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INTERVIEW

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Stevan Bradić

CONSCIOUSNESS IS AN ACTIVE PRINCIPLE
An Interview with Nicholas Brown[1]

During the summer of 2019, I was a Fulbright research scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago, analyzing the relationship between literary labor and the market in American modernist poetry. My research was framed to a large extent by the insights developed by UIC professor Nicholas Brown, in particularly in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital" (nonsite.org) which was to be included in his latest book *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Duke 2019). As soon as I settled in Chicago we met up and started our conversation on the topics of autonomy of art, commodification, totality, artistic labor, and the relevance of Marxism in literary studies today, which was developed in the following months through an email correspondence into this interview.

Nicholas Brown teaches Modernism, African literature, and critical theory in the English Department and in the Department of Black Studies, with an affiliate position in Art History, at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research interests include Marxism, Hegel studies, the history of aesthetics, Lusophone literature and culture, and music studies. His first monograph, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton 2005), examined the relationship between postcolonial literature and European modernism, and the relationship of each to continuing crises in the global economic system. His book, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Duke 2019), asserts the resumption of the modernist sequence — not always in the expected places — in the era after postmodernism. He is working on a book on Brazilian concretism. Former President of the Marxist Literary Group, Professor Brown chairs the editorial board of the journal *Mediations* and is a founding editor of the electronic/print press MCM'.

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Bradić: In your latest book *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (2019) in the tradition of Hegel, Lukács, Adorno and Jameson, you build a case for the autonomy of the work of art, as a self-legislating, immanently purposive artefact. This appears to be a continuation of your previous work on the topic, seeing how you successfully navigate between what you (with Imre Szeman) have described in the "Introduction" to the *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture* (2000) as an understanding of artworks as "ineffable objects demanding infinite interpretation" (3) on the one hand, and the reduction of the aesthetic to an "effect of the cultural field" (4), on the other. Why is it important today to defend the autonomy of the work of art and the irreducibility of the aesthetic?

Brown: Our historical moment is characterized by skepticism toward the revolutionary idea that consciousness is an active principle, not something that can be coherently accounted for by a description confined to the order of cause and effect. The very notion that people are actively engaged in creating the world we live in — in short, the idea of politics — presupposes this principle. It is the core insight of German Idealism, a philosophical translation of, and attempt to come to terms with and endorse in the field of thought, the French Revolution and its aftermath. The account of the artwork as something autonomous — that is, something that solicits interpretation and judgment rather than responding to external demands — arose from this impulse and is an entailment of its core insight.

As is well known, this tradition, Hegel's followers in particular, were criticized by Marx for failing to account for the boundary conditions set by the metabolism of human life, in short political economy. This error is fundamental to Hegel, but it can be traced to his time and place, where the nature of industrial capitalism and the problem it would pose for his whole system remained historically obscure. The naïve condescension with which Hegel treats the entrepreneurial class in *Philosophy of Right* is breathtaking, but not historically surprising. But Marx did not abandon — could not have abandoned — the fundamental insight of German Idealism. The first half of his famous dictum that people make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, paraphrases that insight, even as the second half corrects it. But this correction has repeatedly been understood on the Left undialectically, as though "materialism" and "idealism" were opposites, and as though "idealism," the idea that consciousness itself is a determining power, were something that materialist or any other politics could do without. Material conditions structure any concrete situation. But these are the cards we are dealt, not the game, and distinguishing the two is a practical matter that does not require ostentatious theoretical modesty about the limits of human agency. Indeed, a great deal of the work of Left analysis consists in figuring out which conditions are relevant — what in fact is the state of the game — and this is always a postulate, an idea, not a mere registration of givens. Anyway, my contention is that to defend the autonomy of art is to defend the principle of consciousness as an active principle, which is on my view to defend the idea of politics as such.

Bradić: But this skepticism about the limits of human agency originates on the Left, does it not?

Brown: The idea that the course of human events is not subject to conscious intervention but is rather determined by god, history, evolution, custom, norms, race, geography, culture, brain structure, or whatever else, has its natural adherents in the defenders of the status quo. So a certain kind of center-right market determinism, one of the phenomena lumped under the term "neoliberalism," is an entirely unsurprising development. What is more unexpected, and historically new and specific, is the way the anti-humanism of the 1960s French intellectual Left, which in the 1990s became a kind of lingua franca for self-consciously advanced thought in the U.S. and elsewhere, eventually putting down roots here and becoming affect theory, object-oriented ontology, and cognate "spinozist" tendencies, turns out to fit hand in glove with this aspect of neoliberalism. Very well, market absolutism and theoretical anti-humanism in various forms coincide in calling for a certain modesty about the role of the giving, disputation, and accepting of reasons in human affairs. But if we are going to take Marx's insight seriously, we should entertain the possibility that the market is in every sense prior. Marx understood that commodification is a crucial tendency of capitalist production. Our contemporary market absolutism is clearly implicated in the acceleration of the commodification dynamic. But, in a more mediated fashion, so is the deflation of intentional action into the interplay of human and inhuman "agency." So while spinozist theory generally imagines itself to be on the left, it is objectively a center-right phenomenon.

Bradić: Is your defense of "consciousness as an active principle" a version of Enlightenment individualism?

Brown: What is at stake in this debate is not personal autonomy. Spinoza's critique of personal autonomy as an egocentric view on ordinary causality is in general correct. If a thermostat could feel, it would no doubt feel like it was making decisions all day. What is at stake is the role of consciousness, the giving, disputation, and accepting of reasons, in human affairs. Like forces, reasons can be compelling. But differently from forces, reasons are only compelling within an institutional or quasi-institutional framework in which those reasons normatively matter. So personal autonomy is not at stake there either. The concept of art is one of those frameworks. "Aesthetic autonomy" refers to the capacity of the work of art to establish its own law, internal to itself, thereby setting aside, as not determining its meaning, those conditions that are otherwise determining. Our role as readers or beholders or critics is to discover that law, in other words to interpret the work, and interpretation is always subject to dispute. Without making any great claims for the political efficacy of art, I will say again that the assertion of autonomy is on the side of politics as such, and the critique of aesthetic autonomy — and the critique of the institutions and para-institutional norms that sustain it — is, today, of a piece with market absolutism.

Bradić: I have to return here to Bourdieu. You obviously find some of his work on culture compelling, but you do not seem to accept some of his central axes.

Brown: Fredric Jameson at one time took a lot of flak for claiming that the Bourdieusian "reduction of the aesthetic to an effect of the cultural field" is objectively anti-intellectual. Bourdieu himself was at the same time a defender of intellectual autonomy. But it is the deflationary aspect of Bourdieu's work that has been taken up in Canada and the United States, and I am not sure in any case that Bourdieu's practical politics squares as well as he imagined with his theoretical intervention. His major works repeatedly evade the problem with fancy footwork. But what I am trying to say is that a fraction, I would say a hegemonic fraction, of humanities scholars in the U.S. are objectively anti-intellectual. That is a naturally conservative position no matter that some in this fraction also imagine themselves to be "defenders of the humanities" and liberals or even leftists. So it is really Bourdieusians and contemporary spinozists who have to "navigate" the contradiction between determination and interpretation. My solution to it is a classically Hegelian-Marxist one, at least as I understand that tradition.

But Bourdieu's work on art, starting with "The Market in Symbolic Goods," is indispensable. Certainly I could not have written *Autonomy* without the idea of the "restricted field," without an account of the struggle of artists and scientists to build institutional or para-institutional buffers against the anonymous market. I think you cannot understand a great deal of art after, say, 1880, in a robustly historical way, without understanding that from a certain point art's relation to history is absolutely mediated by its relation to the market, which is not at all static, nor does it undergo uniform change, but can rather be distinctly periodized. Squaring this insight with a basically Hegelian, rather than a basically sociological, view of art is not difficult.

Bradić: So would you say that the suspension of the commodity form is a significant characteristic of the artwork, even when it does not address it openly? Would this be then an essential characteristic of what we consider to be art, at least since the late nineteenth century?

Brown: Absolutely. The open confrontation with the artwork's commodity character is rare, but all art since the end of the nineteenth century has to contend with it in some way. I might even be tempted to date that exigency rather precisely, to the revolutions of 1848 and the crack-up of the universalist aspirations of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. But that would be a much longer story. In the modernist period, this confrontation takes place in a sense outside the work of art, in the construction of restricted fields that keep the commodity dynamic at bay. But even in the modernist period works of art are not guaranteed to count as interventions in a restricted field, they have to claim a place in it; and claims are subject to judgment. In this way modernist artworks suspend the operation of the commodity form, but without addressing the commodity form explicitly. It's before and after modernism, when restricted fields

offer no protection, that the relationship to the market becomes interesting and fraught, and is often more legible on the interpretive surface.

Bradić: The central issue of *Autonomy* is the question of commodification of art. In it you "confront the commodity character of the artwork in five media: photography, Hollywood film, the novel, popular music, and television" (27). You accomplish this through what I would describe as procedure of intersection – namely, each of the chapters is devoted to one of the media, and at the same time it begins with another. What intrigues me here is your claim how this "whole is thus intended to present a kind of totality" (27). In one of your earlier works, *Utopian generations* (2005), in somewhat different context (anti-colonial and postcolonial struggle) you also discuss the necessity of the (Marxist-Hegelian) concept of totality. How do you see its relevance today, both in relation to art and social reality?

Brown: Totality is one of those words in the Marxist-Hegelian lexicon that is easily misunderstood, partly because it is, on my view, not a concept but rather a cluster of related concepts that shade into one another. Ironically, the one concept it does not include is the one that it is anathematized for, namely the submission of a heterogenous field to a single rule. In one sense, totality is just the commitment to thinking, the idea that while there are countless things that haven't been understood and an only slightly smaller countless number of things that will over the span of human history continue not to be understood, there is nothing that is in principle beyond the reach of thought. The Althusserian-Lucretian commitment to the aleatory swerve or "clinamen" and Adorno's heterodox understanding of negativity are two examples on the Left of a distrust of totalization in this sense, and they are both, in declaring a kind of taboo — totality must not be thought! — essentially reactionary. In another sense, and this is the one I was primarily drawing on in *Utopian Generations,* it refers to the notorious Hegelian "identity of identity and difference," which just means that for anything to be compared with anything else there must be a ground of comparison. Ambitious African literature from the anti-colonial period shared a representational project with Modernism, but went about it in different and sometimes opposed ways. Meanwhile the soon-to-be-former colonies and their soon-to-be-former colonizers are also part of the same world economy, and in that sense form a functional, conflictual whole. *Utopian Generations* attempts to mediate between these two sets of relations.

But the meaning of the word that is foremost in *Autonomy* is perhaps best translated simply as "normativity." This is a tricky concept because... where is it? Actions are only intelligible against a background of normative expectations. But you can't directly read these normative expectations out of the actions, partly because the norms are themselves are in conflict and different actors are acting under different presuppositions. The wager of totality is that these sets of expectations are not just different, but in conflict; that is, they are related to each other in ways that are determinate and determinable. That's why this meaning of totality is cognate with the others.

In the context of culture, I understand commodification as a normative presupposition, one that responds to sociological conditions but cannot be simply read out of them. That is, what characterizes our current situation is that commodification forms an unavoidable part of the normative background against which artworks are intelligible.

Bradić: While discussing the autonomy of the works of art, particularly in relation to music industry and television, you address the significance of the social conditions under which the artworks are being produced and consumed. This is, for instance, visible in your analysis of the shift from the bossa nova to Tropicália movement, as well as, although in a different manner, in your analysis the shift between the British and the American versions of *The Office*. Throughout your book you approach the issue of commodification of art through Marx' opposition of real and formal subsumption of labor under capital. But unlike Marx you apply it primarily to the products of (artistic) labor, namely, the artworks, and not to the conditions of labor itself. Why do you choose this angle?

Brown: This is a tricky point but it is crucial. On one hand, we are dealing with a social tendency, what Marx called the real subsumption of labor under capital. In the classic text from which that terminology is taken, this takes place, as you say, in production; what is at stake is precisely the subsumption of labor under capital, not the subsumption of its product. But there is a complementary account in the *Grundrisse* that takes place at the level of the product of labor, via the universalization of market circulation. These processes are complementary; one could not exist without the other.

For reasons that Marx assumed but did not spell out — reasons that Dave Beech has thoroughly explored — artistic labor is not universally and directly subsumable under capital. (Though it is more subsumable than Marx suspected — Marx could not have envisioned, for example, sequencing software taking the place of a live orchestra in a theatrical performance). The artwork, on the other hand, seems in its social facticity to offer no such resistance to the market.

Bradić: So the artwork has to confront its commodity status no matter what, while some artistic labor is more easily subsumable under capital than others. Does this mean that, no matter the relations of production, the artwork establishes itself as an artwork through the negation of the commodity form?

Brown: Yes — assuming we're within a hegemonically capitalist cultural field. The relations of production matter, but they matter because normative presuppositions respond to them, not because they are sociologically determining. This is a crucial but difficult distinction. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel explains the increasingly explicit thematic content of then-contemporary literature by pointing out that modern life is itself characterized by reflexive knowledge, and that "no artist could, merely by resoluteness and force of will, abstract herself from it." This is what I am trying to say about commodification. Not

that total commodification is an economic fact, though it is certainly an economic tendency. Rather, contemporary life is characterized by the universality of commodity exchange, and no artist can, merely by resoluteness and force of will, abstract herself from it. Commodity exchange presupposes what the economists call "consumer sovereignty," and consumer sovereignty precludes the self-legislation of the work of art, and therefore precludes its meaning. So artists find themselves obliged to devise stratagems or ruses that turn aside the barrier to meaning posed by the commodity form. Even when sociological conditions are in place that block the immediate pressure of commodity exchange — even when relations of production are congenial to the production of art — artworks are not simply exempted on the basis of their location in social space. Rather, they have to claim admission to the Bourdieusian restricted fields that still obtain, and this claim is coterminous with the work itself. In the U.S., artistically ambitious jazz musicians maintain important aspects of a restricted field. But the work of art still has to account for its relation to commodity exchange, precisely by claiming its exclusion from the commodity dynamic, by asserting its participation in the restricted field.

Bradić: In your book you maintain that the work of art is "not itself emancipatory" (37) although it does oppose capitalism. Similarly, for Kant, aesthetic judgement could not be equated with a moral one, but at the same time it could not be separated from it either, since it functions along the same axis, and therefore could be considered as preparatory for it. Schiller on the other hand reframes the entire relationship between the sensory and reason through his concept of the "aesthetic state," and enables us to think of art as necessarily politically active. If his positions are "untenable now as they were then" (37), what can art hope to attain in our context?

Brown: Against his apparent intention, Schiller showed that there is no way to distinguish between art as a propaedeutic to freedom and art as a substitute for freedom. So what can art attain or oppose? What I meant by saying that the work of art is not itself emancipatory is that works of art have no material levers to operate. Whatever artworks attain or whatever they oppose, they attain or oppose by successfully soliciting interpretation and judgment.

Art's real, material enemy, the universalization of commodity exchange, cannot be opposed by it in an unmediated way. The artwork is what Brecht called a "foreign body" within our total exchange society, but it lacks the means to oppose it actively. Art's proximate, ideological enemy is the post-1968 anti-dialectical theoretical counter-revolution and its American appropriation, whose "spinozist" suspicion of meaning evacuates the specificity of the work of art. If art is (like everything else) an ensemble of affective relations, or (like everything else) a social precipitate, or (like everything else) a nexus of human and non-human "agency," then it is (like everything else) a commodity. The relationship between artists and theorists of art in the postmodern period was in retrospect far more conflictual than it appeared at the time. If in this

ideological struggle the victorious camp among the theorists played a reactionary role, the role artists played was far more complex. Among the pasticheurs have been those determined to lodge a foreign body within the cultural logic of late capitalism. Some of those artists have had, as Brecht did, powerfully political things to say. But even Brecht acknowledged that before his plays could succeed as politics, they had to succeed as plays.

Bradić: If a work of art entails "internal suspension of the commodity form, which nonetheless does not cease to operate" (182), in what ways does its mediation through the institutions and the market affect its social existence?

Brown: This is precisely what I was getting at. The artwork's active relation to the commodity is purely an internal relation. The external relation to the commodity is passive; externally, it is just a commodity. This means that its social facticity is ratified through the market. It is the relations internal to the work, which comprise a meaning and solicit interpretation, that invoke a mode of social ratification to which the market is hostile, thereby constituting a foreign body within commodity society. Judgment and interpretation are, before any judgment and interpretation, built into artworks as their horizon. There is a lot to be said about how judgment and interpretation are empirically mediated by institutions, but I'm not the one to say it. There is a danger in examining up close how the sausage is made that leads to cynicism. In principle, artworks are addressed to everyone, but this address is easily obscured. Part of my job is to teach, for example, college sophomores how to understand George Eliot. Eliot is in the scheme of things not that distant from us historically, and the things she cares about are often of interest to us in a fairly unmediated way. But it takes a significant effort on the part of a college sophomore in 2021 to figure out what Eliot is asking her to do. Without an institutional framework, those kinds of meanings would be accessible only to enthusiasts.

Bradić: Are you saying that the institution of art disarticulates use-value and exchange-value, which are otherwise totally imbricated in the commodity form?

Brown: In a capitalist society, use-value is the necessary and sufficient condition for exchange, and therefore the necessary and sufficient condition for a product's commodity-character. So the two cannot really be disentangled: any use-value will immediately take the form of a commodity. To realize its exchange value, a product must have a use; for a product to be socially ratified as useful, it must be exchanged. But the dual character of the commodity is not the dual character of the artwork, because meaning is not the same as use.

Bradić: Why not?

Brown: Meanings are not a special kind of use, but something other than use. If someone finds a new use for a widget, we don't say that that person misunderstood widgets, that account of the widget was unconvincing, that they mistakenly ascribed to widgets a use they do not have. They simply found a new use

for widgets. But we can and do insist that novels can be misunderstood, that a person's account of a novel can be unconvincing, that a student or a colleague or a friend can ascribe a meaning to a novel that it does not have. A novel of course also has a use and therefore is exchangeable: it has the ordinary doubleness of the commodity. But it also has the "dual character" of the artwork insisted upon by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno and Brecht agreed at least on this, that works of art are capable both of having a use (e.g. entertainment) and of being about that use, and that these are ontologically distinct.

If meaning is equated with use, then all readers of a novel are entitled to their own private meanings just as all buyers of widgets are entitled to their own private uses, and in that case literature professors and seminars aren't much use. As far as the commodity-character of the artwork is concerned, that's not false. But if you believe that's all there is to it, then there is nothing further to talk about. Our interpretations will be as little relevant to each other as our dreams.

Bradić: In an essay "One, Two, Many Ends of Literature" (2009) you claim that "the forms of attention required by literary analysis are particularly congenial to Marxism." What is, then, the role of interpreters and interpretation in the process of social recognition of a work of art?

Brown: What I'm trying to say in that essay I still think is true, but it was a sad attempt. Since then I have read Lukács's book on *The Young Hegel*, and his essays collected in *Goethe and His Age*. These do a much better job. But the point I was trying to make is that the Hegelian dialectic and the modern concept of art were born at more or less the same time, in more or less the same place, and that the living branch of the dialectical tree is Marxism. There is that crazy document we call the "Oldest System Program of German Idealism," in Hegel's hand, but it sounds more like Hölderlin, and Schelling was also somehow involved in writing it when the three of them were at seminary together. It is a conceptual mess, totally useless as a guide or clue to anyone's mature thinking, but it shows how closely aesthetic and inchoately dialectical ambitions were tied together, even if incoherently, at the end of the eighteenth century among ambitious young thinkers in Germany. In fact, Hegel's attempt to disentangle them, the well-known "end of art" thesis from the lectures on fine art, is deeply problematic.

In the early pages of his lectures on fine art, Hegel claims that what distinguishes the artwork from other forms of human activity is that in its very mode of being it solicits interpretation and judgment. We ratify the social existence of commodities by buying them, but we ratify the social existence of artworks by interpreting them. Of course specialists have a role in this ratification, especially in a society as stratified by class as ours are. But the solicitation to interpretation embodied in the work of art is radically universal. Ratification by the market, on the other hand, has no need of specialists; therein lies its apparently democratic appeal. But the market is radically particular: that is, stratified by price.

Bradić: As a student of Frederic Jameson and a graduate of Stanford and Duke Universities, you have been working in the tradition of Western Marxism since the 90's. One could claim how you have started your career in the period of an almost absolute triumph of the neoliberal capitalist doctrine, marked by the famous statement of "end of history". How would you describe the changes that have happened since then in the configurations of knowledge and capital?

Brown: Stevan, this is too big a question for me! I had no idea what Stanford was when I was there. I had my group of friends, I was in a band, there was a good bookstore in Palo Alto. I liked some professors, too: Sylvia Wynter and Marjorie Perloff were there, two scholars who couldn't be more different from each other, but both fearless and heterodox and electrifying lecturers, and I spent a wonderful three years learning Swahili from a linguist who was there at the time, Ndinzi Masagara. The people I argued about philosophy and literature and music with were mostly not the people from my philosophy and literature classes, whom I found too serious without really being able to say (then or now) precisely what I meant by that. A lot of my friends were computer scientists, but I had no idea that they or people like them were about to drive a massive — partly fictional and ideological, but still massive — reorganization of capital. But I don't have any special insight into it. I will say that whatever the theorists might have thought or hoped, there was no sense among the computer scientists I knew that the revolutionary-libertarian view that "information wants to be free" was remotely incompatible with capital accumulation. They believed in the former, and were eagerly looking forward to the latter.

Similarly at Duke I was ignorant of where I was. I had never lived in the South, and I hated it. The Literature Program was a very competitive place for students in ways that were not conducive to debate as I understood it. I learned a lot from Fred and from Valentin Mudimbe, and what might not be as obvious is that I learned a lot from Michael Hardt and Frank Lentricchia. In a complicated but not simply negative way I learned a lot from Barbara Herrnstein-Smith and Eve Sedgwick, and Toril Moi forced me to learn Portuguese, which made me furious at the time but I owe her a huge debt of gratitude for that. In educational terms, it was ridiculously rich. But I spent very little time on campus and I left as soon as I could. Of course the intellectual density of Duke and the miserable state that Durham was then in were both conncected to the acceleration of private accumulation and public disinvestment that is the primary goal of neoliberal ideology. But I wasn't aware of that at the time and couldn't give a good, specific account of it now.

It does seem to me that the period since I finished graduate school — that is, since the end of the 1990s — has been marked by neoliberal decadence. On the material side, capitalism's chickens have been coming home to roost for the past twenty years at an accelerating pace, making the old justifications for the neoliberal offensive seem more and more transparent and ridiculous. On the theoretical side, the "spinozist" reaction that was hegemonic in the 1990s even at Duke — a reaction that Fred opposed but tried to accommodate — is still dominant, but its dominance has become hollow. Recent well-received books

in this vein don't even appear to be trying to grapple substantively with real theoretical problems. The basic coordinates have been assumed for so long that their original justification has been forgotten, and straightforward questions of a fundamental nature cause a kind of panic. This decadence suggests that there is opening for new developments in politics as well as in theory — but of course it doesn't guarantee that these new directions will be positive ones.

Bradić: What role have the universities played in these changes? Would you agree with Bourdieu's assessment that we still need an "internationale of intellectuals" (*Rules of Art*, 344) in order to defend the autonomy of cultural production?

Brown: In the humanities, a strain of thought hegemonically considered advanced within the academy has been responsible for the lack of coherence in our understanding of what art is, and therefore for our lack of a basis for defending the standing of art as a subject worthy of disciplinary study. Bourdieu's work is implicated in this dynamic. His defense of intellectual autonomy is of course the other side of the contradiction that he has to navigate, and a number of our illustrious "defenders of the humanities" find themselves in the analogous situation of defending their autonomy on heteronomous grounds.

Do we need an international of intellectuals? We certainly need a strong and organized Left built around the working class, by which I mean the vast majority of people who are not owners of capital. This is probably more important than a cohesive intellectual class. It may be that an organized working class would be better for intellectual life than an organized intellectual class! At this moment, proposals for university funding coming from the political left in the U.S. are far more radical than anything coming from the intellectual left, whose administrative ranks have, at every turn, been willing to buy their way into the ruling class by sacrificing their own institutions. I have already said enough about the cognate accommodationism of contemporary theory.

But the way this question is taken up is, ironically, going to have a national basis. Specifically, this is going to look different in countries that are or expect to be in the E.U., as opposed to a large and hegemonic but intellectually isolated country like the United States. There is a spontaneous esprit de corps among scholars that can be witnessed at any international conference or colloquium, and this is something to build on. But in the U.S. only a very privileged stratum of intellectuals gets to witness, much less experience, this kind of international intellectual competition and camaraderie. In the U.S, real, conscious political organizing of intellectuals as a class or professional fraction with common interests that include intellectual autonomy but also more mundane things like job security and safe working conditions, has to take place first at a more provincial, national level. More specifically, the limited, but real and substantial successes that unions have had at U.S. universities when they organize across the division between the permanent and itinerant faculty need to be expanded upon. But this is, as I said, a more provincial matter and probably does not have a great deal to say to the European context.

Bradić: What does it mean for you to work in the Marxist tradition today?

Brown: In a recent interview, the great Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz said that if Marxism had never developed a practical-revolutionary program, it would still be the right way to do history, the right way to do political science, the right way to do literary analysis. This is shocking coming from him — he was exiled for his political activities as well as his views — but I think it's right. Of course there are lots of ways to do Marxist literary analysis, and many of them are bad. Roberto was talking about the core of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition: Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, Brecht, and you would now have to include Jameson and Roberto himself. In other words, Hegelian-Marxist criticism isn't the right way to do literary analysis because it contributes to social liberation, though it may do that, but because it grasps literature in a more productive and powerful way than other approaches.

Bradić: Does this mean there is no political program for Marxism today?

Brown: What I mean to say is rather that its relation to criticism is highly mediated. The re-entry of socialism into electoral politics in the United States has been an unexpectedly electrifying phenomenon, but the socialists are an embattled minority in the Democratic Party and the Communist Party is effectively nonexistent. Black Lives Matter is undisciplined by design, not a movement in the ordinary sense. It doesn't propose a practical-revolutionary program but serves rather as a slogan that crystallizes urban and liberal dissatisfaction, which is widespread and intense but widely disparate in the interests and goals that motivate it. The union movement is working hard to rebuild but is a shadow of its former self after savage neoliberal onslaught that was, as is well known, undertaken alike by the right and by the "left." And what is genuinely of the left today is not uniformly intelligent. All this is to say that it is far from obvious what a Marxist politics looks like when there is no practical-revolutionary Marxist politics going on at scale. This appears to be a problem, since not only did Marxism develop a practical-revolutionary program, but such a program arises logically from the same set of presuppositions that undergirds the Marxist production of knowledge.

But one of Marxism's deepest commitments, which it shares with Hegel, is that any politics, no matter how apparently radical, is in practical terms deeply conservative if it does not intervene in the conditions that actually pertain: *hic Rhodus, hic salta!* In a neoliberal present where the left is weak and often confused, this means supporting social democratic tendencies militantly, but with a distance I would call pedagogical. That is, with the explicit reservation that social-democratic proposals, which are in themselves often popular even in this supposedly center-right country, cannot succeed in any robust way without the support of a practical-revolutionary politics – an organized alliance of the more secure and more precariously employed or unemployed sectors of the working class. Marxism is fundamentally a set of postulates about how capitalism works and how the world works under capitalism; history is its teaching lab.

Bradić: What affirmative trends do you see in art and theory today?

Brown: I wish this were an easier question. A colleague of mine, an art historian, recently told me that her most difficult task as a scholar was finding art worth talking about.

I think the successes one encounters in heteronomous fields, which are largely what concern *Autonomy*, are always going to be ephemeral; anything that works is going to become a mere technical-industrial means almost immediately. For a brief moment it seemed like the American telenovela — *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *The Wire*, and so on — was going to be a serious art form. People were talking about long-form televisual narrative, only quasi-facetiously, as possibly becoming the new Victorian novel. That lasted maybe five years. Now "quality television" is, predictably, just a market niche: good actors and passable dialogue, sometimes really expensive costumes and sets, to go with your premium media subscription. One recent exception is the first season of the TV series *Homecoming*. But that came out of left field: originally it was a podcast, and the TV show is a nearly verbatim visualization. That the second season, written for television, is insupportable just emphasizes the point. Musicians like Prince and Jack White are sui generis — their solutions don't work once they have been incorporated into the culture-industry toolbox. The novel, by its nature not capital-intensive, may be an exception. The distribution problem can be overcome quickly if a book starts to catch on with a few critics or even scholars. Can you imagine a few scholars' essays making a difference in the popularity of a pop song? I didn't mention it in *Autonomy* but the latest wave of African novelists, especially but not only among the Francophone writers, have taken an ambitious turn: Zoë Wicomb, Fiston Mujila, Alain Mabanckou, Abdourahman Waberi, all writers with markedly original relations to the medium. Meanwhile contemporary art photography continues to be a bright spot, partly because in places it operates according to the logic of a Bourdieusian restricted field. It is exhilarating to witness the dialectical, leapfrogging development of photography as its own problem playing out in real time among younger (and very different) artists like Viktoria Binschtok, Phil Chang, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Dan Shea.

Another positive thing I have noticed, and this may only in my immediate perceptual field, is that young people seem to become disenchanted with what are sold to them as generationally "their" cultural goods at an earlier age than my generation did; in a corresponding way, they seem to be more interested and aware of things they think are worth preserving and understanding in the cultural goods of the past, which already suggests an interest in something in them exceeds their status as cultural goods. For what it's worth, my own children, like most people their age, are deeply invested in popular culture. But they have very little enthusiasm for contemporary popular culture, and this does not seem to have anything to do with their upbringing — it seems quite general among their peers. It also seems to me that young people — and now I'm talking about my undergraduate students, mostly working class, mostly

first-generation college students, at an urban, public university — are more interested in erudite culture, perhaps because of the same feeling of disenchantment with the prevailing cultural standard, than my generation was. But this all may be just wishful thinking on my part, I haven't looked into data that might support it.

In the field of theory, there has been a small but a clearly perceptible shift in thinking about Hegel and German Idealism more generally, so that the idealist sequence is neither anathematized, as it was for the Foucauldian generation, nor so little-studied and exotic as to be thought susceptible of admixture with an entirely contrary figure like Lacan. There has been a rapprochement, not without friction but highly productive, between Hegelians and followers of certain figures in Anglo-American philosophy like Elizabeth Anscombe and Donald Davidson. Enthusiasm for Marxism as a Left identity is increasingly attractive; the commitment to Marxism as a conceptual discipline is less frequently encountered but one is permitted to hope that it is a lagging indicator.