

## 9 Neoclassical economics as a logic of subversion

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Subversion is an activity associated with radical politics and art. It means an effort – usually combined with plotting and similar secret, underground activities – to undermine established powers and authorities. However, this [paper](#), in line with the general orientation of the volume, starts from the presumption that we today, all of us, inside the ‘advanced’ world, live *inside* subversion. Thus, as the activity of subversion is only apparently self-evident, so better start by exploring the meanings of the word.

Dictionary definitions of subversion, and of related terms like ‘undermine’ and ‘overthrow’, contain three points of interest. Most evidently, such an activity involves a degree of violence; though this is combined with secrecy, a link that will prove to be particularly important. Furthermore, such activities aim with particular vigour not directly at the prevailing powers, trying to avoid a direct – and usually hopeless – confrontation; rather they aim at the foundations. In one reading, subversion tries to inflict blows below the belt; in another, particularly clear in the term ‘undermine’, it operates by generating a void,<sup>1</sup> into which the entity falls due to its own weight. Finally, all this involves a fundamental reversal of the *vertical* perspective or order of things: whatever previously was high is brought down, and whatever was low consequently moves up. Such an idea was central to the *Tabula Smaragdina* (Linden 2003), a key piece of hermetic writings, while on different note ‘turning the world upside down’ also for the activity of circus clowns.

The focus of this paper is not on *present* subversive activities but on reading the present as generated by a long-term historical process of subversion. In trying to map the experience of living in a subverted, upside-down world literature, in particular, novels offer a privileged starting point. A main aim of the modern novel was to make sense of living in a world where reality became increasing unreal, an experience that modern sociology or philosophy, fixated with positivism and logic, cannot handle (Szakolczai 2016, 2017). A unique attempt to connect this feeling with the activity of subversion is offered in Goethe’s late autobiography. The metaphor of undermining is pivotal to the way Goethe came to understand the processes which he lived through.

### Undermining in Goethe and Dostoevsky

The term appears at a crucial place of *Poetry and Truth*. It is deployed to stunning effect: Goethe claims that shortly after he finished university and started to work in the legal profession, he came to the realisation that ‘civil society’ had been ‘undermined by a frightful labyrinth’ (Goethe 2015: 931), visible in the destruction of entire families around him. But how could a society be ‘undermined’? And what perpetrates such an activity? A second use of the word offers some clarification: it was the ‘youth’ as such that ‘undermined’ (*untergraben*) itself, with its unhappiness and self-hatred, leading to ever more excessive, unsustainable and unacceptable demands, due to its unsatisfiable passions and imagined sufferings (943). The third occasion offers a different logic: chandlers (955).

A triple diagnosis is not accidental or isolated but a main structuring device in some of the most important sections of the work (Books XI–XIII), dealing with Goethe’s formative experiences from his late teens into his early twenties, background to his first works, especially *Werther*, with which he skyrocketed to eternal fame. It includes the three times he discusses Voltaire, Lessing and the ‘spirit of times’ under his youth, as embodied and expressed in his generation, where Goethe tries to capture the underlying mood just before the French Revolution.

The term rhymes with underground activities, in particular the digging of tunnels under the ground, or mining. Strikingly, the main character of the first volume of *Wilhelm Meister*, Jarno, who in the second volume would use the name Montan (derivative of ‘mountain’), is obsessed with mining. Even further, the quasi-Masonic secret society of which he is a key member, the ‘Society of the Tower’, is working ‘underground’, while the term ‘labyrinth’ is emphatically used to characterise their activities and appearance (see Citati 1990: 115). The model for this was possibly a jocular association set up by colleagues of Goethe in Wetzlar, where the stages of initiation were organised according to degrees of transitionality; thus, the first was called ‘transition’, the second ‘transition to transition’, while the fourth ‘transition to transition of the transition to transition [*des Übergang Übergangs zu des Übergangs Übergang*]’ (Goethe 2015: 851); or permanent transitoriness raised on the third power.

The evocative force of the metaphor goes even further. ‘Undermining’ generates void, or emptiness, thus causing the entity ‘undermined’ to collapse or fold by its own weight. It is thus a way to destroy, decompose, dismantle and take apart, through the void; something that captures the core of the work of Newton, arch-enemy for Goethe, who supposedly not only discovered the absolute void but made it into the ‘background’ of his ‘natural philosophy’ (Horvath 2013). Even more, the void is explicitly associated in the *Wilhelm Meister* with theatre, while in *Poetry and Truth* both with a main ‘underminer’, Lessing.<sup>2</sup>

The model for such undermining activities was Voltaire (Goethe 2015: 772–778) – in particular through his attacks on the family, the institution

which should rather be the positive centre of public life; and also through his campaign against respectable figures in high positions, using the press, under the hypocritical mask of searching for the truth. This resulted in the grave error of making the public believe that it itself is the real judge – a true absurdity. The nefarious influence of Voltaire extends to his continuous mocking and ridiculing whatever was held sacred – Goethe intimates that while reading Voltaire's *Saul* he even had the desire to strangle him (815) – and became effective when combined with the similar activities of Rousseau and Diderot, argues Goethe, preparing a general nausea and repugnance from society, where 'everything existing seemed to perish' (778). As a result, in the legal profession a particularly unhealthy, cynical and sophistic mood became dominant, hurting Goethe's sense of beauty and dignity, making 'the worse effect on a young man who always strives for the good' (860–861) and undermining respect for the law. It was in the context of such nausea of life (*Ekel vor dem Leben*), rooted in a failure of participation (922–924); suggested to the youth by a combination of English poetry, Enlightenment thinking and German theatre; and out of which *Werther* emerged, that the term 'undermining' was presented and discussed.

The key distancing from Lessing concerns his previous impact – the propagation of the theatre of Shakespeare. Once Goethe recognised the deleterious impact of the Enlightenment, he understood where Lessing is coming from and what was wrong with the reading of Shakespeare he offered. He perceived that his contemporaries attributed a disproportionate attention in Shakespeare's plays to clowns and the absurd, and that such erroneous perception could only become so widespread because it was given a first signal by Lessing, who at that time enjoyed unlimited respect (790–2). Even worse, Goethe held Lessing responsible for the bad state of German theatre, literally accusing him of corrupting German public morals, and in a very specific way. The German, says Goethe, is by nature benevolent, but comedy only generates gloating (*schadenfreude*) and incites disrespect for the upper classes, where in Germany Lessing played a pioneering role with his *Emilia Galotti* and its presumed 'unmasking' of the higher circles (910–1). The play perfectly chimed with the 'spirit of the times' (a grave error for Goethe), introducing the new fashion that intriguers must be aristocrats, while the greatest rascals had to be judges or other members of the judiciary.<sup>3</sup>

The metaphor of undermining was not limited to Goethe. A few decades later it also plays a central role in Dostoevsky, according to the chapter devoted to him in the magisterial overview of 19th-century novels by Pietro Citati, *Absolute Evil*. According to Citati, in the midst of working on *Demons*, a sudden illumination came to Dostoevsky, causing him to mutate the project and introduce a new hero, Stavrogin, figure of 'absolute evil', beyond the previous protagonist, Piotr Verhovensky, modelled on Nechaev. This was an illumination which made him realise that the presence of evil was much more extensive than he previously imagined: he had to start from

a much greater distance as the entire Russian society was ‘undermined’ (*minato*, see Citati 2000: 322–325).

Given that destruction is thus achieved by the generation of void – nothingness, nil, *nulla* or *nihil* – it is of considerable interest that the two path-breakers of the idea of nihilism before Nietzsche were Jacobi, an old friend of Goethe, and Turgenev (especially in *Fathers and Sons*), a model figure for a character in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*. They jointly represent the German and Russian sources of Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism, as if forecasting the two greatest nihilistic regimes of the 20th century, Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia.

Such a literal, both literary and historical, focus on words associated with subversion, in particular undermining, helps to overcome the frequent association of subversion with explicit, direct, often even violent attacks on concrete centres of power, moving towards secrecy. In addition, in this ~~paper~~ a further direction will be taken: the instrumentalisation of liminal situations by *fixation*. The idea that the trickster is also a ‘fixer’ was introduced by Ricketts (1965), and is used extensively in the literature (see e.g. Pelton 1980: 16; Bright 1993: 149–150); however, its exact meaning is never properly specified. One crucial hint is given by Ricketts, indicating that he closely follows Radin: the ‘trickster-fixer’ is shorthand for the ‘trickster-transformer-culture hero’ (Ricketts 1965: 327; about this, see Radin 1972: 160); thus in this ‘fixing’ transformation comes into play.

The conceptual history of the term, as evident in the *Online Etymological Dictionary*, is quite intriguing. While ‘fixity’ is about solidity itself, over the centuries the word gained a new shade of meaning, through ‘repair’, towards ‘tampering with’, thus implying a mode of trickery. The chapter, however, will suggest taking the ‘trickster fixer’ in a literal sense: the trickster is someone who can actually fixate someone, even entire cultures, permanently in a liminal situation. This has a crucial corollary concerning ‘subversion’. The strategy of the ‘trickster fixer’ could be considered as the zero cost/zero risk alternative to active subversion: instead of taking up the risk of explicitly opposing holders of power, one can simply use the occasion of people being caught in a liminal situation by finding arguments through which they can be kept there – even convincing them that this is in their best interest. This also corresponds well to the idea of the trickster being an ‘occasionist’, advanced by Horvath (2009, 2013: 58, 133–134, 162, fn.27).

The idea of making use of the temporary difficulties of people, for example, in order to make money out of their plight (about such a mercenary mentality, see Chapters 1 and 8), is not new. Most medieval and early modern food riots were due to such attempts by speculators in periods of draught or other natural or political disaster; a central issue also for the French Revolution. What is new in this respect in our times is that, due to the constitutional inability of rationalist thought to deal with situationality, a consequence of its universalism, cases such as ‘vulture capitalism’ or ‘ambulance chasing attorneys’ are considered perfectly legitimate ways of making money, in line

with the absolute freedom of buying and selling. However, the point of this chapter is quite different. Here, the key argument is that, way beyond such extreme cases, contemporary politics and economics is now systematically based on fixing people in certain positions and identities that otherwise are related to temporary situations and activities. Such identities prominently include the 'victim' and the 'consumer' or rather 'customer'. In both cases, politics and economics supposedly serve such people and are performed in their name and interests, often even through their willing participation. Yet our claim is that both imply a certain 'fixing' of identity, a permanent fixating in a temporary position, and that it is such fixing which plays a key role in all of us now living *under* subversion.

This chapter will focus exclusively on the second case, the figure of the customer.<sup>4</sup>

### **In the name of the 'customer'**

Of course, in the contemporary world everyone spends a fair amount of time shopping or buying. We live in an exchange economy, so in order to procure the most basic things necessary for living we need to buy them. However, this was by no means always the case. The shift from a 'world' in which very little time and energy was spent on buying to our contemporary times was never much reflected upon, only considered as a kind of 'natural' change, a progress and development for the better. This should be revisited, and the identity or the 'subject position' of the 'customer' offers a good way to do so.

#### ***Preliminary remarks: culture and language***

In this section only a few examples will be given to illustrate the case; a proper study would require at least a chapter on its own. To begin with, while we consider classical Athens as direct predecessor of our democracy, the ideas of classical philosophy, even of the Athenian constitution, e.g. concerning exchange, and money in particular, are quite different from ours. Thus, the three central values of Greek democracy, discussed among others by Isocrates and Polybius, were freedom, autonomy and autarchy. While even the exact meaning of freedom, and especially autonomy, differed then from the way we interpret these terms (thus, 'autonomy' did not refer to the individual, rather to the city-state, it being free to set up its own laws, close to what today is called 'sovereignty'), 'autarchy' meant something completely deprived of value for us: the idea to be economically self-sufficient, both concerning households and the entire community. Exchange was limited to the surplus, and was thus generally frowned upon.

A similar consideration concerning the very activity of shopping transpires through Hungarian language. In Hungarian, the standard word used for 'customer' or 'shopper' is *vásárló*, which literally refers to somebody attending a fair (*vásár*). While the conceptual history of terms related to 'fairs'

and ‘markets’ is quite delicate, in all European languages, there can be no doubt that this term referred to the attendance of a rare temporary event, and by no means constituted an ‘identity’.

The third point is concerned with the confusion related to contemporary English terminology. The term ‘customer’ has a very broad meaning, basically denoting the clients of any commercial venue. However, originally the term meant ‘customs official’, and even with Shakespeare it also carried the meaning of ‘prostitute’ (*Othello* IV.i.117), in either case a very peculiar identity, one not associated with ‘common folk’ as it is most self-evidently today. Even more, the use of even such basic economic terms is confusing. While it is clear enough that a ‘customer’ is supposed to buy, and a ‘consumer’ uses products, the problem is not that most often (at least in daily life) the two coincide but that in highly charged ideological terms, like ‘consumer sovereignty’, what is really meant is ‘costumer sovereignty’. The transition between such delicate differences, and acts, is brushed aside in conventional economic theory as irrelevant word-mongering. However, one can rather argue that they are part of the way in which the identity-fixing characteristic of economic theory and practice is systematically hidden.

### **Trickster fixating**

The logic of trickster fixating follows a prescribed sequence of steps. In the terminology of Agnes Horvath (2019), they can be considered as elements of a linear transformation process. Just as in linear algebra a configuration in a space can be transposed, through a matrix, into another, different one, here human beings are guided, through a series of steps, into a different kind of world. This can also be described as an ‘Alice-in-Wonderland-kind-experience’, and this may not be surprising, given that Lewis Carroll was a mathematician.

#### ***Step 1: misreading a liminal situation as reality***

The success of the transformation, especially its hiding, requires that in the first step the trickster must be as close to reality as possible; must act inside and in the name of reality. This is rendered possible by the fact, as Foucault (1982) and especially Weber (1978) were keenly aware, that the real world, or any human society or community, even any concrete, individual human being, can be in two different modes: in an ordinary, normal, accepted, taken-for-granted state; in an out-of-ordinary (*außeralltägliche*) situation; in a state of emergency; or, in classical terminology, in *cosmos* or *chaos*. Concerning the former, the well-ordered world, or *cosmos*, is a *given*: it is simply there, it exists, is even beautiful, for the Greeks (this is why *cosmos* is the etymological source of the term ‘cosmetic’); it can be taken as a gift. As for the latter, a good illustration is offered by illness: if somebody is ill, one certainly keeps existing; illness is very much real (*if* it is real), but an ill person, as it is often

said, is not really himself or herself. All this can also be expressed in the language of liminality as illness, among many others, is a liminal condition.

Here we arrive at the first stage of the trick: the trickster starts not by denying reality, building castles of sand or evoking wishful thinking but by taking the liminal situation as a real, given reality, insisting that we must face real life and accept a liminal, thus in a 'technical' sense unreal as transitional, reality as *the* starting point.

### ***Step 2: fixating in the liminal present***

The second step in the trickster revaluation of values is hardly distinct from the first. It indeed *should* be so as otherwise it would be better noticed and more objected. The key point is to render the ending of liminality, the return to the normal, ordinary state of affairs, impossible. The first stage was interpretive, suggesting that the current, liminal, unreal state of affairs was simply the real reality. The second step is the corollary: if this *is* reality, why would anybody consider a return to something else? Thus, without exerting any explicit pressure, people become induced to stay in a situation that was accepted only as being something temporary.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Step 3: hiding the past***

Still, while this can go on for a time, as a transitory situation is clearly 'real' in a way, after a time people are bound to wonder about a return to normality. The mind, as it was recognised by Tarde, Girard or Gell (or by Pascal, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche), is not simply a source of 'rationality' as Kantian anthropological constant; rather it is a delicate organism that can easily be misled, especially by images, by image-magic or image-power. Thus, trickster machinations always primarily target the mind. The issue at stake is to alter memory, or the images; one has about the past through current sensations, and also bombarding with images. Current sensations are evidently stronger than memory: if we behold an object in sight, we gain a better image than when we try to recollect it. While memory is fundamental for identity, the trickster can actually alter this through images, fiddling with our sense of reality, thus 'constructing' an identity. By means of flooding our senses with sensations and images, saturating our mind, the past becomes obliterated. The stealing of reality is always preceded by stealing the past.

### ***Step 4: revalorising the future by prioritising it***

The fixing into the present, away from the past, is accompanied by a similar operation concerning the future. No matter how overwhelming the impressions gained in the present moment are, the temporal direction cannot be fully eliminated from the human mind. This is taken care of by not only fixating people in the confusing present but offering excessive promises

concerning the future. Our trickster, with disarming honesty, gladly agrees that the contemporary situation is far from being perfect but then argues, through a proper combination of carrots and sticks, that in the future all such shortcomings will be alleviated, and that we only need to trust him. And once he gets a little finger inside the door, he never can be gotten rid of as pulling out would imply acknowledging our increasingly growing losses.

A combination of such attitudes with respect to past, present and future is present in the rhetoric of revolution and evolution. We live *inside* the revolution, where everything is changing and in an exciting way, so we just need to abandon ourselves to the ‘flow’. In addition, we are told that doing so is right and guaranteed by the theory of evolution and the idea of progress, which imply that it is in the nature of things that life is always getting better.

#### ***Step 5: revalorising the past by seriously downgrading it***

Given that memories might always come back, the trickster – apart from focussing on the present by overvaluing it and considering it an exclusive good – also, surreptitiously, returns to the past, though only to emphasise how bad it was. Thus, over time, there is a shift from simply ignoring the past to explicitly considering it as obsolete, bypassed, worthless. But in the next stage of linear transformation new attention is focussed on the past – not in the sense of finally discovering it, refreshing genuine memories but by focussing on selected events that factually demonstrate how bad that was. This selective attention has two main points, all focussing on the same kind of events: wars, crises, genocides, mass murders, famines, all kinds of catastrophes, demonstrating on the one hand *really* how bad the past was, full of suffering, deprivation, oppression, horror; on the other, such past events are used to generate support for our current rulers, showing how much they were instrumental in leading us out of the nightmare that was *the* past. Any effort to correct this view by claiming that this was not all that was happening in ‘the’ past, and that at any rate our past extends not to a few decades but many thousands years, is brushed aside by two ‘ace-of-trumps’ arguments, supposedly silencing any dissent: first, we *know* that the past has no real values as it goes against the theory of evolutionary progress, and second, such dissent represents a disrespect for suffering victims. These arguments together offer a waterproof, airtight closing off of the past.

#### ***Step 6: revalorising the future by downgrading it***

Once the *real* past is safely stolen, the stunning feat of stealing even the future can be accomplished. The bright promises are never actually denied or refuted; they remain hanging somewhere there, but the troubles of the present with the recurrent new crises – outcomes of crisis-mongering – imply that full attention and effort is required just to stay above water. We live in a world of cutthroat competition<sup>6</sup> where nothing can be taken for granted;

if someone has no job, one must search for one; if one has a job, it is not guaranteed that it will last, as technological developments – supposedly self-generating and self-sustaining – cannot be stopped, and at any rate we have already agreed that *this* is where real progress lies. This is where we are right now, with generations being over-educated without having the minimal chance of a meaningful and related work in sight.

### **Modalities of subversion: alchemic technology, public arena, fairground economy**

In line with these considerations, the experience of living under subversion, in an unreal reality, can be expressed in three modalities of permanent liminality, each capturing a highest possible state of subversion: contemporary modernity as permanent war, permanent revolution and permanent fair. The first idea was suggested by Patočka (1976/7), following the philosophy of Heidegger. The second is best associated with Trotsky but was proposed programmatically as early as 1815 by the liberal economists Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer (Voegelin 1999: 216–219). This chapter, based on previous works, proposes a third idea: we do not live in a ‘market economy’ but a permanent fair.

The liminal moments most connected with technological developments and the subsequent entrapment in technology are wars. It is well known that some of the most important technological innovations of the past century, like radar, computers, ATMs (any time machines) or jet engines, were due to the Second World War, though the connection has never been properly reflected upon as that would have come to challenge our idolisation of technology. Similarly, major shifts in the role of the public sphere can be connected to revolutions, where the causality is even more delicate, with revolutionary championing of the public sphere being as much a source as a consequence of revolutions. Of course, wars and revolutions historically have been connected, but the same is true for technology and the public sphere: one only has to consider the invention of the press, or of the internet, both at the same time being technological and altering the nature of the ‘public sphere’.

The liminal situation most associated with the rise of the modern economy is not the market but the fair. While the two are closely connected, distinctions being time and again blurred, a basic line of separation is clear enough.

#### ***Fairs vs. markets: on the origins of the stock market***

At a first level, the distinction between fairs and markets is straightforward. If markets are places where buyers and sellers meet to exchange goods, then a fair is a special type of periodic market. Markets take place frequently, usually weekly, while fairs are much less frequent, often being annual (see

German word *Jahrmarkt*). Their duration is also different: a market lasts at most for a day, while fairs extend to a longer period. Finally, fairs also more closely follow the cycle of seasons, taking place either in early or late summer, thus underlining their liminal character. This, however, can be modified if they coincide with other seasonal festivities, like carnivals.

In terms of space, the distinction is less clear-cut, yet definitely marked. Markets are closely associated with towns. Basically, each town has at least one marketplace, and the daily sociability of towns, just as interactions between town and countryside, often takes place there. It has even been argued that a town is nothing but a permanent marketplace (Cipolla 2005: 35). Fairs, however, only take place in certain select areas, and often outside town limits.

While the semantic distinction is simple, there was a considerable confusion over time in terminology, whether in modern languages or in Antiquity. A standard German term for 'fair' is *Messe*, also meaning 'mass', except that Sunday is market day. In the English translation of Bakhtin 'market', 'fair' and 'public square' were used interchangeably, though even Bakhtin himself was not consistent in distinguishing the terms. Yet, beyond a simple linguistic confusion, there are complex social and cultural issues involved. Fairs represent a heightened level of encounter among strangers. This mode of interaction already played a major role in Weber's definition of a town, which cannot be identified by size or function but rather as a space for the regular meeting of strangers. Markets, and especially fairs, as they always involve long-distance trade, take such encounters to another level. Thus, fairs imply a complex ensemble of cultural, political, religious and social practices, being particularly close to carnivals (Bakhtin 1984).

Clarity concerning the distinction can be increased through a reading of conceptual history. The origins of related terms, places and practices, whether in Greek (*panegyris*, *agora*), Latin (*mercatus*, *nundiae*, *forum*) or Gaelic (*Lughnasa*), can be traced to 'assembly', understood in the most general sense (de Ligt 1993). Such assembly was the meeting place of a community, understood in a broad sense, including people dispersed over quite a large area; potentially every human being was involved. Archaeological evidence offers few hints concerning the origins of settlement: while we don't know why our distant ancestors settled, such settlements grew out of temporary seasonal gatherings (Mithen 2003; Valla 2008). Such gatherings were eminently 'political', dealing with issues concerning the whole community, and they were also connected to the emergence of sanctuaries and their visitation, well visible in the Irish tradition. The same considerations apply to Greek city-states, which grew out of sanctuaries (de Polignac 1995). Over time, the social aspects of fairs became predominant, especially through an intertwining of fairs and carnivals. While the relevance of such remote periods for understanding modernity might not be immediately evident, questions about the sources of markets, debts and business culture are increasingly posed (Roberts 2011).

The more specifically monetary significance of fairs is usually associated with the Champagne fairs in the 13th century and connected to both a general increase of prosperity and the activity of the counts of Champagne (Bautier 1970; Edwards and Ogilvie 2012). These fairs, however, in no way represented a break with the rhythm of medieval life (Herlihy 1997). After the devastations caused by the plague and a series of wars, the role of the Champagne fairs was taken up by the Brabant fairs, with Geneva, the heyday of the Geneva fairs coming around the 1450s (Van Houtte 1952; Bergier 1963). Over the 15th century, and especially from around 1450, there was a burgeoning intensity of fairs, culminated in the fairs of Lyon and Antwerp (Gascon 1971, 1977; van der Wee 1977).

At this moment, a radically new idea emerged. In order to conduct business in between fairs, a new institution was created, giving rise to the stock market (Braudel 1984). Thus, the fair became permanent – together with its association with the carnival – by turning into a feast that would never end. This helps to substantiate the view that *the* ‘economy’ is not a Kantian universal but a specific historical formation, an illustration of the Weberian idea of how something out-of-the-ordinary (*außeralltäglich*) can become everyday or ‘routine’ (*peralltäglich*). In other terminology, it is an instance of ‘permanent liminality’.

Increasingly permanent fairs fixated people into the flux of substitutability, accepting that whatever they ‘need’ must be acquired by some form of exchange, and therefore their lives also should be organised around the principle that they need to offer something for exchange.

The move from the medieval world, in which fairs were rare and spectacular events, combined with social festivities and carnivals, to the present dominated by ‘market economies’ was completed through a series of steps, alongside a ‘linear transformation’ process. Such economies thus show permanent carnivalesque features, though at the same time they are also sacrificial (Szakolczai 2017), due to the tight connections between exchange and sacrifice, through ‘substitutability’ (about this, see Calasso 2010).

The first step in this process, as we have seen, was to fixate characters in the present, meaning inside the fair. This was how the central engine of the modern economy, the stock market, was created – and then was hidden away. Not only the origins of the stock market are not known except by specialists of economic history, but the classics of political economy, even standard economics textbooks, hardly discuss the stock market.

### **Modalities of trickster fixating in the economy**

This, however, is only one part of the storyline. The other concerns the participants of fairs, which includes all members of society, even many people from afar, who are all attendants of the fairs in several capacities: as sellers but mostly as buyers and consumers, especially of foods and beverages, and as spectators. In the following, three glimpses will be offered on the

way human beings became fixated into permanent subject positions within the fairground economy, with more than a little help from the similarly fairground-born theatre.<sup>7</sup> They constitute subsequent steps of a ‘perverted linear transformation process’ (see [Chapter 4](#)) when in a delicate, liminal situation the rhythm of social life becomes diverted from its normal path. Ironically, the solution offered to this crisis leads to further crisis; thus the ‘solution’ is offered by further ‘matrixing’ away from meaningful life.

Three steps of this process will be sketched in the following.

### *Griswold on tricksters and ‘cony-catchers’*

The resurgence of the trickster in 16th-century theatre was identified by Wendy Griswold (1983, 1986: 38–47). The source of the stage figure was partly folk tale characters and sprites, partly the vice figure of medieval mystery plays, but it also integrated the Christian devil and the intriguer of Roman comedies, transmitted by Renaissance humanist plays. However, though Roman comedies often provided the plot structure of these plays, the new stage figure showed a number of important new features, bringing it closer to the trickster, and especially the trickster-fixer, the one who purposefully searches for opportunities to catch people in liminal conditions. Thus, instead of simply responding to events, as characteristic of Roman comedies, city comedy rogues initiated them. Even more importantly, they ‘typically express far more confidence in their schemes and their wits’ (Griswold 1986: 41).

These stage figures closely corresponded to real city characters singled out for attention in contemporary pamphlets as ‘cony-catchers’. They were thieves and swindlers, mostly hidden among the crowds of vagabonds and migrants populating London at that time, often having specialised nicknames as ‘hookers’, ‘rufflers’ or ‘crossbiters’ (44–45). Their closeness to the trickster is explicitly emphasised by Griswold: ‘The operations of the cony-catcher were those of the trickster, involving the usual combination of opportunism, temptation, flattery, and cleverness’ (45). However, here again some special features emerged in Tudor London that some pamphleteers explicitly called ‘Iron Age London’ (47). Central to this was a combination of explicit imitation, mutual interdependence and shrewd shifting between genres and roles. Pamphleteers and playwrights were often the same persons, who on one side denounced such figures and on the other played with them in order to attract more buyers or spectators. This was particularly true for Robert Greene who ‘offered sensational material under the guise of sober advice as to how to avoid being victimised’ (46), a strategy that would be used a century or so later by Daniel Defoe when he launched the first journal oriented for mass readership, before he would immortalise nascent capitalist individualism in the character of Robinson Crusoe who, he was emphatic to point out, was a character in real life (see Szakolczai 2015, 2016: 52, 58). It was the same Robert Greene who famously called Shakespeare an

‘upstart crow’, being upset not simply because Shakespeare imitated him but because he tried to move beyond the mere titillation of the audience. Here we stumble upon the fourth instance of systematic confusion, after that of cony-catchers and vagabonds, stage characters and real crooks, and pamphleteers and playwrights. The main buyers of pamphlets, just as spectators of theatrical comedies, were the ‘gallants’, often victims of cony-catchers, but at the same time often themselves being tricksters, as seducers: ‘the gallants were just cony-catchers from good families’, only more hypocritical (46–47). Thus, the stage was already set for the later debate between actors, playwrights and Puritans, dominating the 17th century, about the merits of the theatre, each side accusing the other of being hypocritical (Agnew 1986: 131–133; Szakolczai 2013: 3, 213) – where the classical Greek meaning of the term was nothing else but ‘theatrical actor’.<sup>8</sup>

### *Agnew on theatres and markets*

The theatre, according to Agnew, was ‘incubator’ or ‘laboratory’ (Agnew 1986: xi, 12, 54) modern capitalism as it promoted undifferentiation by problematising and destroying existing social borderlines. It staged aspects of everyday life and behaviour but only in a highly abstracted and distorted manner, which was then fed back as a positive or negative model to the broad populace, instigating change in the sense of consuming the borderlines and thus liberating the void. Acting together, money and theatre helped to construct a ‘world that threatened to become, in effect, a permanent carnival’ (54).<sup>9</sup>

The subversion of regular everyday social life, by the actor and the merchant, could be joint as both focussed on the same – highly alchemic<sup>10</sup> – target of dissolving the boundaries, ultimately the very forms that kept things together, inside an order that was both meaningful and reflected the beauty of the cosmos. Theatre as comedy had to attack such boundaries as it could draw laughter and applause by showing things from a reverse perspective, capitalising on and perpetuating the carnivalesque experience of a world turned upside down. The impresario, on the other hand, similarly had to dissolve such forms as this was the precondition of things being offered up for exchange in the ‘market’. This establishes the crucial complicity – or parasitical pact – between ‘market’ and ‘theatre’: the ‘market’, through the charlatan-entrepreneur, maintains and finances the theatre, thus the livelihood of the actor, who otherwise was a vagabond, migrating from fair to fair and court to court, subject to the vagaries of municipal authorities or the king; while the theatrical actor promotes the ‘market’ by presenting on stage caricature figures, decontextualised of all social ties, thus reducing human motivation to mere desire and gain and human relationships to antagonistic duels, verbal or physical, or bargains. Such reductionism is fundamental for the market as such human beings will be the ideal consumers – trying to satisfy their desires, and producers – trying to sell in order to gain more, thus

competing with other producers, reducing social life to competition, while also soliciting increasing sympathy for the previously outcast merchants for whom indeed gain is the only moving factor of human life.

Agnew emphasises that this complicity of merchants and actors was new in England, and that it generated enormous confusion. People of all sorts were trying to understand what was going wrong through the increasing commercialisation and theatricalisation of their own lives but were failing to come up with a proper analysis and response, up to our era (3–6). This failure turned out to be momentous as ‘these answers accumulated over time’, forming ‘an imposing ideological edifice on their own’, including a ‘new grammar of motives’ whose ‘authority rested as well on repeated acts of selected inattention’ to the ways in which the ambiguities of market activity ‘continued to subvert the new categories of explanation’ (6), thus being transformed into a kind of mental prison into which subsequent generations were entrapped.

The possibility of such understanding was further undermined by a ‘rogue’ pamphleteer literature, which purported to critically attack commercialisation and theatricalisation but actually only contributed to further confusion and the promotion of these same trends. This is not surprising as the authors of these pamphlets were often just as vagrants as the actors; and furthermore, such use of the printing press was much promoted by charlatans. Even more, there was a cross-pollination between rogues and wondering preachers, a confusion only accentuated by the dissolution of the monastic orders, given that previously in England there was a particularly large number of Dominican and Franciscan mendicant friars, now often living by fairgrounds and marketplaces, preaching and the selling of their pamphlets. It was out of this unprecedented liminal confusion that the first ‘critical literature’ of Europe emerged, a product of rogue preachers and charlatans, a genuine ‘*pudenda origo*’ of the art of critique, as again Shakespeare realised it and again in *Othello*, through the (autobiographical) Iago (‘I am nothing, if not critical’; *Othello* II.i.122; see for details Szakolczai 2013: 225–227).

Agnew offers a convincing explanation for the increasingly central, indeed privileged, role played by the theatre in further perpetuating such changes, also reflecting on their significance. The gradual undermining and destruction of the boundary markers of human existence targeted moments of transition in the ‘human cycle’ (Turnbull 1985) by attacking the traditional boundary markers through ridiculing or satirically enacting them on stage (Agnew 1986: 97),<sup>11</sup> thus dissolving them into nothingness. As a result, a ‘sense of transition [became] a permanent feature of personal life’ as ‘[l]ife now resembled as infinite series of thresholds’ (97–98), making the threshold experience coincide with the market, or de-ritualised commodity exchange.

Permanent transitoriness implies permanent confusion, uncertainty and opaqueness, where any ‘critical’ effort to finally shed new light on what is going on, or ‘unmask’ the persons lying in the background, only further

proliferates the same bewilderment, disseminating further suspicion and undermining figures of respect. This culminates in the utter paradox that the theatre, main instrument in perpetuating confusion, at the same time became ‘the most credible instrument with which to visualise [...] the lost transparency of these ordinary acts’ (98).

However, the dissolving of boundaries is only the first part of an alchemic *opus*; the second concerns the re-fusion of the ‘liberated’ elements into a new unity. Here the key issue concerns the manner in which the ‘happy’ encounter between merchant and actor was played out on stage, and the broader effect it produced.

At the general level, this starts with the affinities between the world of business and the theatre. Apart from and beyond the negative act of liquifying every stable borderline, such affinities extend to their mode of operation, the continuous metamorphosis of everything into everything else, whether through the principle of imitative enactment or of monetary equivalence through buying and selling. Such analogies, present already in the fairground, reached their apogee with the delocalisation of exchange in the stock exchange. Once the immediacy of contact between buyers and sellers in a concrete place was removed, ‘commercial transactions [...] began] to take on the perceived character of a script drafted elsewhere and enacted by a proxy’ (98).<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the level of institutions, identification also directly targeted at the level of persons. The outcome was captured with particular clarity in a poem by John Hall, a poet personally close to Hobbes: ‘Man in business is but a Theatrical person, and in a manner but person himself’ (as in 97). Such an identification like everything in the new world made in the image of fairground, is ambivalent and profoundly so as it ineradicably implies dissimulation and hypocrisy at the heart of business, even though what businessmen most need in order to operate is trust, which requires a modicum of genuineness. Still, the most basic alchemic operation of the theatre to render capitalism acceptable was to reverse the uniformly negative view of merchants. In every society at every moment of human history merchants were despised and hardly tolerated as they did not belong anywhere and therefore by their very being represented a threat to the conditions of stability that are the necessary prerequisite to meaningful social life. Not surprisingly, any theory of corruption was always oriented against intermediaries (22, referring to Pocock). Central for the theatre, going back to the fairground shows, was to reverse such general negative view and drum up support for the merchant, its employer; a process culminating in mid-18th century ‘bourgeois comedy’ (Szondi 1980; Szakolczai 2015).

Agnew’s book is organised around a shift from focus on the actor in the 17th century to the spectator in the 18th. A decisive role in this transition is played by Adam Smith. According to Agnew (1986: 182–186), the primary issue for the earlier work of Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is not the presumption of mutual benevolence as the taken for granted

foundation of economic society – though this also plays its part – but making the disinterested spectator the source of moral judgment. It is this perspective that would be further extended and universalised by Kant.

This shift, however, only captures one stage in the linear transformation process. Before the actor, we have seen, there was the cony-catcher, and the huge numbers of unsettled migrants, who were the permanent audience to fairs; while after the Smithian spectator discussed by Agnew, the focus shifted on the customer. In still later stages of this perverted linear transformation process – and here we need to make a huge jump in time, to offer a third illustration – a major role was played by the World Fairs (Silla 2013, 2018). A glimpse about such a role, focussing on the 1939 New York World Fair, is offered by a major maverick figure of historiography, Warren Susman (1984).

### ***Susman on the 1939–1940 New York World Fair***

This World Fair, according to Susman, represents something like the apotheosis of the myth of the ‘people’ in the American imagination, combining the American dream with a similar obsession with numbers (Susman 1984: 211–212). The chronotope (the term is from Bakhtin and can be defined as a particularly significant time-space configuration or a coincidence of spatial and temporal liminality) New York 1939 is highly symbolic, coupling American ‘people’ with German *Volk*, though prominent to the myth of the American people was not race or state, rather the *fair* (215). As Ed Tyng claimed in his Preface of his 1958 book, the Fair was made for the people, for *You*; it was supposed to both delight *and* instruct the masses; the Fair was made to educate the people but also to do something much more: ‘to *create* the people in the most ideal sense of the concept’ (213–214).

In order to perform such a formative trick, the Fair was supposed to offer ‘enough unusual, varied, and preferably “revolutionary” spectacles and entertainments to attract masses of people’ (Tyng, as in 215–216). It thus had to generate an unprecedented feast; a ‘rich and colourful festival’ (216), which would create an experience that people would remember for the rest of their lives (217). This required, first of all, a master of ceremonies, and Grover A. Whelan, chairman of the Committee on Receptions of the Fair, considered himself just that: a ‘master of pomp and ceremony’ (216). This meant that he understood his own role as the organiser of the World Fair as a merchant and master showman (216) but interpreted this in the full and original sense of the fairground charlatan or impresario, organising troupes of entertainers. The Fair was full of ‘strolling players [like] singers, dancers, musicians, acrobats, clowns’, all hired by management (*New York Times*, 5 May 1939, as in 216). The Fair was promoted through a systematic confusion between commercial gain and nationalism as the Fair incorporated the historic celebrations of the 150th year of George Washington’s presidency, and *this* combination culminated in carnivalesque features: ‘Fair attendance

became equated with patriotic duty. The whole occasion had become a carnival' (217).<sup>13</sup>

In order to have this effect, which included nothing less than the 'creation' of a homogenous people, the most striking trick of the Fair was to focus not only on machines but on *processes*. The greatest process was the people themselves *as* crowds, both as an actor and as the decoration of power, being visible particularly clearly in the perverse manner by which crowds sheepishly follow everything, *especially* itself: 'the crowd's greatest pleasure is in the crowd' (218).<sup>14</sup> Thus, the apotheosis of the crowds through the Fair was at the same time the total demise of the value of concrete human beings, the cynical debasing of humans into a faceless crowd, followed by the corollary supposedly justifying the original cynicism and confirming the prejudice that human beings manipulatively reduced to a homogenous mass are not better than herd animals. The Fair even discovered and promoted as a most important trick to realise its aims 'the "miraculous powers of advertising"' (220).

In his conclusion Susman evoked, through direct quotes from 1940, images of amphitheatre, circus clown and double talk but also that this will be spread 'all over the world. Alas!' (229). American globalised capitalism is the subversiveness of permanent fairground reaching planetary levels.

### **The trickster terminology of modern economics**

Within the limits of this chapter, it is not possible to trace any further this history of tricky fixating, resulting in the modern 'economic society'. In this last section one element will be singled out for attention, the role of double talk in the victory of modern economic thinking and mentality. This generated a vocabulary that is partly a sinister play with words, involving the purposeful altering and thus destruction of meaning, and partly the invention of a new vocabulary, technical terms only accessible for the initiates. Both together serve to hide the transformative character of the rise of the 'modern economy', the fact that it does not represent a progress of rationality but stages in a linear transformation process, which fixates everyone in a permanent flux while hiding it from view.

The four words selected only represent the tip of the iceberg that sank Europe.

#### ***'Utility': the surreptitious replacing of 'utility' with 'pleasure' as the measuring rod of 'economic behaviour'***

Utility as a term goes back to Aristotelian ethics and the related concern with *oikonomia*, or the **managing** of a household. It has nothing to do with the kind of pleasure maximisation that underlies neoclassical economics, founded by Jevons, Walras and Menger. In fact, the very word 'economy', while directly traced to Aristotle's *oikonomia*, has a meaning completely

different from his. For Aristotle, *oikonomia* was strictly limited in the private sphere. ‘Political economy’ as a term was invented in the first decades of the 17th century, appearing first in writings by a series of French figures with strong Huguenot allegiances; while the term ‘economic life’ goes back to Rabelais (Szakolczai 2016: 44–47). In this long semantic history, emphasis gradually shifted (a clear linear transformation going on here on its own!) from utility to money, as evidenced with the term ‘political economy’ being replaced by ‘economics’ around 1900. A pioneer in this process was Hermann Heinrich Gossen, a Prussian bureaucrat who became a patron of inns and taverns, ‘experimenting’ with optimising the proper number of pints to drink, and building a theory on this in the 1840s. While his work went unnoticed, it was later discovered by Menger and Jevons, founding figures of neoclassical economics (Schumpeter 1954). Economic theory never reflected on the thorough and systematic confusion of pleasure with utility at the heart of neoclassical economics. Textbooks still talk about maximising the ‘household utility function’, when they really mean individuals maximising their pleasures.

***The marginal ‘revolution’: after hedonising utility, liminalising marginality***

The key invention of Gossen (1883) and the neoclassical synthesis concerned not simply utility but *marginal* utility, formulating the psychology of maximising outcomes, especially pleasures, supposedly underlining human behaviour. By now accepted as a truism, it is unnoticed that such conduct assumes the conditions of a *fair*. While human beings ‘like’ to enjoy themselves, life is emphatically not reducible to a series of ‘choices’ concerning the acquisition of ‘goods’ that gives us ‘pleasure’. From the perspective of a meaningful human life, it is the *absence* of a concern with ‘maximising’ a concrete outcome, related to the here and there, that makes sense. The type of choice taken as a model by Jevons, Walras and Menger thus applies to fairs only. Not surprisingly, the most important related developments in the 19th century were the World Fairs, the first being in London (where Jevons was educated), to be followed by Paris (where Walras was educated), while Vienna (where Menger was educated) feverishly tried to imitate London and Paris with the 1873 World Fair. Neoclassical economics emerged out of global fairs.

***‘Interest’: from temporariness in time to objectivity ‘inside’***

While the semantic history of the word is surprisingly complex and little known, its etymology is most simple: interest is derived from the Latin word *inter essere*, ‘being in between’, epitomising liminality. It is this word that, through a series of linear transformations, became ‘matrixed’ into the very core of rational individuality, our ‘objective interest’.

**'Opportunity cost': the cornerstone of asinine rationality**

The term 'opportunity cost' is widely considered as the main analytical discovery of Austrian economics. The underlying idea is very simple: the cost of any activity or 'good' is not reducible to the various actual costs and efforts – material, money, human energy, time, etc. – that were required to perform or acquire it, but includes any alternative that has been foregone. Put simply, the price of going to a cinema is not the cost of the ticket but whatever *else* we could have done *instead*. Of course, this implies anything imaginable; so instead of underlining the 'rationality' of choice, beyond 'simple' costs, the idea opened up the abyss of potentially infinite possibilities, with all the stress it involved, while also internalising a sacrificial logic inside every act. Austrian economics thus extends the scholastic puzzle known as Buridan's ass into the paradigm of human conduct. The corollary is that economic rationality, far from representing the height of reason, rather takes the donkey as the model of human conduct. Rationality as asininity is in line with Horvath's ideas about infantile senility (Horvath and Szakolczai 2018), just as with the failure to become contented, to get satisfaction, an experience that defined modern youth culture, as evidenced by the first major hit of the Rolling Stones.

**Conclusion**

A subverter is a parasite but a particularly insidious one. Subversion only makes sense if there is stability, or a centre that still holds. Once all stability is gone, the subverter no longer has anything to attack, his reason of existence disappears, but so has meaning as without stability a meaningful life is impossible.

Thus, subversion is also evil as evil is the transformation of substance, the rendering of whatever is valuable and meaningful into the void, nothingness, the non-substantial non-essence of evil. The subverters are, e.g., the professional revolutionaries, the ones who Foucault (2011: 211) talked about in his last Collège de France course, arguing that they replaced Faust. The metaphor works, except that the category should not be reduced to the Trotskists, Leninists, Stalinists and the like but should be extended, through the constitutive identity between the permanent revolution of Trotsky and the creative destruction of Schumpeter, to entrepreneurs, promoters of technological change, in particular in information and communication technology. Professional subverters give full meaning to the lines of WB Yeats, about the worst who are full of passionate intensity, in 'The Second Coming', a poem written in January 1919, just when Weber gave his 'Politics as a vocation' lecture.

If subversion is evil, then it cannot and should not be resisted (Mt 5: 39). Resistance, rather, especially as an explicit, strategic purpose, is part of the strategy of evil, as it only escalates subversion, treating homeopathically evil with evil, pushing the perverted linear transformation forward.

Subversion can only be met with the Weberian sense of objectivity (*Gegenstand*) as a standing up and standing by: ignoring the subverter while not yielding an inch from the ground. Such stable stance is central for Castelli's (2007) work on the demonic, and for Pascal's 'heart', relying on the indestructible inside us.

## Notes

- 1 About the void, implying nothingness but also the possible contact there with powers out of the ordinary, see Horvath and Szakolczai (2018).
- 2 On Lessing, see Szakolczai (2016: 109–126).
- 3 Note that for Goethe the real 'villains' were not the judges, rather the lawyers and journalists.
- 4 Concerning the first, see e.g. Achille Mbembe (2004: 11) on the 'fixation on the past and suffering' so much present in Africa, and a 'frenetic claim of victimhood'.
- 5 The post-war experience of Communism offers a particularly clear though by no means unique such example.
- 6 This is another crucial, self-explanatory term from the late 19th-century USA.
- 7 About the rebirth of theatre out of the fairground in late-Renaissance Europe, see Szakolczai (2013).
- 8 Agnew's book is a primary source for any study of the tight, formative connections between theatre and markets or fairs.
- 9 Strikingly, the path-breaking books of both Griswold and Agnew are from 1986 – evident reflections on Reaganomics and the rise of neoliberalism. Even more strikingly, they were not really followed up.
- 10 By 'alchemic' I mean the general idea of 'creating' something new by 'destroying' the substance and character of a concrete being, following the work of Horvath (2009, 2013).
- 11 See Goethe (2015: 807) about the destructive impact of satire and critique.
- 12 On the similarities between stock market and theatre, see also Agnew (1986: 144).
- 13 In his classical novel *Scarlet Letter* Nathaniel Hawthorne already made evident the striking affinities between the political elections in Puritan New England and the carnival.
- 14 This is not the 'truth' about human nature; rather, it happens when human beings are forcefully detached from their concrete contexts, thus 'denaturalised', even 'dehumanised'.

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