Inequality, Experts, Krugman, Masks

By William Eaton

Zeteo Essay, January 2016

> . . . the intellectuals of the time . . . went on playing with ideas *que no tenían más función que la de mascaras*—that served only as masks.
>
> Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude)[1]

At a few moments in his recent, fruitful discussion of class warfare ("Challenging the Oligarchy," *New York Review of Books*), the economist Paul Krugman presents a vision—not a pretty vision—of the role of academic experts. Krugman's technical analysis is that the tremendous increase in economic inequality in the United States these past several decades is due to "the oligarchy" gaining increased power as a result of two things in particular: the failure of the federal government "to pursue antitrust regulation vigorously" and "the drastic decline in [labor] unions."[2] The result is that the major corporations and the very wealthy have gained something close to monopoly power, and this allows them to do

---

[1] Note that the English translation given in the present essay combines my own wording with that offered by Lysander Kemp in Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude, The Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States*, and *The Philanthropic Ogre*), translated by Lysander Kemp, Yaro Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (Grove Press, 1985).

[2] Paul Krugman, **Challenging the Oligarchy**, *New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2015. In this piece, Krugman does not define what he means by "oligarchy," and perhaps he has never quite given his definition of this term. In 2001, however, in a *New York Times* column **Oligarchy, American Style**, he wrote this: "the stark reality: We have a society in which money is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few people, and in which that concentration of income and wealth threatens to make us a democracy in name only."

A Marxist could take this a step further: power is concentrated in the invisible hands, let's call them, of capital, an impersonal force that rules over both the wealthy few and the less wealthy many. If the latter cannot help but be exploited, the former cannot help but exploit. To illustrate this point, I often use a 2006 story by *New York Times* labor reporter Louis Uchitelle: **Two Tiers, Slipping Into One**. See endnote 7 of **Film, Marxism: Tanner, Berger, Jonas** for the discussion of how, in that case, the demands of capital forced senior management to go against its own interests.

William Eaton is the Editor of **Zeteo**. *A collection of his essays,* **Surviving the Twenty-First Century**, *was recently published by Serving House Books. See* **Surviving the website**. The present piece may be thought of as the second in a series, which began in December 2015 with **Class Warfare Poverty Death**.

what they want, which is—surprise, surprise—to enrich themselves and further increase their power (e.g. by buying politicians).[3]

As an example, Krugman notes that "most Americans seeking Internet access are more or less at the mercy of their local cable company; the result is that broadband is both slower and far more expensive in the US than in other countries." Other examples: Monsanto's dominance of agriculture, and other companies' dominance in various other domains, from sunglasses to syringes to cat food. As regards unions:

> [T]he decline in unions seems to have major impacts beyond the direct effect on members' wages: researchers at the International Monetary Fund have found a close association between falling unionization and a rising share of income going to the top one percent, suggesting that a strong union movement helps limit the forces causing high concentration of income at the top.[4]

Let me say first that, while Krugman is clearly very smart, diligent, well-read, well-intentioned, etc., we did not need him—or should not have needed him—or the IMF researchers or any other experts, to tell us that increases in monopoly power and declines in unionization would be bad for the working classes, both in our role as employees and in our role as consumers. (And I need to stress that, although some US citizens have some wealth—equity in their homes, mutual funds, etc.—and some Americans are shopkeepers and tradespeople, in business for themselves, the majority of working-age American adults, so-called professionals and free-lancers included, are working-class employees. Our compensation and working conditions are a function of the relative power of employers and

---

[3] A reader of an early draft of this essay, sent the following comment, which takes its well-earned place here:

> I believe it's not just the 1% who are abusers but rather all of us in that we are self-serving by nature. It's the consequences and ramifications of such serving that differ. If [members of] the underclass [get] a step ahead, [they] will sacrifice others to maintain that step. For example, the low-level workers who oppose immigrants, who may in fact lower wages. Or take my academic colleagues who consider themselves underpaid and yet depend on the exploitation of adjuncts to sustain their underpayments. And the majority seeks the lowest prices, blocking awareness of the abuse of those in Asia and Latin America who turn out those cheap products. . . . Whatever the political or economic system, those with the ability will abuse it as they serve themselves. And justify their actions. Consider all those in this country who consider themselves Christians and do little to follow the teachings of Christ, manifesting their faith in the condemnation of gays.

Rousseau cast more than a glance in this direction 250 years ago.

> Il n'y a point de profit si légitime . . . Any amount of legitimately earned profit can be exceeded by illegitimate means, and one always makes more doing one's neighbors wrong than by helping them. How not to get caught is thus the only question—to which the strong devote all their force, and the weak all their tricks.

Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes, endnote. My translation.

[4] Krugman, **Challenging the Oligarchy**, *op. cit.*, citing International Monetary Fund researchers Florence Jaumotte and Carolina Osorio Buitron, "Union Power and Inequality," www.voxeu.org, October 22, 2015.

employees in the economy as a whole and in the particular sector of it in which we are employed.)

If we do not need experts to tell us that it is not good for us if some others get more power and we less, what then might be the role of experts (in this domain and others)? This is the guiding question of the present piece.

An answer that peeks through the cracks in Krugman's piece is that experts—or a certain set of them, people who are often found teaching at our major universities—maintain a kind of smoke screen, obscuring the obvious with the complex and encouraging us to deny what we would otherwise know, to include by encouraging our enthusiasm for wishful thinking. (This is also a description of much of the work of priests, ministers, popes, gurus, and other peddlers of religion.)

Devil's advocates might well point to how expert climate scientists have called the world's attention to global warming. I would not seek to minimize either that phenomenon or the value of exceptions that prove rules. However, did we really need experts to tell us that massive industrialization, with all its waste products, was going to significantly change the Earth's environment? Or are we, rather, now leaning (if half-heartedly) on one group of experts, making them responsible for reminding us of what we had long been enjoying pretending we did not know?

This may also be the place to stress that the present piece is hardly seeking to support a new form of know-nothingism. The point is not, say, that, thanks to their big hearts or common sense, uneducated people do or can know more than egg-headed, Ph.d'd intellectuals. Rather, it is up to each individual, however degree'd or not, to keep trying to learn to think better for herself or himself. *Sapere aude*, Dare to know, as Kant and other champions of the Enlightenment put it. The present piece and the *Zeteo* approach more generally should make clear that I am also not denying that we can learn a great deal in "conversation" with—and to include through reading the works of—other people. Daring must involve wrestling with the ideas and feelings (and the simple fact) of other people, and also wrestling with ourselves.

I would pause to note—as for further exploration at a later date—an idea linked to Quakerism and Emerson, that an "awful solitude of soul" may permit a mind to be "unswaddled, unchained." Not insulation of place, but insulation of spirit is essential". [5] "A

[5] Quotations are as quoted in Charles Daniel Gelatt, ***The Quaker Influence on Emerson***, a University of Wisconsin master's thesis, 1939. "Not insulation…" comes from Emerson's address **Literary Ethics** (1838). Note that, in context, the import is somewhat different.

> Not insulation of place, but independence of spirit is essential, and it is only as the garden, the cottage, the forest, and the rock, are a sort of mechanical aids to this, that they are of value. [What a claim! Rather Industrial Revolution, no?] Think alone, and all places are friendly and sacred. The poets who have lived in cities have been hermits still. Inspiration makes solitude anywhere. Pindar, Raphael, Angelo, Dryden, De Stael, dwell in crowds, it may

man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages."[6]

This is to suggest that the present piece, among other things, returns to certain ideas of the past, to include to a very American one: that something about our democracy (over-advertised though it now seems to be), and about our egalitarianism (a mirage on life support?), and about our wide open spaces and bountiful land (rapidly being "developed" and consumed) . . . Something about all this should give us Americans, a rare capacity—to think for ourselves. That, again, would involve being wary of experts and thus, too, not trying, even in the privacy of our own homes, to set ourselves up as experts. That "I" (like Emerson) might have some capacity to think for myself and to eloquently express my thoughts to others; I and they should be careful that this does not lead me into doing other people's thinking for them.[7]

It might be said that, as we have developed a vaccine for small pox, so now we need to develop one for expertise—and for media noise, advertising, and other forms of propaganda (all of which often involves "experts"). Our greatest teachers—perhaps our only good teachers—are those who, in addition to helping their students learn how to get what they need from other people, help their students learn to think for themselves, to include by being skeptical of expertise. (Dealing with misinformation is large component of this challenge, but is not the focus of the present piece.[8])

> be, but the instant thought comes, the crowd grows dim to their eye; their eye fixes on the horizon, — on vacant space; they forget the bystanders; they spurn personal relations; they deal with abstractions, with verities, with ideas. They are alone with the mind.

A footnote in Gelatt's thesis links the other quoted comments to Emerson's *Journals*. Googling, I find the "unswaddled, unchained" phrase in an entry of January 29, 1825. On July 14, 1831, Emerson wrote of "the awful solitude in which here a soul lives." It is indeed possible that this awful solitude of soul idea emerged from Quakerism and via Emerson, but the phrase was certainly used by others, to include by Edward Bouverie Pusey, one of the leaders of the nineteenth-century High Church "Oxford Movement" in England. (Mitchell Santine Gould is to be thanked for transcribing the text of Gelatt's thesis—itself an excellent work.)

[6] Emerson, **Self-Reliance** (1841).

[7] In a chapter on Brecht, Raymond Williams outlines the major principles of Brecht's approach to the theater, including these two:

> The drama [Brecht] opposes involves the spectator in a stage-action and consumes his capacity to act; the drama he recommends makes the spectator an observer but awakens his capacity to act. Again, the drama he opposes presents experience, drawing the spectator inside this until he is experiencing the action with the characters; the drama he recommends presents a view of the world, in which the spectator confronts something and is made to study what he sees.

Drama from Ibsen to Brecht (Oxford University Press, 1969), 278.

[8] See **"I Don't Know What to Believe Anymore"**, *Zeteo*, March 2015. **Dedicated, well-armed sociopaths who'll stop at nothing** also makes use of Paz's masks idea and straddles a gap between misinformation and stupefying expertise.

And so we come back to Krugman's piece. As regards monopolies, he describes a role played by the University of Chicago economist and Nobel Prizewinner Milton Friedman: "Milton Friedman, in a deeply influential 1953 essay, argued that . . . there was little evidence that monopoly had important effects. Friedman's view largely prevailed within the economics profession, and de facto in the wider political discussion."[9] That is, without Friedman many people might have—naturally, using their native intelligence—have concluded that allowing businesses to establish monopolies would not be good for those who then had to do business with these combines. But Friedman's work helped people, prominent people, other "experts" included, to set aside their, or our, native intelligence.

Friedman was a right-winger, and thus the fact that his work served business interests is no surprise. But Krugman's piece is a review of a book—*Saving Capitalism: For the Many, Not the Few*—by a certified liberal economist, Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor under William Clinton and currently a professor at Berkeley. Krugman writes that Reich's 1991 *The Work of Nations* had helped Reich land his Clinton administration post and had "focused squarely on the issue of rising inequality." But, "Reich's book saw inequality largely as a technical problem, with a technocratic, win-win solution."

That sentence describes the majority of public-policy related work produced by prominent US academics and think-tank employees and published by prominent publishers and reviewed in prominent journals.[10] One can read any number of books and papers proposing solutions to poverty:

> (a) as if poverty were not a relative term (the poor are those who have less than everyone else according to some hierarchy of values—need for food, shelter, and water included!); and
>
> (b) as if the prevailing economic system did not depend on the desperation of a goodly percentage of the population in order to save employers (and consumers) from having to offer better wages or working conditions. For example, in the United

---

[9] Krugman, **Challenging the Oligarchy**, *op. cit.*, citing Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," in *Essays in Positive Economics* (University of Chicago Press, 1953).

[10] I went quickly to see Michael Moore's latest movie, *Where to Invade Next*, and I enjoyed and appreciated it, and think it could be used as a launching point for interesting discussions, to include about capitalism. But the movie also does its share of mask making. For example, various benefits of Western European life, such as long vacations, decent working conditions, and good food, are presented as if they sprung entirely from within the societies—or social classes—that enjoy them. But we live, rather, in a global system in which the vigorous exploitation of workers and resources in various parts of the world are used, inter alia, to provide comfortable livings for the privileged. In some countries the privileged are few, and in other countries—including those that Moore visited—the privileged are more numerous. But, on a global scale and even within most societies, the underprivileged are much in the majority. And the privileges, and even some of the sense of well-being of the privileged, depend on the work and suffering of this majority and on the extent to which the current levels and extent of exploitation can be maintained, if not augmented. Similarly, the air pollution from the factories around Beijing is all of our pollution, even though only a few millions suffer directly the ill effects. And California's water shortages and sinking ground levels are in rice, lettuce, and many other products consumed thousands of miles away.

> States economic policy at times focuses on keeping the unemployment level from dipping below 5 percent, because a lower level would cause wages to rise, a phenomenon policymakers do their best to prevent. To repeat: the current system mandates the poverty or impoverishment of 5 percent of the population.

So what, then, is the role of those proposals to reduce poverty that do not discuss, and first and foremost, those two parameters (a & b)? Such proposals are likely full of smart, even brilliant suggestions. And, we might say, the more brilliant these suggestions are, the better they—intentionally or not, it doesn't matter—serve, above all, as masks. They make it harder for people to see what, without all this expert input, they could see, relatively easily and for themselves, about the economic forces channeling their lives. That is, in this case, we are diverted from seeing that, and how, poverty is built into the structures of our economic system. And insofar as we are diverted from recognizing this fact, what hope can there be for all our diverting solutions to poverty?[11]

---

[11] The other day I heard some Left-leaning Nobel Prize winner or some such proposing that we should, in a sense, vote with our pocket books: by consuming less. This would strike a double blow, both against corporations and for the environment, which certainly would be relieved if humans began consuming less. Ignored: the fact that our whole economic system, our jobs, health-care, pensions included, depends on our consuming more and more. It is not simply that we have to keep spending the amounts we now do (plus some); we have to keep spending at the same rate, keeping money circulating through the financial system at the same speed or faster than it now does. Thus, whenever there is a crisis—the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, for example—economists and politicians are concerned to quickly restore consumer confidence, because if we consumers take even so much as a day off from spending, the effects can be disastrous.

One of the engines of U.S. economic growth the past fifty years or so has been ever-increasing levels of personal debt. By borrowing more, we are able to spend more, and this notwithstanding the fact that, in "real terms," our incomes have not risen. Again, it does not take an expert to see that this economic model is unsustainable. We cannot keep borrowing more and more, getting a new credit card each time we max out the previous new one. But, on the other hand, absent some other, stop-gap solution—a current favorite: printing extra money so that it can pass quickly from consumers' hands onto businesses' bottom lines—we cannot stop. Our common sense is telling us that the current, insatiable, ever-growing-GNP-demanding machine is engendering and will continue to engender environmental degradation and periodic economic crises. But, again, that does mean we can turn off or even slow down the machine, and nor can we—except in dreams—distance ourselves from it.

I would not be a nihilist, suggesting that our situation is hopeless, that nothing can be done. And I certainly share one of the Nobelist's or Nobelist *manqué*'s implicit assertions: it is way past time that we, as a species, devalued consumer goods and gross-national-product growth. It would not only be better for the non-human environment if we gave pride of place to other, non-economic goals; it could be better for us. (A light at the end of the tunnel: our economy becomes dominated by activities that consume only human time and energy, services such as massages, various kinds of therapy, exercise classes, religious observances?)

Can we, without capitalism, grow and distribute enough food for the current world population—or, ideally, for a steadily declining human population? Why not? (And, in any case, hunger and starvation are features of life under capitalism, as they were of life before it.) Can we, as part of some other economic system, build enough shelter, provide good health care, etc. Why not? However, our economic and social problems are more structural and deeply rooted than people are being led to believe by ostensibly well-meaning, reformist experts. So long as we live under capitalism, its fundamental value—increasing the rate of return on capital—is our fundamental value, and this remains true no matter how much we kick and scream, or speak out sensibly for other ways of life.

I must stress that I am not anti-capitalist in the usual sense of such words. I can see that capitalism has many noxious qualities, but this does not mean that faith in alternatives does not involve various kinds of wishful thinking. And insofar as our ideas are products of the economic relations in which we find ourselves,

Similarly, the old World Trade Center towers could have been filled with books and papers (and now TED talks, etc.) proposing that global warming and every other environmental problem could be fixed by new technology and by smarter use of existing technologies. As if there weren't a direct link between new (or once new) technologies and environmental problems (to include overpopulation and rampant consumerism).

On a simple level, we might say that we are suffering from the collateral damage of the Industrial Revolution. And perhaps environmental degradation will reach such a point that we revert to some mutation of pre-Industrial-Revolution life? That's likely wishful thinking. It is said that the dinosaurs may have been wiped out by a meteor. The Industrial Revolution and its sequels are coming to seem like the next meteor, and this even as our technology has us keeping a wary eye on outer space, to make sure we can see and deflect some other meteor. If we cannot see and do not want to see how the Earth is already shaking all around us, what can be the role of our devices for seeing further into outer space?

Thousands upon thousands of examples might be cited. I will note just one.[12] A few years ago an issue of *Sierra Magazine* (a magazine for Sierra Club members) had an "Innovate" feature about "ocean thermal energy conversion or OTEC." Wikipedia is now prepared to take the curious through various versions and applications of this technology, and to offer expert testimony, such as that "Up to 88,000 TWh/yr of power could be generated from OTEC without affecting the ocean's thermal structure."[13] As described in *Sierra Magazine*, OTEC involved taking cold water from 3,000 feet or more below the surface of the ocean. Once on land the water's coolness was to be used in various ways to make human life superficially easier (e.g. by producing electricity). Then the water, now rather warmer, was to be injected back into the ocean at a depth where the surrounding water temperature was the same. Does one have to be an environmental scientist to realize that removing substantial quantities of water from the oceans—to say nothing of returning them at a different temperature—would have profound effects on the ecosystems involved? And if such operations are carried out on any scale, unanticipated consequences are all but guaranteed. Given this, it seems hard to see the trumpeting of this idea, with its technical name and under this "Innovate" heading, as anything but mask making. Nicely, in another of part of the same issue of this magazine, I found a statement from the Club's Executive

---

new ideas await changes in those relations, which changes may be as unexpected and unintended as capitalism has been. (*Notes for some future text.*)

[12] It will be said that the key is picking the right technology and that picking some technology, however unsophisticated, is inevitable. I understand that. My poor, aging knees have need of more stairs and fewer escalators and elevators, but stairs, too, are a human innovation, even a kind of technology. But the present piece is about masks, to include about how the proposals of technological fixes mask the role of technology, and of specific technologies, in the problem.

[13] **Ocean thermal energy conversion**, Wikipedia, consulted 13 January 2015.

Director, Michael Brune: "[I]t's hard to find the right solution if you don't understand what's causing the problem."

In Reich's case, and as regards inequality, in *The Work of Nations* (1992) Reich had apparently (according to Krugman) put his faith in a "theory of skill-biased technological change" (SBTC). I will reduce the theory to this: In the Information Age the well-trained will thrive and the unskilled suffer. However, Krugman recounts:

> over the course of the 1990s the skill gap stopped growing at the bottom of the scale: real wages of workers near the middle stopped outpacing those near the bottom, and even began to fall a bit behind. Some economists responded by revising the theory, claiming that technology was hollowing out the middle rather than displacing the bottom. But this had the feel of an epicycle added to a troubled theory—and after about 2000 the real wages of college graduates stopped rising as well. Meanwhile, incomes at the very top—the one percent, and even more so a very tiny group within the one percent—continued to soar. And this divergence evidently had little to do with education, since hedge fund managers and high school teachers have similar levels of formal training.

(Evocative comparison, the hedge fund managers and the high school teachers. In his latest book, which "Challenging the Oligarchy" reviews, Reich apparently argues that the high profits at some financial firms largely reflect insider trading that we've made a political decision not to regulate effectively. For this and many other reasons, I am hardly the only person—the only parent of a high-school student—who would feel more hopeful were the Wall Street gangsters and cartels being allocated less money and our teachers more.)

We began the present response with the idea that we did not need an expert to tell us that increases in monopoly power and declines in unionization would be bad for the working classes. Or, if you prefer, if some experts are of value, it would be to remind us of certain basic facts because so many other experts—plus the usual advertising, sports and celebrity fanfare, etc.—keep distracting us from what we know.[14] (The model of Plato's Socrates, in the *Meno* most notably, is that truth lies within and the role of a teacher is to help us get in touch with or uncover what we know. Does the US model, then, involve further burying our knowledge, and we ourselves, in various forms of chatter, academic chatter included?[15])

---

[14] A *bon mot*, or tweet, I think, from the Canadian TV personality and producer Ziya Tong (13 February 2014): "In the 21st century you'll find cameras *everywhere* except: where our food comes from, where our energy comes from, and where our waste goes."

[15] Of course the model is not exclusive to the United States, and our academic institutions and practices are modeled on older, European ones. While in graduate school, I wrote a lengthy paper about a kind of tacit deal

And thus the example at hand, of Robert Reich, a liberal economist and, in 1992, a soon-to-be high-ranking government official, proclaiming that, notwithstanding whatever intuitions we may have about monopolies and unions, inequality can be redressed by providing people the right training and retraining. I have used the phrase "wishful thinking." Krugman writes of SBTC: "It was an attractive, optimistic vision; you can see why it received such a favorable reception."

We have found our way back to a point that Octavio Paz made in 1950—about how, during the Mexican Revolution period, intellectuals had gone on playing with ideas *que no tenían más función que la de mascaras*—that served only as masks. In reference to what might well be called the ongoing rape of Africa, the Irish critic and diplomat Conor Cruise O'Brien referred to "the ingratiating moral mask which a toughly acquisitive society wears before the world it robs: 'liberalism' is the ideology of the rich, the elevation into universal values of the codes which favoured the emergence, and favour the continuance, of capitalist society."[16]

This raises the question of what role Krugman's or my own ideas play? Likely we are all in the mask-making business, but at different levels of sophistication. (And the most sophisticated masks may be the most deceptive.) I have assigned these levels odd letters to disguise the fact that I consider one level superior to the other two.

- Milton Friedman can be classified as **Level Q**: direct obfuscation in the service of the rich and powerful. It may look like "we" have a problem, but "I" (the certified and clearly mentally agile expert) am telling you—based on my years of study and great intelligence—you don't understand. We don't really have a problem. (As a pitch to capital for funding, e.g. for academia or for "me," the expert, this becomes: We can encourage people to look the other way while you go about your business.)

  In an article Krugman cites—"Bring Back Antitrust"—David Dayen, a freelance writer who writes about financial topics from a Left perspective, makes much of the role that the law professor and high-ranking government official Robert

---

that Kant made (or may be imagined to have made) with the Prussian government. And it might be said that this tacit deal is fundamental to academics and academia. Briefly here, it stipulates, or loudly whispers, that academics are to be allowed to explore their ideas with a rare liberty so long as the language and other forms in which they announce their findings is like that of their predecessors'—priests'—Latin: inscrutable and uninteresting to the general public. Again, the overarching role of these experts, or of this modern priestly class, is mask making, obfuscating.

[16] Conor Cruise O'Brien, Introduction to *Writers and Politics* (Pantheon, 1965). For more on liberalism, see **Blind Fanatics**, by Pankaj Mishra, *London Review of Books*, 3 December 2015. Among Mishra's observations: "Horrific famines were caused by a fanatical British allegiance to free trade" (which approach, of course, favored the economic interests of Great Britain, it having industrialized before everyone else, and rather before it began championing free trade).

Bork played by developing and broadcasting "his" expert opinion.[17] (Interestingly, during Bork's many years professing at Yale Law School, his students included Robert Reich, William Clinton, and Hillary Rodham.) Bork's opinion was that antitrust enforcement was actually bad for innovation and consumer well-being. Were Bork still alive he would likely persist in maintaining this and marshal a great deal of "information" to support "his" position. I have put "his" in quotation marks because I am impressed by the extent to which the position is not so much Bork's as it is that of businesses seeking to gain monopoly power in order to be able to increase revenues and profits and drive down wages.

One of Bork's ambitions was to become a Supreme Court Justice. And, it seems to me, his implicit, Level Q pitch for this post went something like this: I have proved my willingness to give my powerful mind and capacity for hard work to the task of promoting the interests of the rich and powerful; on the Court I can be counted on to do more of the same. As for what I personally believe—beyond in the value of promoting the interests of the rich and powerful and, thereby, trying to become or remain part of this club . . . ?

- Reich—and hardly Reich alone!—is **Level T**: the indirect obfuscation of well-meaning (or, if you prefer, seemingly well-meaning) technocrats. We do have problems, serious problems, such experts propose. Indeed, they make their livings by identifying problems and solutions (and by helping us ignore how life—whose fundamental feature is mortality—transcends problem-and-solution thinking).[18] One basic (ostensible?) problem for the Level T's is how the less fortunate, the well-beyond-the-Ivy-League, are suffering unduly, unjustly. But what "I," the expert, have been able to discover is that this problem comes with a solution. We just have to be smarter, work smarter. (And, of course, it is on this basis—"my" smarts and commitment to bettering—that I am to be paid more than most people.)

  The tantalizing pitch here—as in Krugman's writings in the *New York Times* and *New York Review of Books*—is that smarts are all that's needed to make the capitalist machine work better—more productively, with less social tension— for everyone. Hence the title of Reich's book, *Saving Capitalism*. Similarly, Zephyr Teachout, who has been campaigning relentlessly against monopoly power and for public financing of elections, has said: "It's important to not believe that our current pathological capitalism is the only kind you can have. We can have a version of capitalism that's not this concentrated." (See footnotes 10 and 11.)

---

[17] David Dayen, **Bring Back Antitrust**, *American Prospect*, Fall 2015. Note this counter-intuitive factoid: "Despite all the buzz about the start-up culture, entrepreneurship has suffered from these barriers to competition. The New America Foundation found start-ups fell 53 percent between 1977 and 2010."

[18] Regarding illusions of problem-solution approaches, see **The King's Therapy: Exploring our hopes for a cure, with help from *The King's Speech***.

As has been previously discussed in the context of cures for poverty and technological fixes for environmental problems, what such Level T experts obscure are the fundamental dynamics of the forces that channel our lives. These experts help us ignore what we could otherwise see clearly. E.g.: people are destitute because they have been driven off their land, its wealth and sustenance taken away from them, and because capital seeks endlessly, relentlessly to pay workers as little as possible, to pay the rank and file subsistence wages while keeping a sizable number of people unemployed so that those earning minimal wages (or more) will feel lucky to have the jobs they have. Of course the sketch I have just presented is a simple one, and if an expert were to start filling in details, the picture would appear more complicated, and there would be truths to be found in these details *and a great deal of obfuscation.*[19]

- We thus come to **Level O**, a great Onknown (and perhaps heretofore and eternally existing more on paper than in any flesh). There is a Brechtian (and Russian Formalist) idea of "*verfremdung*"—making strange.[20] That is, for our non-theatrical

---

[19] A sports fan, I find evocative the following examples, from Major League Baseball and college sports. Having begun my fandom in St. Louis in the 1960s, I remember well how Curt Flood, the Cardinals all-star, African-American centerfielder, refused to be traded and pursued his case all the way to the Supreme Court. Thus he, and his lawyers and supporters, were able to strike a key blow against the indentured servitude in which the players had been held since the nineteenth century. So now the media goes on and on—and countless sports commentators who like to make much of how they are great friends of the players go on and on—filling the airwaves, the Web, and tabloids with chatter about how much baseball players and other sports figures get paid. And, indeed, these athlete-entertainers are now paid much more than most Americans, and baseball players have done particularly well for themselves. Major League Baseball players' salaries now add up to about $3.5 billion per year.

What gets a lot less attention is the revenues and profits of the business itself. Last year, while paying its players $3.5 billion, Major League Baseball's owners' revenues were $9 billion. In addition, according to *Forbes*, over the past five years, the value of the average major league baseball team increased from about $500 million to $1.2 billion. So, in addition to the annual profits, the average "owner" (who may well be several people or corporations) earned $140 million per year from capital appreciation. Thus—and again, revenues are not even being counted for the purposes of this comparison—the annual capital appreciation alone is about seven times what a few leading players have been earning, and about thirty-five times the average player's salary. The players' share of league revenues has declined by more than 30 percent over the past 12 years.

Two other points in this regard. First, as in life so in baseball. Even just twenty years ago, the figures for average and median salary were fairly close, but now the average is seven times the median. That is, a very few players are making huge sums—$20 million a year—while most players make a tenth of that. Of course this discrepancy pales beside that between CEO and general-worker pay in the economy as a whole. A 2014 Harvard Business School study estimated that this ratio was 350 to 1 (with the average CEO earning about $12 million/year). It is relevant, too, that Americans, on average, do not realize this; they think the ratio is roughly 30 to 1. (See **The pay gap between CEOs and workers is much worse than you realize,** by Roberto A. Ferdman, *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2014.)

Secondly, I cannot help, in this context, not mentioning the ongoing indentured servitude of college athletes, many of whom happen to be African Americans. According to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) financial reports analyzed by *The Washington Post*, in 2014 the 48 athletic departments in college sports' wealthiest conferences earned $4.5 billion. Players' salaries: $0.

[20] Let's lean on a Wikipedia article (January 2016) entitled **Distancing effect** (a.k.a. the alienation effect or estrangement effect; German: *Verfremdungseffekt*). This

purposes, rather than or along with trumpeting or wallowing in expertise, intellectuals and their texts (and podcasts…) might call attention to their non-expertise and to the questionable value of expertise. A text might even be obliged to do such calling in order to be taken half seriously.

"The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one, so that it can always be recognized as illusion," Brecht wrote, and he also warned against unbefitting seriousness.[21] I would note, too, an observation of Adorno's regarding tact: it was a bourgeois invention that had, by the mid twentieth century, fallen into irreparable ruin, living on only in the parody of forms, an arbitrarily devised or recollected etiquette for the ignorant.[22]

And this, I am proposing, may be the point we've now reached with expertise as well. And thus Level O intellectuals would retain the forms of expertise and yet a sufficiently parodic or self-doubting tone—which might be imposed by the present age more than coming from within the intellectual herself. The result would be a chronic calling into question of expertise (and of its cousin, information), so that, even as our texts might seem to have something to say—a kind of hollow wisdom?—more loudly they would echo: "But there is no wisdom." "It is not simply that human understanding is limited; we are desperately and enthusiastically attached to ignorance!"

Or, if you prefer, and tipping our caps to Plato, Socrates, and Bakhtin, we could say that wisdom is an unfinalizable process of seeking to understand oneself and one's circumstances, the forces and channels directing or guiding one's behavior, thoughts included. Of course, as with working out at the gym, the process has its

---

is a performing arts concept coined by playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht first used the term in an essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," published in 1936, in which he described it as "playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play." [For present purposes we will equate these with experts.] "Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious."

Verfremdungseffekt is rooted in the Russian Formalist notion of the device of making strange (Russian: *приём отстранения),* which literary critic Viktor Shklovsky has claimed is the essence of all art. [And, we are now suggesting, of all expertise? Science most definitely included?]

[21] Brecht in translation: "It is to be hoped that the present notes, indicating a few of the ideas and devices of various kinds that are necessary for the performance of a play, will not make an impression of misplaced seriousness. It is difficult in writing about these things to convey the carefree lightness that is essential to the theatre." From the "Concerning these notes" segment of the "Notes and Variants" appendices in an edition of *Mother Courage and Her Children* edited by John Willett and Ralph Mannheim and as translated by Willett. (Penguin Books, 2007), p. 135. The "illusion" sentence is from the same text, the "Realistic theatre and illusion" segment, p. 95.

[22] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life), 1951. The words used in the present essay are from E.F.N. Jephcott's translation (Verso, 1978).

highs (and lows and injuries), but an end can never be reached, only imagined. Much exercise is had, enjoyed, suffered through. There is sweat. There are showers.

In any case, if our experts and non-experts, intentionally or not, show themselves to be rather lacking in helpful expertise (let's call it), we may well feel thrown back on ourselves, on our "common sense"? And thus, we should also keep in mind that what goes by the name of common sense is often an awkward collection of normative bags—the customs, the often contradictory adages, the prejudices of our age. I note an observation (and adage?) of Marie Le Jars de Gournay, the young female friend of Montaigne's old age:

> Et trouve la reigle de bien vivre aussi certaine à fuyr l'exemple et le sens du siècle qu'à suivre la Philosophie ou la Théologie.
>
> If you want to have a good life, instead of following the counsels of philosophy or religion, you'll do as well to flee the habits and common sense of your times.[23]

Embracing/mistrusting common sense (or some, seemingly more fundamental "native intelligence")—we are not far here from paradoxes associated with Plato's Socrates. I would stress that these are indeed paradoxes, in the more nihilistic, contemporary sense of the word "paradox": a statement that is self-contradictory or logically untenable, full stop. Thus, there is Socrates's claim that his superiority lay in knowing that he did not know—as if the ignorant might know of their ignorance. And there is his claim that, although we cannot know what the good is, we know what it is: It is to try to know what the good is, even though we cannot.

I would also stress that the world will little note what is written here; it is the work of certified experts that will continue to be prominently published, broadcast, reviewed, etc. And if, posthumously perhaps, a non-expert's work can, as carrion, be found to feed later experts or support some new trend in expertise, such work, too, may be trumpeted and wallowed in, or torn from its bones. Prior to such a time, however, there can be no money, and but rarely fame, notoriety, or criminal convictions, for non-expertise. Seriously half-serious non-expertise is likely a great luxury, available only to those with the good fortune (or mutual fund shares) not to have to give over their minds and best hours to serving the machine. (Or is here our mask-making role: our existence, and non-expert squawking, suggests that not serving the machine, thinking for oneself, remains an option?)

Socrates and Plato belonged to a little club of defrocked oligarchs, their offspring and friends. A contemporary non-expert is likely to be more alienated. Like those who have been known, of a Sunday, to wander into half-empty Quaker meeting rooms, take a seat, and perhaps even rise to speak—as if God had something to say through them. Something to

[23] Marie de Gournay, « Préface sur les Essais de Michel, seigneur de Montaigne » (1595) [the third edition of *les Essais*]. My gloss.

which, according to the unwritten rules of such meetings and such speeches, there can never be any answer. Emerson again: "Inspiration makes solitude anywhere."[24]

Before turning to the young Marx and Engels, who have been waiting patiently in the wings (and so that they might draw the curtain on the present show), I must note that were I writing, as I often do, about the preeminence of unanswerable questions about where we come from and where we're headed, and about the human predicament (mortality, interdependence, consciousness, . . .)—this would be a different piece and reach different, if not entirely contradictory, conclusions about intellectual activity. But, that said, the present essay remains situated in our present pass, in which, among other things, economic injustice reigns in the United States. Indeed, my sense is that we Americans are now, and not for the first time in our history, wondering whether justice has ever been, in "our" country, more than a convenient fantasy, or mask? Our economy has been built on slavery, exploitation, the overconsumption of natural resources, and imperialist invasions (both military and economic). We may well ask what role in any of this could there be for justice?

Thus—another example of the role of intellectuals—we may ask what role has been played by the most prominent work of American political philosophy published in the past century: Harvard professor John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971)? Like Plato's *Republic* and other much-taught works, the book has engaged many students, professors, and others—vigorous but susceptible (or willing to be diverted?) minds—in questions about what justice is and how it might be achieved. In this way, we might say—I will say—such books have helped distract many of our most effervescent intellects from the actual dynamics of human social interactions and from how those groups and individuals with power have developed, imposed, and used various political and legal systems (and philosophers) to preserve and advance their interests. *A Theory of Justice* implies that achieving justice is a central goal of our society and thus obfuscates the history of our country.

"We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role In The Present-Day Society"—one line from point 5 of one version of the Black Panthers' "Ten-Point Program." Another line: "If a man does not have knowledge of

---

[24] Emerson, **Literary Ethics** (1838). See footnote 5 for context. Paz might be said to be more optimistic:

> If we tear off these masks, if we open ourselves up, if—in brief—we face our own selves, then we can truly begin to live and think. Nakedness and defenselessness are awaiting us. But there, in that "open" solitude, transcendence is also waiting; the outstretched hands of other solitary beings.

The Labyrinth of Solitude, translated by Lysander Kemp, *op. cit.*, 194.

himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else."[25]

A key passage from a translation of Marx and Engels's *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology):

> . . . inside [the ruling class] one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood), . . .[26]

* * *

[25] **The Ten-Point Program of the Black Panthers** (the version quoted from above). *N.B.*: Several, divergent versions of the Program are stretched across the Web, and it seems that, not surprisingly, various versions, shorter and longer, were disseminated by the Panthers. A **PBS website** states that on October 15, 1966, Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale drafted the first text. This version, which the website reproduces, includes the following "NUMBER FIVE":

> Any suggestions? You want education? What kind of education do you want? An education which what? Reveals the true nature of this decadent American society? That's what I thought you said. WE WANT AN EDUCATION WHICH TEACHES US OUR TRUE HISTORY AND OUR ROLE IN THE PRESENT DAY AMERICAN SOCIETY. Put a semi-colon in between the first part and the second part cause a lot of young people will be reading the ten points; we don't want to be accused of bad punctuation.

[26] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*: Part I, as translated by S. Ryanzanskaya (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964); as reprinted in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 173. Text is thought to have been written in 1846, when both Marx and Engels were in their twenties.