequence of the neoliberal order that we remain complicit in perpetuating (Taylor 2013; James 2008), many of us feel pardoned by the simple act of sharing or reposting supportive messages on Facebook. This is not unlike the good conscience gained by the committed clicktivist who, incidentally, also derives a sense of pleasure from signing online petitions (Kuldova 2018).

This is commodified *interpassive resistance par excellence*, the outsourcing of one’s ‘politics’ to commodified signifiers that grant the individual symbolic capital whilst simultaneously reinforcing the capitalist system and maintaining the status quo (Raymen 2019a). The chocolate, the coffee, the bag, the Facebook pictures and messages act on our

behalf, performing our anti-capitalism for us so that we can continue to consume with impunity (Fisher 2009). As Winlow (2013:30) points out, “interpassivity encourages us to rest easy, safe in the knowledge that a critique of the present is being waged daily on our behalf”. But hang on a second, surely we are not ideological dupes. We are, as Lloyd (2017:275-276) explains “too knowing to be duped by ideology”. Certainly, we know that participating in micro-rebellions or individualised acts of consumer redemption will not shake the foundations of the capitalist system. But here is the rub, we continue to act *as if* we did not know this, engaging in what Žižek (2008:12) calls “fetishistic disavowal” – I know very well that this is the case but cannot bring myself to really believe and therefore act as if I do not know. By maintaining a cynical distance individuals feel content that, at least at the level of knowledge, they have not been conned by the system whilst continuing to participate in the capitalist rituals of everyday life (Kotzé 2019). However, these individuals remain pure subjects of ideology for as Žižek (2008) reminds us, ideology works at the point of *doing* rather than *knowing*. Therefore, whilst we may believe that we know about capitalism’s exploitative and oppressive practices we continue to participate, acting *as if* we do not know (Lloyd 2017).

Taylor (2013:102) argues that this prevailing form of cynicism “is the perverted psychological resistance of the modern individual”, one who refuses to believe in the efficacy of government or their politics but who refuses to do anything about it. Within this contemporary neoliberal condition, expressions of discontent remain little more than muted grumblings expressed harmlessly through bad jokes, ‘edgy’ t-shirt logos, and Facebook posts, all of which capitalism effortlessly absorbs. It is not that we have given up belief in fighting the system, but in acknowledging its difficulty we have deferred our agency and delegated our belief to various commodities that appear as the true believer in our stead (Kuldova 2018). Moreover, individuals derive a sense of pleasure from the act of interpassivity and the fetishistic disavowal that sustains it for critique is served here on a plate of commodified enjoyment (ibid.). Indeed, despite knowing that the interpassive object fails to ‘act appropriately’, and that such objects are themselves often produced in harmful and exploitative conditions, we consume and enjoy them nonetheless (ibid.). To help make a bit more sense of this it is instructive here to briefly explore the contemporary reorientation of the super-ego. Rather than feeling guilty for desiring too much and over-indulging the super-ego now demands that we enjoy, making us “feel guilty if we miss a single opportunity to indulge ourselves” (Winlow and Hall 2018:99).

Accordingly we are, at a deep psycho-social level, far more committed to *feeling* good than *doing* good. Set against the backdrop of emotivism discussed previously and the

generalised lack of agreement as to what constitutes both human and social good – with such matters left to the private discretion of the sovereign individual – (MacIntyre 2011; Raymen 2019b), interpassive gestures of commodified ‘resistance’ are not only enough to make us feel good (Žižek 2011), but are mobilised *precisely because* they make us feel so. Indeed, Grant and Sonnentag (2010) suggest that doing good buffers against feeling bad. More specifically, they argue that perceived prosocial impact buffers against negative self-evaluations and thus emotional exhaustion. Engaging in actions perceived as being beneficial to others not only helps alleviate the psychologically aversive state of affective fatigue, a condition quite common in the neoliberal era (Taylor 2013), but engenders feelings of joy and happiness (Grant and Sonnentag 2010). Thus despite their inefficiency, interpassive and reactive gestures of resistance are pursued *as* sources of pleasure and enjoyed just the same as any consumer product. Again, even in more ‘passive’ forms of ‘resistance’ we see commodified hedonism transformed into a revolutionary doctrine (Heath and Potter 2006).

Since capitalism is so well-versed in co-optation and precorporation resulting in what appears to be the complete commodification of resistance, whilst at the same time encouraging the ‘rebels’ to feel good about “‘saving the world’ through consumption” (Mostafanezhad 2014:113), perhaps the answer to effective resistance lies in strategies of ascetic withdrawal (Barber 2007).

The Commodification of Abstinence

There is undoubtedly a deep underlying violence that underpins consumer culture (Smith and Raymen 2018). For instance, consider Morrison’s (2014) analysis of *Unwatchable: Is your phone rape free?*, a viral video made on behalf of the Save the Congo NGO. Released in 2011 the video depicts scenes of systematic mass raping and extreme brutality driven by the trade in conflict minerals used in the production of mobile phones amongst other high-tech electrical devices. However, rather than capturing the actual story of Congolese victims, the film is framed in England and portrays the destruction of a white middle-class family. The reason for this is quite simple Morrison (2014:193) contends, “we are ‘Africa’d out’”. Such atrocities have, he argues, become overdetermined (see also Žižek 2009a). Accordingly, by locating the film in England the makers of the video attempted to “shock Western consumers into ethical accountability in the trade in conflict minerals and, ... the mass rapes and extreme brutality it fuels” (Morrison 2014:192).

Since our incessant consumption of various iterations of mobile phones appears to be the driver for much of the harm these Congolese victims experience should this not prompt an ascetic withdrawal, an abstinence from such commodities (Jameson 2010)? Perhaps by going ‘mobile free’ for a month this gesture of abstinence could be used to protest against the use of conflict minerals. By resisting the commodified object forged in fields of violence we could demand ethical accountability and change. One could be forgiven for thinking that such a period of protest abstinence would be conducive to mobilising a concerted revolutionary force driven towards a collective duty to the other. However, as Barber (2007) reminds us, strategies of ascetic withdrawal are not very effective. This is because periods of commodity abstinence simply open up the space for different kinds of desire to emerge and be temporarily satiated by additional commodities that serve as intermittent replacements for the abstained object (Dean and Fisher 2014). Indeed, such acts of withdrawal energise the capitalist system rather than inhibit its productivity, it capitalises upon such refusals actualising the potential value by transforming it into a site of immense production so that the initial refusal leads precisely to “the privileging of a whole new commodity” (McGowan 2016:168).

Accordingly, as Bauman (2005) notes, even attempts to escape the grip of commodified consumerism turn into consumer commodities. It is within this context that we encounter the *commodification of abstinence*. If we continue with the example of going ‘mobile free’ for a month, this period of abstinence becomes yet another micro-rebellion that simply represents a new opportunity *for* commodification. Besides the inevitable flurry of suitably edgy t-shirts, badges and bumper stickers, popular providers such as PlayStation, XBOX, or Nintendo might offer to alleviate the burden of giving up one’s mobile phone by supplying great deals on the latest games – after all, this is dividualism’s increasing leisure pursuit (Taylor 2013). Or, ‘going ‘mobile free’? Why not binge-watch a series on Netflix?’ The ease with which these commodities replace the abstained object is intimately connected to the difficulty we experience in relinquishing “the compensatory desires and intoxications we have developed in order to make the present liveable” (Jameson 2010:384). Indeed, with the reworking of the super-ego and its contemporary injunction to enjoy, any commitment to asceticism is incredibly difficult for “the absence of pleasure weighs heavy upon the psyche” (Ellis et al. 2018:4). In the current milieu, a period of abstinence from one’s mobile would prove particularly weighty. As Fisher (2009:24) aptly points out, “to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand” is to court boredom for the smartphone serves to plug the gaps where this contemporary malady would otherwise fervently grow (Dean and Fisher 2014).

The period of protest abstinence is therefore likely to be short. A fleeting gesture curtailed further by the modern cynic's disbelief in the value of their action or its political efficacy. Commitment to collective fatalism endures as meaningful change is branded impossible and the masses to be mobilised instead defer decision-making and action to others, or other 'things', in the hope that they will act on their behalf (Taylor 2013). In an act of pure sociosymbolic interpassivity the new 'thing' replacing the abstained object allows politically passive subjects to imagine themselves as rebellious and virtuous heroes. What is more, the commodified replacement – often produced under harmful conditions in developing countries (Ellis et al. 2018) and distributed by companies that operate “beyond the pale in terms of working conditions and management practices” (Lloyd 2018b:246) – is enjoyed just the same as any other consumer product or experience. Then, once the brief period of protest abstinence is over and the replacement object takes its place amongst the “discarded fashions, fads and trends in an ever-shortening life cycle of commodities” (Smith and Raymen 2018:72), one can return to the sanctity of the smartphone and its sensation-stimulus matrix (Fisher 2009).

Let the posting and sharing commence. All the 'edgy' and rebellious gaming and Netflix watching can now be shared via social media with incessant 'hashtagging', #game/series, #SavetheCongo, #donemybit, #timetodoyours. Watch the likes roll in as one's symbolic capital is elevated whilst simultaneously contributing to the further marketing of consumer products using the very phone one abstained from, the one produced with conflict minerals. The inevitable upload to social media is important, not because it possesses any revolutionary potential (Crary 2013), but because it functions as a form of symbolic ratification of having 'done good' thereby allowing one to feel good. Social media, then, operates as a kind of big Other verifying the virtuous act (Myers 2003), not as interpassive resistance but as anti-capitalism *proper*. However, the validation of this imaginary resistance does nothing to ameliorate the real harms precipitated by our current social arrangements. Rather, its ostensible appearance of change only serves to negate real change as we convince ourselves that it is sufficient to band-aid the fallout of neoliberalism through commodified gestures of 'intervention' (Mostafanezhad 2014).

We know the band-aid is hopelessly insufficient but we fetishistically disavow this knowledge and continue to act *as if* we do not know. Moreover, when such disavowal is momentarily threatened, as we are confronted with capitalism's obscene Real, we simply remind ourselves that 'at least we tried'. Kuldova (2018) makes the point well by noting that ignorance is not the problem. Efforts to de-fetishize commodities by revealing the truth behind their production fail precisely because most people *already know* (Kuldova 2018). Destructive

consumer behaviour continues because the majority of consumers maintain a cynical distance, they know very well the truth behind the exploitative, brutal and harmful production of commodities. Far from foreclosing one's consumption it gives it a moral licence, one can continue to consume so long as they do not buy into the marketing discourse that tries to hide capitalism's destructive and exploitative nature. Therefore, we consume not despite this knowledge but precisely *because* of it. Moreover, this 'revolutionary knowledge' itself is further commodified (Kuldova 2018). In the context of the aforementioned example of protest abstinence, the various replacements for the abstained object are not only sold to provide psychic relief but are marketed with a degree of symbolic capital in that they now constitute the object of interpassive resistance. Simultaneously the replacement assuages feelings of loss, acts on one's behalf as the rebellious hero, and displays one's enlightened and moral superiority (ibid.).

There can be little doubt that we are complicit in perpetuating systemic and subjective violence both domestically and abroad (Žižek 2009a). Yet our focus, in the instance of going 'mobile free', on the subjective violence occurring throughout the eastern Congo distracts our attention from the systemic violence of global consumer capitalism (Žižek 2009a). A violence sustained on behalf of our incessant consumerism as we continue to acquire the symbols of a life deemed worth living through the harm inflicted on others (Smith and Raymen 2018). Perhaps this is the tacit meaning behind the filming of *Unwatchable* in England. It brings the true locus of trouble back home, i.e. the West as a significant driver of the systemic violence that precipitates the very subjective forms that capture our attention.

Ultimately, strategies of ascetic withdrawal are not only ineffective but counterproductive as the act of abstinence itself easily becomes commodified and assimilated into capitalism's self-critique adding yet another false indication of change. Cynically aware as we may be we dare not vocalise it too loudly for the capitalist system has imposed upon us a compulsory refusal to refuse (Winlow and Hall 2016). Our deep-seated commitment to consumer culture and the sociosymbolic significance attached to consumer objects as the source of identity and distinction means that any attempt at negation has already been negated by the system (ibid.). Morality and desire have been so thoroughly disconnected that contemporary calls for change demand that we act against our self-interest and desires, yet faced with the daunting scale of change required and berated by the super-ego's injunction to enjoy "there is no incentive to act against one's sovereign desires" (Raymen 2019b:147). Indeed, as Raymen (2019a:51, original emphasis) notes, "we are not *naturally* resistant subjects who seek to continuously disrupt the status quo". The only natural resistance is to resist re-

assimilation back into the Real of our pre-symbolic biological being (Winlow and Hall 2013). In lieu of a clear, alternative sociosymbolic order we are forced to either risk an encounter with the terrifying indeterminate void of the Real or continue to fetishistically disavow the destructive nature of consumer capitalism (Raymen 2019b; Winlow and Hall 2013). Against this backdrop it is easy to explain our penchant for passive, or more accurately interpassive, forms of ‘resistance’. As we have seen, such acts of ‘resistance’ shore up rather than shake the foundations of the capitalist system and thus ensure its survival. This incessant “tinkering at the edges” (Whitehead 2018:92) makes it look as though *something* is being done, as though the system is being held to account and its worst effects mitigated making the aforementioned choice far easier: ‘no need to risk an encounter with the Real, capitalism is being humanised by various acts of micro-resistance’.

Evidently then, the issue lies not in our doing nothing but precisely the opposite. Our prolific pseudo-activity helps capitalism run more smoothly by offering the appearance of positive change so that no change actually need occur (Žižek 2006, 2009a). The first step towards real change thus necessitates that we take a step back and refuse to participate in micro-revolutions.

Towards a Gesture of Refusal and Enlightened Catastrophism

What I am advocating here is our participation in a gesture of refusal to being absorbed into various micro-revolutions of simulated transgression that offer nothing other than the appearance of change. Unlike strategies of ascetic withdrawal, or attempts to ‘opt out’ of competitive consumption, which simply open up the space for the commodification of abstinence, refusing to be forced along the path of simulated rebellion is the only true resistance in consumer capitalism (Hall et al. 2008). In the same way that charity acts as “the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation” (Žižek 2009a:19), the pseudo-activity of micro-resistance functions to “mask the nothingness of what goes on” (ibid.:183). All the acts of ostensible resistance reviewed here endeavour to immerse us in the promise of the future and thus mirror rather than depart from the foundation of the capitalist structure. Indeed, the very act of investing in such promise means that we have “already succumbed to the fundamental logic of capitalism” (McGowan 2016:13). McGowan (2016:12) further drives the point home by stating that “this is the problem with the insistence on revolutionary hope: it partakes of the logic that it tries to contest. Revolutionary hope represents an investment in the structure of the promise that defines capitalism”.

Perplexing as it may sound, we must refuse to participate in acts of micro-resistance that espouse the possibility of change and the promise of a better future. Whilst the latter weds us firmly to the logic of capitalism, the former is evoked to guarantee that it will not be acted upon so that no change actually takes place (Žižek 2017). Accordingly, these hyper-conformist pseudo-struggles function not as a revolutionary spark, but as an extinguisher negating the explosion of true change. The possibility they evoke and the appearance of change they present stand in the way of actual change and thus constitute the very source of capitalism's continuation (Žižek 2017). Difficult as it may be, we must dispense with the idea that doing *something* is better than nothing, that capitalism can be humanised or made less destructive and exploitative by piecemeal adjustments (Whitehead 2018). Investment in the promise of something better offered by various anti-capitalist movements must be abandoned (McGowan 2016). Rather than commit ourselves to discourses that promote baseless and incautious optimism (Kotzé 2019), we have to confront a zero-point of hopelessness because “it is only when we despair and don't know any more what to do that change can be enacted” (Žižek 2017:x).

Enlightened catastrophism (Winlow 2017), or what Dupuy (2013:28) calls “enlightened doomsaying”, offers us a means of confronting this zero-point. Its radical move lies not in a promise of a better future but in its guarantee that there will be *no* future if we carry on as we are. It invites us to take an imaginative leap, projecting ourselves into the moment following catastrophe – the complete and total destruction of our socio-ecological terrain by the neoliberal forces we sustain – and then, casting our gaze back to the present, to see this catastrophe as our *fate* (Dupuy 2013). Believing that it can be avoided, that science and technology will come to our aid, or that political leaders will eventually act on our behalf to do what is needed to avert the coming calamity, is to believe that the impending catastrophe does not really threaten us. Only by believing and accepting that this fate will come to pass can we mobilise ourselves to prevent it from happening, to accept this fate as one which we may yet choose to avoid (ibid.). As Winlow (2017:191) points out “the shock of recognition and conscious acceptance must compel us to begin to do what needs to be done”, to think through the coordinates to set us on a different course. Enlightened catastrophism, then, succeeds in achieving that which the preceding doctrines of resistance have so far been unable to. It frees an honest appraisal and the subsequent critique of our current condition from the promise of a better future (McGowan 2016).

To fully realise this commitment to the courage of hopelessness and enlightened catastrophism first requires our *absence* from, rather than presence in, the various forms of

pseudo-activity discussed previously. The ultra-realist interpretation of absence as having a probabilistic causal influence is instructive here (Lloyd 2018b). From this perspective it is not only the presence of something that can produce negative consequences but the absence of something, such as “when things could and perhaps should be present, but remain absent, there is an effect” (Winlow 2017:180). However, absence can also be *transformative* (Winlow and Hall 2016). In the current context, this transformative absence is realised by *not* participating in various micro-revolutions that serve only to negate real change by offering the appearance of change. By *refusing* to participate in forms of interpassive resistance that allow the system to run more smoothly. By abstaining from, rather than engaging in, frenetic activity that masks the destructive logic of consumer capitalism and the inefficiency of the nothingness that passes for contemporary progressivism. It is tempting to view various forms of resistance as opening up ‘cracks’ in the system that may constitute a point of weakness ripe for revolutionary potential. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated here, such ‘cracks’ work *for* rather than against the system by providing the space within which ascetic abstinence can be commodified and incorporated into capitalism’s self-critique.

Augmenting slightly Fisher’s contention that direct action is required to precipitate systemic change (Dean and Fisher 2014), this chapter contends that both inaction *and* action are required to achieve this end. They must, however, be put to work in a crucial order. First, we must participate in a gesture of refusal to partake in various acts of micro-resistance and refuse to enjoy the comforting myths we have created for ourselves (Kotzé 2019). Second, having rid ourselves of discourses that promote baseless and incautious optimism we can take a good look at the world *as it is* and confront, through the medium of enlightened catastrophism, an honest appraisal of our current condition. Finally, by confronting a zero-point of hopelessness we can “fashion the forms of intervention that can arrest our slow descent into the chaos of the future” (Winlow 2017:191). Do not be fooled by the *promise* of incremental change towards a better future, or be tempted to participate in acts of ‘resistance’ intended to secure it. Do not heed the altruistic calls of charity that simply allow the system to run more smoothly. To act to the contrary ultimately prevents the carrying out of the only realist solution to our contemporary condition, the complete reconstruction of global society (Žižek 2016).

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