

Essay

Optimism of the Will. Antonio Gramsci Takes in Max Weber

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Abstract: Responding to Max Weber’s dour predictions, we enlist Antonio Gramsci’s optimism to suggest how culture can spike development. Weber’s sociological focus took culture to mean shared beliefs and practices. As a culture that derives from the Protestant Ethic, capitalism waged a “war on pleasure.” Weber warned that this unfeeling rationality would generate an “iron cage” to trap our humanity, but his book has been read, paradoxically, as a manual for the lock down. Gramsci, on the contrary, understood culture in its humanistic sense, as a field of aesthetic pleasure, innovation, and debate. For him, a precondition for transformational social change was the broad engagement of masses as empowered collectives (Weber favored charismatic leaders); and pleasure in idiosyncratic forms of artistic as well as rooted expression was the fuel for participating in personal and shared advances. This pleasure in art and collective interpretation contrasts with the exclusionary rituals of commodified pleasure typical of capitalist consumerism. Gramsci’s confidence in the transformational role of creative culture provides a framework for understanding a new wave of inclusive artistic practices that originate in the Global South and that revive the arts as vehicles for active citizenship. Participatory art can re-enchant today’s sorely disenchanted socio-cultural world of mature capitalism.

Keywords: Gramsci; Weber; culture; pleasure; enchantment/disenchantment; social change; Global South

Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure

Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not virtuous. (Freidrich Schiller [1], p. 170)

1. Introduction

When José Antonio Abreu launched a project in 1975 that would become world-renowned as *El sistema*, it seemed incredibly ambitious and to some skeptics out of tune with the times. He aimed at social transformation through immersive classical music education for the most vulnerable youth in Caracas [2]. The system of youth orchestras and choirs started with 11 children in a garage at the city limits. Forty years later, the project has been adopted in far-flung countries, and has been established as a reference case of music-based inclusive education [3]. In Venezuela alone, as a state sponsored initiative, as of 2012, it had engaged over 2 million children and enrolled 400,000 at the time [4]. Reverberations inspire more music-based approaches to youth education [5]. Somewhat inevitably, the success breeds controversy [6–9], and doubts regarding the compatibility of Abreu’s model for a range of social environments [10]. It would be frankly difficult to imagine how his system

might avoid controversy and skepticism. For most rational people, the arts produce pleasure—for those who can afford the leisure—but they do not effect substantial, measurable social change.

El sistema confronts that expectation with undeniable practical impact [11]. Its primary objective was not to form professional or even amateur musicians, but rather to develop children's civic and intellectual capacities—along with taste, which was synonymous with judgment for the Enlightenment [12]. Youth development became demonstrably possible in Caracas, despite the violent, dysfunctional, social environment. The admirable results in general education and musical performance, as well as an orientation toward community action and cooperation [13] multiply, because participating youth grow up to become teachers for younger cohorts [14]. Moreover, positive effects in terms of improved self-control and reduced behavioral difficulties for program participants have been found in randomized trials, with particularly relevant effects upon the subgroups of most vulnerable children [15]. *El sistema's* methodology is also used as a reference to develop and test further music-based education programs [16]. When Abreu first applied for support from granting institutions, the officers were dumbfounded. It was a utopian dream that smacked of elitism. Classical music for marginalized youth? Lacking any rational evaluation of the critical social context it purported to address, it seemed deaf to the real needs and demands of its young, under-educated audience. Unsurprisingly, then, Abreu was turned down and had to raise his own funds. What worked against *El sistema's* credibility for “serious” policy support—a continuing challenge, despite the increasing global attention and consensus, the legitimization of outstanding musicians, such as the late Claudio Abbado, and the concession to the Venezuelan government of a 150 million dollar project-specific loan from the Inter-American Development Bank—is exactly the same “X-factor” that makes it so enchanting to the media: The romantic allure, the emotional clutch of transformed life stories lavished on audiences. “Serious” policy has apparently nothing to do with affect. Many other visionary, transformational art projects face the same skepticism from policy makers, often surrendering in defeat [17].

“Disenchantment” has become today a hallmark of policymaking, as a major, undisputed legacy of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [18], the classic analysis of the origins of capitalism [19]. Radical Protestant culture, for the German sociologist, was a set of beliefs and practices that generated disenchantment as a function of economic growth [20]. The costly paradox, or bad joke, has been that Weber was warning us against the consequences of dour capitalism, which would lock us into an iron cage of rationality without feeling [21]. However, his book has been read for generations as a user's manual for doing just that [22], ironically transforming, entirely beyond Weber's intent, what was an insightful positive analysis of the long-term socio-economic evolution of market capitalism into a normative guide. This is not to say, of course, that the disenchantment of contemporary capitalist societies has been the product of the Weberian vision, but rather that Weber's analysis has been received as the conceptual milestone that eventually canonized a process of cultural change that had been building up for centuries into ‘the’ epitome of modern rationality. To sacrifice pleasure and love for single-minded economic rationality is still unexamined advice to modernizers rather than a danger to avoid through programs of sociability and enjoyment [23]. Weber's socially scientific notion of culture may be, in the above specified sense, part of the problem [24]. As a shared system of life, it seems second nature and determining. Artists and humanists use culture to mean the changeable field of arts: Intentionally destabilizing conventional stipulations of meaning in a social world that otherwise crystallizes into a conceptual habit.

The mutual precaution between policy and pleasure is neither obvious nor inevitable. If the arts can have emotional impact and trigger profound personal commitment by practitioners and audiences, they may well have relevance and value for policymaking. It is true that these dimensions of art need to be broad-based and can be difficult to assess, but there is a growing literature that extensively documents the measurable effects of cultural participation in a variety of criteria, such as psychological well-being [25] and environmental sustainability [26]. More generally, there is clear evidence that artistic experience has profound neuro-biological effects [27] and is positively related to all major facets of human development [28]. Additionally, one of the most conspicuous elements that enables

creative culture to be so deeply beneficial is exactly its capacity for enchantment, its ability to build valuable layers of meaning and to open up uncommon, fascinating perspectives on all aspects of human existence [29]. Failing to appreciate these effects, and their major implications for all kinds of policy, amounts to missing key elements of human nature [30], and thus to making policy decisions that founder on misunderstanding the reasons and motives of people whose behavior the policies hope to address. Despite his intention to sound an anguished alert, Weber has been misread as issuing a call to disenchanting arms. We inherit Weber's impoverished characterization of human nature, which guides today's neoliberal narratives [31], with their focus on the instrumental dimension of rationality [32].

Advocating a new role for cultural initiatives as a transformational social platform amounts to recovering Weber's anguish and questioning the perspective he so unwittingly engendered. Surely, there are elements of his approach that can survive a critical revision. Venturing into the delicate conundrum, we find a prescient ally in Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci knew Weber's work, though his reading is generally overlooked. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the positions Weber and Gramsci took regarding the role of creative culture in social development, in order to issue a new call to action for cultural agents who can contest the disenchantment of contemporary policies. Gramsci's "optimism of the will" ignites civic energy and ingenuity in communities that apparently lost ground in the transition to capitalist modernity. In other words, through Gramsci's selective parsing of Weber, we propose to rethink the role and potential of creative culture as a transformational platform for contemporary policy. We will in particular argue how breathing new life into cultural agency is a corollary to rediscovering pleasure as a principle of human motivation that should be reckoned with in public policy. Without taking pleasure and creativity into account, policy will not be realistic or truly rational. Our paper initiates a recovery project to invite a significant change of hearts and minds. It hopes to open a new dialogue between art and policy that will require (your?) elaboration. This essay, in the strict meaning of 'trying something out', is therefore not an exercise in erudition, but an exploration toward social change. Rather than a familiar sociological approach to describing conditions and limitations, we prefer the humanistic approach of 'close reading' to de-familiarize well-known sources, and so to revive them for thoughtful engagement, otherwise known as 'praxis'.

This essay should not then be regarded as a piece of scholarship about Weber, Gramsci, or both. The body of research and commentary about the work of both authors is large enough to qualify each as a legitimate subfield of socio-political theory. Our primary interest is not to contribute to either one of these bodies of literature. The purpose here is rather to take the dialectical tension between the positions of Weber and Gramsci about the relationship between pleasure and social change as a generative illustration of the dilemma faced today by a social science that aspires to understand the complexity of social phenomena on the one hand, but also to provide a canvas for meaningful social change on the other hand. The gradual turn of Weberian disenchantment from a descriptive to a normative concept, and the fading of the possibility to pursue 'good sense' in the Gramscian meaning of the word through engaged intellectual work appears to us, in a sense, two sides of the same coin. What we aim at, with this essay, is therefore to imagine a possibility of 're-enchanting' our understanding of the limits and possibilities of social change by leveraging upon a rediscovery of the pleasure principle in its public, and not in its private, form: Namely, as a powerful force of collective sense-making—a socio-cognitive and affective attitude that is often found, in its many local variations, in socio-cultural spaces that are peripheral in the power relationships of the current global order [33], and which are generally identified as the 'Global South' [34]. Despite its substantial identification with Africa, most of Latin America, and selected parts of Asia [35], rather than being characterized in literal geographical terms, the term 'Global South' is to be meant in the context of geo-political relations of power [36], both in its 'hard' and 'soft' components, i.e., not only from the point of view of military deterrence and political and economic negotiation power, but also of cultural influence [37]. The Global South has therefore been not only militarily and economically colonized, but also culturally so, and it is almost inevitable that a possible turn of the tide cannot but start in cultural ('soft') terms [38]. At the

same time, it is clear that such a socio-culturally diverse sphere can be characterized as a coherent whole only with respect to power relationships, but certainly not with respect to their socio-cultural identities and specificities. In this regard, one can consider the 're-enchantment' of our notion of social change as a possible, partial inversion of the flow of cultural influence in which some areas of the Global South take a propositional role, and leave the receiver end of the relationship, thus creating a new sense of possibility of re-configuration of the patterns of cultural influence across the Global South itself [39], and toward the Global North [40]. This idea resonates intriguingly with the Gramscian vision of a re-energization of the subaltern through a rediscovery and re-framing of popular culture as a repertory of norms, rituals, and traditions that is dialectically alternative to the hegemonic one [41]. Again, in accord with the Gramscian vision, this process of re-enchantment cannot but be rooted in a transformational view of education as a form of personal and collective empowerment. In this perspective, our paper can be seen as a preliminary reflection toward a rethinking of educational practices as creative articulations of ritualized, collective pleasure that ideally connects to pioneering experiences from the Global South, such as Freire's [42] pedagogy of the oppressed and Boal's [43] legislative theatre.

Inevitably, reasoning in terms of stark contrapositions, such as Global North vs. South, may pave the way to inappropriate generalizations. If the Global North-South divide is mainly construed in terms of a polarization of power relationships from a world order perspective, the picture gets much more complex and nuanced in terms of cultural differentiation. Different peripheries of the world are characterized by specific socio-cultural environments, and certainly not all cultures that belong to the Global South present a similar attitude toward the private vs. public dimension of pleasure, its role in human existence, and its potential as an empowerment resource. So, clearly, this is not our thesis. What we have in mind is that certain experiences have been the product of certain socio-cultural environments of the Global South, and that in a sense, it has been this marginality, with all its difficulties and contradictions, that has created, in some cases, socio-anthropological niches where pleasure-based practices have been cultivated as forms of socially conscious, self-critical personal and community empowerment. Although our emphasis in the paper is on South America, disparate, strongly situated practices of interest are found in different contexts, such as, for instance, in South Africa [44–46]. An awareness of such practices beyond their native contexts is still very fragmentary and incomplete, as they are most likely under-researched and possibly even under-documented. Our emphasis on South America is a recognition for having been the cradle of more conceptually systematic and methodologically articulate statements than in other geo-cultural quadrants of the Global South, and this has also been the cause of the higher visibility and diffusion of, and scholarly attention toward, South American practices and theorizations.

In a sense, then, our comparative reading of Weber vs. Gramsci is an instantiation of the dilemma of imagining the possibility of social change through an engineered process of more or less benevolent manipulation that appeals to the instrumental rationality of humans, or as an emergent process of social mobilization around a collective urge of, and capacity for, sense-making, which is today driven by an unprecedented possibility of massive, decentralized production of cultural content—a scenario that Gramsci would have probably welcomed [47]. We do not think that this dilemma should be seen as an either-or alternative. But the point is that, today, the answer to the dilemma has been placed firmly at the farther end of engineering and instrumental rationality, with a consequent impoverishment of our common understanding of human nature and of its complexities—thereby generating a form of 'common sense' in the Gramscian sense of the word that has paralyzed our capacity to learn from the spheres of human existence that did not qualify as pillars of the hegemonic representational canon of modernity. The consequence has been a narrative where the socio-economically developed, 'disenchanted' end of the spectrum (the Global North) is teaching lessons to the reluctant, under-developed, over-exuberant end (the Global South), about possible pathways to 'disenchantment' as preconditions for economic and social prosperity. It is not hard to read such a narrative in terms of Gramscian hegemonic common sense where the possibility

of a bi-directional exchange of expertise is de facto denied unless intentionally pursued [48], despite the richness of smart adaptations and experimentations that are occurring at the other end [49]. In fact, some of the major social challenges faced today by the Global North may be ultimately traced back to the socio-cultural consequences of living in a disenchanted world, and to the consequent commodification of all aspects of human existence: Intimacy [50]; security [51]; nature [52]; and life itself [53]. It is time for a new synthesis, where both parties can learn from the other, and an appeal to Gramscian praxis to restore a more balanced discourse, through the rediscovery of the public dimension of pleasure in shared, inclusive forms of cultural expression and empowerment as a key societal resource [54], is, in our view, the move to make. The purpose of this paper is to explain why, how, and what for.

2. The Blind Alley of Rational Modernization: Weber's War on Pleasure, and Its Discontents

Pragmatists would say that to forfeit hope in favor of sober realism makes no sense for the living. Forfeiting gives up even more than the possibility of a better future; it also weakens our hold on the trenches of rights and resources that others have already won for us through the struggle and patience that Gramsci called a protracted war of political position [55] (p. 140). Or better, such rights and resources could not have fully been won for us by others if the Gramscian war of position has been successful, as success would mean in this case that intellectuals have given up the privilege to turn into a progressive force, a catalyst of an alternative historical bloc [41]. But, sobriety has been the preferred option for intellectuals during the decades after the heady 1960s, maybe because it sounds smarter to be right about the world as we know it than to speculate on how it could change—or to take the risks to be part of such change, by embracing the responsibilities that come with a commitment to Gramscian 'good sense' as opposed to the 'common sense' of the status quo [56]. No one really doubts the scarcity and unfair suffering in the world, nor the fact that these persistent problems outstrip all known schemes for solving them. To be fair to risk-averse intellectuals, the record of speculations on change during the XX century has often been disappointing if not sometimes alarming. Risk has often failed to deliver desired results and instead has generated unintended consequences borne mostly by already distressed populations [57]. But the understandably dour review does not account for real advances in the politics of racial equality [58], for example—U.S. segregation was legal until the past mid-century; apartheid ruled South Africa later still; and campaigns in women's rights, gay rights, and human rights in general would follow [59]. Too much intellectual sobriety, therefore, can give up healthy stimulation along with the risk of excess [60]; and abstention amounts to refusing agency [61]. So even if pessimism does not usually raise doubts about veracity and evidence, it does give off a familiar air of bad faith. If pessimists acknowledge that suffering is unfair, they also imply an ideal of fairness while "knowing" that the ideal is unattainable and that efforts in that direction do not amount to much. Perhaps pessimists reside comfortably somewhere beyond the trenches that others dig and occupy; they stay on privileged ground high enough above the struggle to tolerate, if not to enjoy, the stubbornly uneven distribution of rights and resources [62].

Gramsci's political optimism does double duty during the terrible years of fascist rule while he wrote from prison (1926–1937) to a once heroic Italian Communist Party now decimated and defensive [63]. One duty was to interrupt the pessimism that kept the defeated communists from thinking ahead. The other was to identify and foreshadow the ways in which abstract or "scientific" reason had led the movement astray. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* address the left's understandable despair after having lost so much political ground so quickly. The unprecedented carnage of WWI, when one month of battle in 1916 saw 70,000 Italian soldiers die and twice as many wounded, had accelerated communist organizing and seemed to usher in a new social order. Gramsci could point to Russia where the communists had taken advantage of the same moment of crisis to turn the guns of imperialist war on the bosses at home. Lenin sidestepped the economic assumptions about necessary stages of development in order to provoke a political revolution that standard Marxism could not have predicted. "The Russian Bolshevik communists labored for eight months to broadcast and concretize

their slogan—‘All power to the Soviets’—and the Russian workers had been familiar with the Soviets since 1905. Italian communists must treasure this Russian experience and economize on time and effort.” ([55], p. 82). By the time Gramsci writes this in 1919, the moment of inter-imperial war had passed through Italy without creating a coordinated response from the left. The work of coordination was still to be done, and it would take time to prepare the ideological and social groundwork for political revolution in a republic, like Italy, so newly put together and so dangerously divided between the North and South. That work of consolidation and communication across social classes and between geo-economic regions would constitute a cultural path toward revolution for Italy. Cultural revolution (instead of the economic path that counted on advanced stages of industrial development, and alongside the political path that Russia had blazed) would make communist society achievable in an uneven country, like Italy. Writing from prison, hardly knowing how his *Notebooks* might survive censorship and confiscation, Gramsci continued to enjoy the work of enlisting virtual readers as comrades in education, literary criticism, philosophy, journalism, and other humanist activities for an exhilarating cultural overhaul that would amount to revolution.

Taking pleasure in commitments sounds like bad advice, however, if you take to heart Max Weber’s formulation of how progress is achieved in the modern world. Development does not abide pleasure, Weber was sure in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, because pleasure is sinful by definition for radical Protestants, such as Calvinists, and by extension for their secular heirs, practically all of us moderns. It is not that capitalist culture has extricated the pursuit of pleasure [64], but that this pursuit presumably veers away from virtue in classically liberal and neo-liberal development [65]. Generally suspect, personal feelings distract God’s devoted stewards from their roles as vehicles of the divine will. Hard work makes good on God’s gifts to man, not because man chooses to work (the way Gramsci chose to work), but because man obeys the divine calling. Devotion to work requires self-censure for any subjective sensation, let alone pleasure with its pagan ties to hedonism [66]. Weber certainly did not preach this doctrine of rational emotional restraint in the service of economic gain [67]. We noted that his brilliant reflection on the cultural causes of modern capitalism closes with a worry about the ultimately deadening consequences of economic reason’s triumph over affect. The “iron cage” of our “Calvinist” heritage of capitalist modernity first locked out any human faculty to will one’s own salvation, and then it left the renegades, the non-believers, and even the devotees of competing religions locked up in a culture of capitalism that frames us all, to the degree that we are modern subjects, in what Weber described as a loveless and disenchanting world that he evidently abhorred [68], but from which he did not see a possible escape [69]. A perspective on modernity that became classic in social theory, from Marx through to Simmel among many others, this link between asceticism and accumulation lasted well past Gramsci’s time [70], finally loosening over the past generation as social scientists catch up with him to reclaim culture in collectively constitutive ways [71].

Tragically though, as already remarked, Weber’s alarming description of what makes capitalism work practically became an instruction manual for modernization [72]. Largely through Talcott Parsons, Weber’s caution about unfeeling rationality softened through the American’s appreciation for mitigating influences, including cultural values [73]. To Weber’s call for re-directing the fate of the modern world away from cold capitalism and increasingly bureaucratized life, Parsons responded by qualifying the alarm [74]. Not only was the baby of capitalism worth saving, its bathwater was warmer than Weber had allowed. The adjustment of tone about the terror of capitalist development and the inclusion of humane mitigating factors amounted to an effective endorsement and recommendation for the rational development of society [75].

Weber used to quote the wise sayings of Ben Franklin, a lapsed Calvinist, but still ardent worker. “Time is Money” was a favorite. The consistent admonition to turn time into profit and make effort yield measurable gain strikes a chord so helplessly hard-wired for most of Weber’s readers that it exercises a descriptive power convincing enough to read like a requirement [76]. Carrot and stick development policies after the Cold War would make democratic progress depend on economic rationality [77]. But Weber knew that one thing had nothing to do with the other; growth does not

follow from beatings [78]. Nevertheless, the Protestant ethic hangs like a pall against pleasure in development projects, a chastising backdrop to blot out almost any joy in personal, professional, or political activity [79]. Decent people do not unduly adorn themselves, or derive too much pleasure from their work and even from their families [80]. They certainly do not celebrate their own participation in public life as if celebration could in any way be linked to responsibility [81]. To imagine that pleasure may be either a cause or an effect of social responsibility, or even both cause and effect in the loopy logic that animates pragmatism and that irritates philosophical orthodoxy, is no doubt a symptom of damnation for the legacy of the Reformed Churches. The pall extends far beyond religious believers; it covers an assortment of miscreants and skeptics who may never even have read Weber, because linking self-denial to social virtue rings true to almost anyone [82]. Even Aristotle complained that pleasure had been so narrowly understood—hijacked by sexuality and physical sensations—that citizens tended to ignore its ethical offices of promoting virtuous behavior [83] (p. 140). The link between austerity and morality is depressingly familiar for concentric circles of modernizers who ripple out from the industrialized centers of the Northern Atlantic Reformed Churches to practically everywhere else by now [84]. Personal indulgences had already been sinful and pleasure had long been the obstacle to responsibility ever since medieval European theological traditions banished pagan cults. The constraints go even further back, at least to the Classical philosophers who advised citizens to seek moderation in all things [85].

We admit to using Weber's formulation as shorthand for a set of deep cultural convictions about the dangers of pleasure. In "a world robbed of gods" [18] (p. 282), Weber gave a compelling account of the rationalization and intellectualization that had disenchanting the world, apparently including himself as victim [86]. Among the intellectual consequences of the mathematical rigor that passed for social science was a narrow economicism that refused to acknowledge the political power and responsibilities associated with subjectivity [87]. Along with other creative thinkers at the turn of the 20th century, Weber objected to the exclusion of feeling and spirituality from the accounts of human development [88]. Given his objections to the evaporation of pleasure, we wonder why he did not engage more proactively the potential of pleasure to save social relationships from the death of cold calculations. Was Weber performing the pessimism and fatalism that he decried? Freud did, for example, engage the power of pleasure when he responded to the same culture that was closing in on Weber [89]. He pursued the effects of pleasure and its repression; he even added a book on jokes that reads like a user's manual. But Weber seems to be trapped in the very iron cage that he denounces. The tight space apparently banished for him the feelings and perspectives that survive "elsewhere" outside the compact culture of Calvinism [90]. Whether or not Weber was a native informant of the Protestant ethic, his gloomy portrait can serve as a point of departure for other, more economically marginal, peoples [91]. In the interstices between capitalist modernity and living otherwise, it may be possible to pursue an alternative route to progress, a route that travels southward towards lesser developed areas than the industrialized regions of Northern Europe and the United States. This alternative route recognizes pleasure as a sign of and stimulus for development [92]; it understands development in broadly social terms rather than in terms that target economic growth as the source of all other advances [93].

To many, Weber is a prophet of doom for a self-destructive Western culture that is about to sacrifice the autonomy of politics to the rationality dictated by economics [94]. The real Weber of course was zealous to preserve the will to make decisions based on ethical ideals and to train, by his own example, an independent faculty of judgment that can discern the difference between political values and scientific information [95]. Alongside his warnings about a social system bound to lose its dynamism, Weber also urged his foreign readers to preserve the remaining opportunities to rescue freedom and democracy from the "iron cage" of a new vassalage to rationality. The possibilities, he warned, depended on exploiting the propitious, but precarious, contingencies, and time was not on the side of political progress, despite what conventional liberals imagined [78]. By 1915, options were still open in Russia and even in the United States. Weber's strong advice was 'to act while it

was still day.” [78] (p. 416). Night was already falling on the more established centers of capital where the advice to act would have been out of place. Deciding to act politically needs the will to act, and the Protestant ethic has no use for free will. The doctrine of pre-destination is a rational result of an absolute dedication to God’s uncompromised glory. Since Calvinists understood God to be the ultimate authority of all creation, to imagine that man has the authority to determine his own salvation or damnation through the free exercise of human will is to conclude, blasphemously for radical rationalists, that God has limited power ([18], p. 100). Instead, man is but a tool of the divine will for Calvin, not even a vessel of the Holy Spirit, as he remained for Lutherans. As a tool, all feelings were met with suspicion since only efficacy in the world was a sign of God’s decision to save a soul ([18], p. 114). Of the many metaphors that devotees have crafted to celebrate His elusive majesty, Calvinists approved of the stern father, but were suspicious of the merciful shepherd, not to mention the scandal of the loving husband [96].

Weber drew Gramsci’s admiration, somewhat against the grain of Weber’s work. They shared some common ground as skeptics of scientific solutions for society, and Gramsci hoped to cultivate more ground by adapting aspects of *The Protestant Ethic* for Italy [97]. Both were convinced that human subjectivity, experienced collectively as a national culture or the life of the spirit, amounted to much more than super-structural or epiphenomenal corollaries of material conditions. Weber was not shy about rejecting the scientific Marxism that discounted culture [98]. For him, communism and socialism were the most irritating parts of the whole misguided project of positivism to reduce society to mathematically predictable patterns [99]. But Gramsci risked his hard-won credentials as Italy’s leading Marxist thinker by arguing against economic determinism and defending culture as a decisive force in the progress of history [100]. Weber was an unorthodox ally here, both because Gramsci enlisted the anti-Marxist to support a revolutionary program and because the support he wanted was for inculcating in Italy the hard work, dedication, and disenchantment that Weber identified with the Calvinist ethic he so critically portrayed [101].

Like the Brazilian cultural “cannibals” who consume First World books and their authors despite the indifference or disdain those authors may show to their culturally marginal Latin American fans [102,103], Gramsci fed on Weber [104]. Far enough away from the excesses of discipline and disenchantment in industrialized Europe and North America, Gramsci was free from Weber’s worries about the crippling consequences of the Protestant ethic. Italy still needed more discipline and less superstition [55] (pp. 94, 118, 121). So, Gramsci took Weber in, digesting the useful elements, but refusing the poisonous pessimism that led to desperate recommendations for charismatic leaders [105]. By suggesting how Gramsci cannibalized Weber, we hope to make more visible a path of scholarship and corollary social interventions that develop beyond the tight spot of Weber’s legacy [106]. As a first move, inspired by Gramsci’s own practice of poaching the nourishing meat of Weber’s matter, but leaving the heavy casing aside—and also at a safe historical distance from Marxist programs—we will be claiming Gramsci as the patron saint for contemporary cultural agents [107]. His contributions for the social ripple effects of art (i.e., his cultural innovation) do not need to collapse culture into the corporatist or strictly group-based activities that generally characterize his proposals [108]. Those proposals show the kind of contradiction he identified or suspected in any historical moment [55] (p. 393). As a Marxist, Gramsci could not easily have theorized revolution from individual changes of heart; instead, the agent of change for him was the class, or the bloc [109]. But as a humanist (philosopher, art critic), his innovation was to privilege culture—over economics and politics—as the medium for change [110]. That meant listening to what Ranajit Guha [111] would call “the small voices,” putting individual taste or judgment above the predictably convergent answers that come from mathematics, or “scientific” economics. In the culturally determining field of education, therefore, Gramsci warned against the cult of technical training that curbs the imagination to arrive at correct answers [112]. Instead, he endorsed the humanities (he attended university classes in philology and was a trained journalist), specifically literary interpretation because it “arrives at a historical judgment or a judgment of taste, in which nuances, “unique and individualized” expressiveness, prevail.” [55] (p. 377).

The preference for right answers prevailed, nevertheless, not only in ‘scientific Marxism,’ despite the sideline of the Frankfurt school, but also as a brand of economicism in capitalist countries. An effect of this Weberian legacy on humanists for the last couple of generations, or at least a trend that resonates with the protestant ethic, has been to identify dispassionate criticism and pessimism with serious scholarship [113]. The challenge is now to rededicate humanistic scholarship towards constructive engagements [114]. Engagement is vital, not only because the world is in need of any and all the social development we can collectively muster, but also because those of us who still have enough faith in the humanities to dedicate teaching careers, sleepless nights of research and reflection, and often our own limited financial resources to the study of art might want to take account of the pessimistic effects in our field of what Weber called the Protestant ethic.

3. Reformation, Latin Style

A British journalist recently asked Antanas Mockus if he thought that a Mahatma Gandhi would be successful in Latin America. “He’d have to be a lot more fun-loving to be effective” was the playful answer [107]. Traditional asceticism may have moved the Hindu masses to hold out for independence in the 1940s, and to some degree self-denial must have moved their Protestant English masters too, but Latin Americans would wonder what disdain for social pleasures had to do with political action. A Latin Gandhi would know that social and political movements thrive on song, spectacle, and rhetorical virtuosity [115]. Gramsci knew that the same taste was true for Italy, and he tried to enlist as many artists and educators, priests and journalists, as would join him to shake the country free of a stagnant culture and to create a vibrant consensus for freedom [116].

A new Reformation would incorporate its Protestant inspiration and all others in a dialectical movement between action and reflection that Gramsci, following Marx and Lenin, called praxis [117]. “The philosophy of praxis presupposes all this cultural past: Renaissance and reformation, German philosophy and the French Revolution, Calvinism and English classical economics, secular liberalism and this historicism which is at the root of the whole modern conception of life.” ([55], p. 351). Gramsci takes advantage of all these historical advances and weaves them into his war of position, a gradual conquest of cultural/ideological ground that begins with the inter-active exchanges inside the party and between leaders and masses [118]. He even recognizes the contributions of “active reactionaries”, such as Benedetto Croce, whom Gramsci credits with forging a new humanist conception of the world “transcending Catholicism and every other mythological religion.” [55] (p. 183). This was especially relevant for Italy’s peasants [119], whom Gramsci described as “superstitious in a pagan sense.” [55] (p. 180). Refusing to dismiss people and positions that were considered class enemies by the radical left, Gramsci would engage the broadest possible range of interlocutors as part of the work to bind the disparate sub-cultures into one national culture. Unafraid that the revolution would be sidetracked by admitting legitimate moves from political competitors, Gramsci hoped to win some of them over; in any case, he admitted useful elements even from recalcitrant opponents, like Croce ([120]; but see the critical remarks of [121]). Once the Moderates, for another example, recognized a point of contact with the communists, engaging in the dynamic of praxis could winnow good ideas from the chaff of tradition and reduce the distance between competitors who share the same goal [122].

For Gramsci, the tireless movement of praxis animated the new Reformation. It may recognize in its enthusiasm something of the religious zeal that inspired earlier movements, and that survived in Sorel’s attempt at a mythopoetic revolution [41], but the modern feeling would be free from other worldly incentives, including the calculating spirit of Calvinism:

“A conception of the philosophy of praxis as a modern popular reformation (since those people who expect a religious reformation in Italy, a new Italian edition of Calvinism, like Mario Missiroli and Co., are living in cloud-cuckooland) was perhaps hinted at by Georges Sorel, but his vision was fragmentary and intellectualistic, because of his kind of Jansenist fury against the squalor of parliamentarism and political parties. Sorel took from Renan the concept of the necessity of an intellectual and moral reformation; he affirmed (in a letter to

Missiroli) that often great historical movements are [not] represented by a modern culture, etc. It seems to me, though, that a conception of this kind is implicit in Sorel when he uses primitive Christianity as a touchstone, in a rather literary way it is true, but nevertheless with more than a grain of truth . . . " [55] (p. 350).

Gramsci entertains a doubt here that repeats in several passages of the *Notebooks*: Is faith a deterrent or a spur to revolution? Does irrational belief sustain or derail the dialectical movement of praxis? In his characteristically supple and pragmatic way, Gramsci will want to know when and for whom the question applies. At what stage of cultural and historical development is faith an option or an obstacle? The question sharpens when Gramsci considers which elements to take in, and which to leave out from the experience of the Protestant Reformation. As a model for the cultural revolution in Italy, the Reformation and its dogma of predetermination raised a conundrum about whether or not human beings have free will: If a revolution is a movement of the people, if they are the authors of the revolution, clearly the people have the will to revolt. And if they are not the authors, if they have no will to revolutionize society, then the revolution is indefensibly neither popular nor democratic—and this is a concern that interestingly occurs in both Gramsci's and Freire's pedagogy: Where is the dividing line between a leadership that facilitates learning, and one that replicates the usual domination scheme [123]? In fact, Gramsci had to admit an enormous difficulty on this count while he was writing from prison. Among the masses and even the leadership there was a general pessimism and unwillingness to make the revolution. Faced with this lack of hope in the struggle, Gramsci resorts to the language of faith and to a provisional doctrine of historical determinism—a doctrine that he had excoriated in "scientific" Marxism for ignoring the possibility of error and the responsibility to act—in order to jump start a dynamic of high expectations and good results that confirm the expectations in a virtuous cycle of hope and achievement. "Real will takes on the garments of an act of faith":

"When you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance. "I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term." Real will takes on the garments of an act of faith in a certain rationality of history and a primitive and empirical form of impassioned finalism which appears in the role of a substitute for the predestination or Providence of confessional religions." [55] (p. 377).

Turning Weber's worry around to make Calvinism's effect of crimping creativity into an incentive for perseverance, Gramsci offers a reinterpretation for desperate times: "its iron conception of predestination and grace, . . . produces a vast expansion of the spirit of initiative (or becomes the form of this movement)." [55] (p. 338). But he takes care not to let this convenient interpretation take on more importance than would serve the left's long term strategy. So, he continues to translate from the detour through determinism back to human agency. Gramsci adds that "even here" in this irrational transition from despair to progress, the will is at work:

"It should be emphasized, though, that a strong activity of the will is present even here, directly intervening in the "force of circumstance", but only implicitly, and in a veiled and, as it were, shamefaced manner. Consciousness here, therefore, is contradictory and lacking critical unity, etc. But when the 'subaltern' becomes directive and responsible for the economic activity of the masses, mechanicism at a certain point becomes an imminent danger and a revision must take place in modes of thinking because a change has taken place in the social mode of existence." [55] (pp. 336–337).

Therefore, Gramsci commissions a "funeral oration" for the fatalistic conception of praxis. The ceremonial speech would compare mechanistic Marxism to the theory of predestination and

grace for the beginnings of the modern world, “emphasizing its usefulness for a certain period of history, but precisely for this reason underlining the need to bury it with all due honours.” [55] (p. 343).

The reader will sense Gramsci’s equivocation about when to bury blind faith. His strategic defense of belief is more than a rhetorical gesture. How else do we engage masses of people who do not yet have a long historical perspective on change? “Is it possible that ‘formally’ a new conception can present itself in a guise other than the crude, unsophisticated version of the populace? And yet, the historian with the benefit of all necessary perspective, manages to establish and to understand the fact that the beginnings of a new world, rough and jagged though they always are, are better than the passing away of the world in its death-throes and the swan-song that it produces.” [55] (p. 343). During this period of jaggedness in changing systems of belief, Gramsci advocated more serious attention to folklore and superstition [124]. Here, again, the Protestant Reformation is a model of accomplishment, though not of procedure. Whereas the radical Protestants simply banished the popular and mystical elements of religion, communists will have to acknowledge existing culture among the people whom the party would recruit. However inappropriate that culture may seem to leaders on the left, its common sense and folklore are the raw materials to be processed into more advanced stages of religion and of philosophy. “Only in this way will the teaching of folklore be more efficient and really bring about the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses, so that the separation between modern culture and popular culture will disappear. An activity of this kind, thoroughly carried out, would correspond on the intellectual plane to what the Reformation was in Protestant countries.” [55] (p. 362).

Potentially poisonous elements, such as blind faith, from obsolete or competing political programs, including the Protestant Reformation, are mixed into Gramsci’s proposals, like exotic spices that keep the nourishment appetizing [125]. Or they are like vaccines that acknowledge the power of particular diseases, distill their essence, and then immunize vulnerable subjects by inoculating small and safe doses of the ailment that healthy organisms can incorporate and overcome [126]. Calvinism, for example, supplies the element of grace, skimmed off from the doctrine of predestination. Rationalism, for another example, provides the incentive for discipline in the party and among workers, however damaging its side effects on human sentiment and inter-personal loyalty. And Fordism, the sometimes frightening American avatar of rationalization as mindless factory efficiency, would produce high yields in Europe too, were it not for “the saturation and fossilization of civil service personnel and intellectuals, of clergy and landowners.” [55] (p. 277). Not even the regulation of sexuality for workers seemed entirely misguided to Gramsci, as long as the economically virtuous behavior applied to the bosses too [127]. “The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized.” [55] (p. 282). Those who dismiss these uneven initiatives as mere failures and cynical uses of Puritanism, Gramsci warned, miss the “unmatched” importance of this “new type of worker and of man.” [55] (p. 290).

Other political alternatives just as unfriendly to the left as Fordism, including Croce’s humanism, could also make valuable contributions to the pragmatic politics that Gramsci advocated. He appreciated Croce’s refutation of the pagan superstitions, which were dissuading peasants from political participation, although he objected to Croce on other serious grounds [128]. His “tendentious” general view of humanistic history exaggerated the role of reform and denied the necessity of revolution, thereby derailing or delaying Italy’s opportunity to make real historical progress [129]. Croce’s defense of “passive revolution—his example is the process of social development in France from 1815 to 1870—does not credit the French Revolution of 1789 as the trigger for the civic and economic gains that followed” [55] (pp. 264–265). Gramsci points out that Croce’s argument for bureaucratic reform indirectly helped to reinforce Fascism, which had anyway claimed continuity with the “historic” right. Croce unwittingly supplied the new movement with an intellectual justification for the passive fascist revolution, which “consisted of the economic structure being transformed in a ‘reformist’ way from an individualistic to a planned economy (command economy)” [55] (p. 265).

Gramsci's eclectic practice of political philosophy goes so far as to admit useful moves even from this arch enemy camp, especially from the Moderate Fascists who were waging a successful contemporary war of position. The cultural revolution from the left would have to emulate that model and supersede it: "This ideology [fascism] thus serves as an element of a 'war of position' in the international economic field (free competition and free exchange here corresponding to the war of movement), just as 'passive revolution' does in the political field." [55] (p. 267).

Of all the political philosophies that Gramsci cleverly pieced together despite the taboos and traditions that distanced some of his readers, probably none is more central than Machiavelli's advice in *The Prince* [130]. Those lessons offer more than particular ingredients for Gramsci to cannibalize; they represent a general recipe for choosing and recombining elements borrowed from others. The book is a model of eclectic and dynamic thinking; it is "not a systematic treatment, but a 'live' work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a 'myth'." [55] (p. 238). That is to say, Machiavelli "gave imaginative and artistic form to his conception" by representing the collective will in the person of a condottiere [55] (p. 238). Gramsci notes that Sorel's use of "myth" seems to exemplify Machiavelli's innovation, interpreting a political ideology as a "concrete fantasy" that could animate a collective will among shattered working people. But Gramsci wonders why Sorel stopped short at imagining spontaneous clashes with authorities, limiting his focus to resistance and reaction. Why did he not pursue the myth and the collective will to more constructive stages of concrete political fantasy? [55] (p. 239). Gramsci concludes that behind Sorel's refreshing spontaneity is the familiar dead end of mechanistic ideologies that take progress for granted, as if it were the necessary result of favorable conditions, such as a general strike. Nothing follows necessarily from exciting strikes, as Gramsci knew. The white heat and speed, the charismatic character of leadership that Sorel advocated, create a short lived enthusiasm that wanes before it can forge a new politics. That is why Gramsci interprets the modern prince not as an individual, but as a complex social "organism," the political party which has already begun to represent a collective will ([55], p. 240). (Not a Moses, as Rigoberta Menchú would re-interpret the Old Testament in a similar spirit, but the plural Moseses would lead her people to freedom [131]). Gramsci's pragmatic "prince" does not imagine that cultural or political reform alone can transform society; he understands the project of good government to include necessary connections between "Intellectual and moral reformation . . . with a programme of economic reform—indeed the program of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reformation presents itself." [55] (p. 243).

Machiavelli's Italian Renaissance manual for effective government was startlingly secular and unsentimental for his time, to be sure, and it continued to represent cool-headed pragmatic thinking for Gramsci's overheated times. The "modern prince" provided Gramsci with a framework for developing sane and supple responses to a range of fanatics, radicals, and mechanistic Marxists whose ready-made answers to daunting questions reduced the work of praxis to a predictable and self-perpetuating system [132]. Against abstract and indefensible speculations about the natural course of progress, Gramsci labored to ground political responsibility in concrete conditions that required the interventions of human agency; without it, the left loses opportunities to advance from one trench of history to the next [133].

4. Parting Ways

To use Weber effectively, Gramsci boiled him down to a few easily digestible bites: (1) The centrality of self-discipline for wealth accumulation; (2) the determining character of culture in society, without discounting economic and political forces; (3) and the insufficiency of positivism, specifically economicism, as descriptions or predictions of human affairs. But significant elements of Weber's project were distasteful to Gramsci, and they evaporate in his reduction of Weber's sociology to yield the stickier stuff of revolution: (1) Weber interprets past history, but Gramsci wants to write its future; (2) Weber separates the dry ingredients of descriptive scholarship from the leaven of prescriptive

politics, and Gramsci mixes the two together in a motion called praxis; (3) While Weber appeals to an elite class of intellectuals, Gramsci caters to a broad public of intellectuals in the making.

Weber, of course, hardly wanted to promote the Puritan prison house that he described, but rather to give a scholarly historical ‘scientific’ account of how radical religious restraint enhanced the rational mores and practices that drove capitalism forward. Analysis should never amount to a recommendation, to follow Weber’s careful distinction between dispassionate scholarship and political engagement, because these activities respond to very different criteria: Observation and intervention. “Certainly, Max Weber regarded the importation of personal value judgments into science as the cardinal sin of modern science.” [78] (p. 418).

“Analyses,” Gramsci objected, “cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless the intention is merely to write a chapter of past history), but acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particularly practical activity, an initiative of will.” [55] (p. 209). Concrete analyses should identify wedges into apparently static systems by revealing ‘the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched, what language will best be understood by the masses, etc.’ [55] (p. 209). Intellectuals for Gramsci are change agents, unless they serve the dominant bloc, intentionally or unintentionally, by merely accounting for the status quo and ignoring the potential for change ([55], p. 303). Either way for Gramsci, on the left or on the right, intellectuals frame the public’s approach to politics.

Weber, on the other hand, did his very best to keep politics out of his scientific sociology, ‘the politician has to make compromises, the scholar must not justify them.’ [134] (p. 441). The laudable distinction probably impressed Gramsci, who dared to describe social forces in politically unorthodox ways, even if he doubted whether absolute scientific objectivity was possible, let alone desirable for intellectual agents of change. Existing books on intellectuals were almost all of this allegedly disinterested sociological type, less concerned with tracking the contentious forces of power than with describing social phenomena, including the assumed autonomy of intellectuals ([55], pp. 303–304). Even in the soviet hands of Nicolai Bukharin [135], sociology was disappointingly snobbish for Gramsci. Bukharin’s manual does not start as Gramsci thought it should with popular consciousness—common sense and folklore—as the origins of philosophy; instead, it implies that great systems of thought are opposed to those of the popular masses and that philosophy derives from the elite ([55], p. 343). To avoid staying stuck in similar habits, Gramsci’s book on Italian intellectuals would not be a sociology but a “cultural history” (*Kulturgeschichte*) and “political science.”

Weber defended sociology for staying clear of politics [136]. When he identified a pathological inability to feel—anhedonia—as the historically favorable condition for capitalism that distinguished prosperous Protestant from poorer Catholic countries, he did not add recommendations for change [137]. But elsewhere, as a political commentator, Weber gave pointed advice to break the trend of bureaucracy and rationalization and rescue the state’s fragile autonomy, not yet entirely determined by the economy [138]. Whatever his success or failure in keeping sociology free of tendentiousness, his two roles agreed on at least one objective: “As scholar and political thinker he tried to shield society from losing its voluntarism to an over-rationalized state, controlled by the economy” [134] (p. 439). Weber meets Gramsci on this issue of efficacy of the will. Both discounted the debilitating equation between emotional restraint and economic bounty. They could have pointed to the case of England, Marx’s poster-country for industrial capitalism, where a confluence of feeling and prosperity produced Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) [139] and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) [140]. But as soon as they put the will to work, Weber and Gramsci part company.

By 1905, Weber was arguing that capitalism did not depend on liberalism or on democracy; he was ready to jettison them both for the personal authority of a charismatic leader who would best promote development [134] (p. 439), and radiate his superior consciousness to reorganize all spheres of society [99]. A generation later, that elitist option was dangerously embodied in fascist fuehrers for Germany and for Italy. Gramsci deplored charisma as the antithesis to the organic intellectual and to

the collective leadership of the “modern prince.” [55] (pp. 219, 240). Had Weber lived a decade or two beyond 1920, he might have become disenchanted with charismatic leaders along with everything else that brought him to despair. Perhaps he would have felt even more miserably stuck in a historical dead end of modernity, but it is hard to imagine his change of heart about the masses.

Elitism continually characterized Weber’s politics and also his work as a scholar—two roles that were hard to keep separated [141]. Some interference was unavoidable to the degree that science begins with presuppositions: “No science is absolutely free from presuppositions, and no science can prove its fundamental value to the man who rejects these presuppositions.” [142] (p. 153). For Weber, the superior culture of scholars is incommensurable with that of the masses because culture for one is meaningless to the other. Intellectuals desire and develop symbolic solutions to existential quandaries, they want to understand the world, while the masses are moved by “irrational sentiments” that demand material change [99]. Gramsci recognizes in those sentiments the energy for social progress, and he rejects Weber’s unbridgeable class distinction as a non-starter for his own objective to forge unity. Separating political from intellectual work denies the contributions of praxis to refine both doing and thinking; and decoupling mental from manual workers derails the productive assumption that “All men are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of the intellectuals.” [143] (p. 9). This crucial function is to bridge or to glue divergent sectors of society into one dynamic political party capable of winning hegemony over the current ruling class. That successful class stays in power thanks to its own intellectual auxiliaries who have made even the thought of change unlikely [144].

So, the first moves of an opposition must be to re-think the possibilities for change, and to identify in popular common sense the seeds of all great religions and philosophies, including praxis. At the early stage of revolution that Gramsci addresses, it will need leaders specialized in the conceptual elaboration of ideas, intellectuals whose progress is admittedly slow, nonlinear, and tries the patience of the masses ([55], p. 334). One task for intellectuals is to reframe common sense—from a sense of resignation to the workers’ appreciation for the effects of labor on the material world. Another task will be to identify common sense as the origin of many great religions and philosophies ([55], pp. 331–332). Aristotle was fond of starting there to get to practical wisdom ([83], p. viii). Additionally, Marx makes frequent references to the validity of common sense, not for its content which should change, but for the solid and imperative form it takes ([55], p. 346). Croce endorses common sense too, going so far as to call all men philosophers, but his influential proposition is unclear, says Gramsci, and has no traction to produce a national popular culture ([55], p. 345). A “collective noun” rather than a simple one, common sense represents a variety of world views ([55], p. 327). These can develop into a consistent political philosophy only through serious engagement with one another and with the world, through a dynamic that toggles between interventions and reflections, through praxis [143] (p. 329).

Significantly for an argument bent on revolutionizing material conditions, Gramsci insists on the massive intellectual work to be done—starting with a school curriculum that teaches young people more literature and less math [55] (p. 377). “The lay forces have failed in their historical task as educators and elaborators of the intellect and the moral awareness of the people-nation . . . because they have not known how to elaborate a modern ‘humanism’ able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes.” [55] (p. 369). Surprisingly, for a Marxist thinker, Gramsci grounds his affirmation of universal intellectual capacity on the innate faculty of taste, a familiar grounding for aesthetic rather than political philosophy or psychology: Each person is a “man of taste, participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it.” [143] (p. 9). A shared “aesthetic taste” can bind people into a speech community [145]. So, the development of taste accompanies—or even founds—the conversion of common sense into good sense, a formulation, by that way, that Gramsci got from a novel, Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* [146]. He therefore assigns a greater importance to works of literature and other arts than their ideological content, dwelling on the aesthetic forms that train taste. For example, Gramsci is unfriendly to opera, because it breeds a wooden or “bookish” sense of life that reduces flux to easily remembered musical matrices [55] (p. 373). Additionally, he defends the

serial novel, especially the French novels that Italian newspapers were reproducing to support sales, because the French feuilletons represent the “popular-national character” that Italian novels should emulate [55] (pp. 245, 369).

From industrialized Northern Europe, Weber [18] had asked why Protestant countries outstripped Catholic areas in capitalist development. That question begs another: Why was this issue his focus of attention during the years it took to write his book? Some of the motivation to feature a cultural cause for economic dynamism was surely a contestation to the economicism that “scientific” analyses since Marx had made popular [147]. But readers have also noticed that “much of Weber’s sociology is based on an assumption about the cultural superiority of German values.” [148] (p. 76). Weber, it turns out, was an economic nationalist (with suitable qualifications; see [149]). The Protestant project developed from a report he had prepared on the dangers of admitting foreign laborers into Germany [150] (p. 40). Polish and Russian workers were forcing Germans out of the agricultural sector in the East-Elbian region and Weber responded with reasons to reverse the trend. One reason was the superior work habits of German peasants, the “Protestant ethic”, which also inspired capitalist development through its sacrifice or the infinite delay of gratification as a symptom of the “seriousness” that development requires. With its subtle semantic ambiguity, the notion of “seriousness” epitomizes the gulf between Weber’s “cultural” explanation for successful social development and Antonio Gramsci’s advice for achieving desirable change through the “optimism of the will” and the pleasure of acting—as artists do—in the face of possible or probable failure [151]. The comparison is hardly arbitrary, given their contemporary careers and their shared disillusion with positivist rationality, and their respect for culture as a cause of social development.

We do not aspire here to offer a profound, expert reading of Weber’s work. We are rather interested in Weber’s conception of Protestant Culture as a set of ascetic and elitist assumptions that put pleasure and ethics in opposite corners of a contentious ring, as a foundational axiom of productive modernity. Weber was aware of the risk of oversimplification he was facing by choosing to venture into comparative cultural explanations of socio-economic development [152]. His ultimate goal was to upset the materialist determinism that stifled scholarship at the turn of the 20th century, prying open that determinism with a comparative history of religions as causal factors of social development. His subtle argument was that while economics does explain some dimensions of development, it cannot be entirely determining, since a particular religion helped to explain the rise of certain economic forces, which did not develop equally among peoples who practiced other religions [153]. Ironically, given Weber’s iconoclastic project against positivist determinism, our own objective here is iconoclastic against *The Protestant Ethic*; it is to pierce the cultural determinism that follows from conventional readings of the book—also as a consequence of Weber’s own cultural biases [154]. As a scientific thinker, Weber must have inherited more of the Protestant ethic than he admitted. Whereas its adherents maximize material wealth and therefore shun pleasure for the greater glory of God and as a symptom of their own salvation, Weber looks hopelessly on the bitter lives of Puritans and their secular, but equally rational progeny without sharing their convictions or making effective theoretical moves to recover the lost love of life. Pessimism is Weber’s consistently reasonable response to a world disenchanted from the magic and the ritual that looked pagan to Puritans, a world reduced to rational patterns and quantifiable accounts [155]. He saw no capacity or willpower in the general population to re-enchant the world through everyday ingenuity and thereby to renew the love of life through personal or collective creativity. Short of exceptionally talented charismatic leaders (Weber especially liked the Old Testament Prophets), modern subjects were hopelessly gripped by a downward dispirited spiral of ever more limited opportunities for freedom and affect.

The slippage from description to prescription is hardly surprising for sociology, despite Weber’s best non-normative intentions for information and theory building [156]. He refused to pander to the State with pseudo-legitimizing studies of already existing progress [134]. Science was the handmaid of politics, but politics depended on leaders who can process information towards norms and goals that are independent of science. [78,153] among others doubt Weber’s success at absolute

objectivity (see also [157]). His investigation does not slip in the direction of pandering or in the service of a counter-ideology, but in the probably unintended effects of confirming the ethical and economic dangers of pleasure through his pursuit of radical Protestantism as the spirit of capitalism. This conundrum points to the fundamental issue of a socially transformative Gramscian praxis: The necessity of an engaged scholarship [158], whether we reckon the effects of what we write [159]. Research projects are not politically neutral and can instead amount to interventions, though scholars are of course free to choose what they will study. The choice however will make the difference between one intervention and another. Pragmatists, like Rorty, are not shy about asking after the consequences of scholarly choices. He puts the matter quite boldly in the broad company of William James and others who choose to ask only useful questions: “James agreed with John Stuart Mill that the right thing to do, and a fortiori the right belief to acquire, is always the one that will do most for human happiness. So he advocated a utilitarian ethics of belief. James often comes close to saying that *all* questions, including questions about what exists, boil down to questions about what will help create a better world.” [160] (p. 5).

5. The Remains of Reason

The far left asks inflexibly formal questions, Gramsci complained; it refused to take objective situations into account and ignored even the disposition of the masses towards the progress of the party. Whereas Gramsci advocated a protracted campaign of education and interchange between the party’s leadership and the popular classes in order to forge a shared and dynamic national culture worthy of the “modern prince,” the radical left restricted the work of leadership to trained cadres. This vanguard style of politics leads barely integrated masses into programs that follow from established principles ([55], p. 156). It does not factor in the time to work out mistakes, to regroup and adjust to new conditions. Gramsci advised more humility and more time consuming development, especially for organic intellectuals who “develop slowly, far more slowly than any other social group, by their very nature and historical function” to embody tradition and translate one social class to another ([55], p. 184).

It took a long time, for example, before intellectuals understood some aspects of “The Southern Question.” Even after WWI, while the Italian left had stepped up its organizing program during 1919 and managed to ignite the factory worker rebellions of 1920 in Turin that promised to spark revolution throughout Italy, “the southern question” was repressed. How to incorporate masses of peasants who would otherwise remain “a disordered rabble, a tumultuous horde driven to the cruelest barbarities by the unprecedented suffering which are becoming ever more frighteningly evident.” [55] (p. 117). That question would haunt Gramsci in the disastrous aftermath, when big business and government caught the workers and the party leadership off guard and then consolidated into a lasting fascist alliance. He would conclude that the greatest obstacle to effective organizing was an almost blind faith in what passed for scientific Reason as the motor for allegedly inevitable progress. It would, among other things, eliminate the effects of contradictions between workers and peasants. Sometimes this abstract reason—independent of human agency and therefore presumably incapable of error—appeared in the guise of economicism, predicting regular stages of development and struggle whatever the political culture and context. Frustration with economicism is a leitmotif in the *Notebooks*, though economicism’s blindness to subjectivity did not warrant the opposite error of Freudians to attribute causality to psychological forces [99]. Among the critiques that Gramsci levels against the unwarranted faith in market forces is to identify it as a “direct descendant of liberalism.” [55] (p. 210). One casualty of this unmediated confidence in extra-political forces is the left’s sectarianism, fearing compromise, for example, with the Liberals ([55], p. 184), and therefore disabling the work of praxis ([55], p. 220). Not that praxis should concede ideological ground or that it ought to patronize uneducated interlocutors, but that the process of building critical consensus works by stages to refine debates and to include increasingly broader sectors along with their initial world views. Other times abstract reason bears the name of internationalism, impatient with local feelings and practices of belonging ([55], p. 231), which in Italy, were still regional and needed greater national

coordination (through a standard language, for example) to adapt to a still more universal experience of international solidarity ([55], p. 326).

In both cases, the same imperious Reason recalls the specter of the French Revolution in Schiller's [161] *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller's recommendation to bypass the bloody earnestness of radicalism is practically a rehearsal for Gramsci's proposal to wage an incremental cultural revolution. Instead of a self-defeating campaign to achieve political freedom by direct aggression, a campaign that left great numbers of potential French citizens without even the right to life, Schiller was sure that an indirect path through the pursuit of beauty and the creation of art would be more effective. While Gramsci would be more sanguine about the bloodletting under the Jacobins, who had to remain firm so as not to commit political suicide, he knew that they were finally too inflexible to make good on their promises ([55], p. 253). Incurably bourgeois, the Jacobins denied workers the right to organize ([55], p. 256). The French Revolution counted as a historical advance, for Gramsci, along with the Protestant Reformation, the Bolshevik Revolution, and other turning points in the progress of freedom. It represented particular advances to be defended and mistakes to be superseded, including the inability to distinguish between ideological consistency and self-destructive sectarianism. Gramsci also knew the trouble that the inflexible far left was making in Italy, both by refusing to ally with other forces and by insisting on the scientific rationality of the economic approach to revolution. That approach would keep Italy waiting perhaps indefinitely until material conditions were ripe for revolution. Even Lenin's political upstaging of economicism in a Russia that did not look ready for communism was unavailable to politically disjointed Italy.

The only way ahead was through gradual cultural reform, a relentless war of position that would shift power from the current hegemonic bloc to a new bloc of the coordinated masses [162]. So, without dismissing or discrediting real warfare in the progress of social revolution, as Schiller did, with hindsight, Gramsci acknowledges the reformist sequels as a war of position to occupy and hold down the trenches that follow from the earlier and more aggressive war of maneuver. It was time that the strategy served the left instead of building only fascism. "In Europe from 1789 to 1870 there was a (political) war of movement in the French Revolution and a long war of position from 1815 to 1870. In the present epoch, the war of movement took place politically from March 1917 to March 1921; this was followed by a war of position whose representative—both practical (for Italy) and ideological (for Europe)—is fascism." [55] (p. 267).

Hard liners would not admit tainted strategies, but both Schiller and Gramsci understood that progress toward freedom is uneven, unorthodox, and risky. Schiller called this experimental process "play," acknowledging that the same materials and circumstances can produce a variety of modern and therefore provisional artistic responses, more or less successful, but not enduring in the sense of classic works of art that ignore the dynamic of changing societies. Gramsci named the dynamic "praxis," a rhythm of creative activity in the world and reflection on that action. Schiller defended the trial and error of making art against the ardent and intolerant rationalists for whom error was punishable by death; and Gramsci took on the 'scientific' materialists for being just as arrogant and sectarian as the Jacobins proved to be. Both identified in the universal faculty that drives the creative process our human capacity to make decisions and therefore to make mistakes. Error preoccupied Gramsci after the chastening defeat in Turin. In 1919, he was still confident that Marxists had the "maieutic" function of history's midwife, critically "biding their time" [55] (p. 85) as new stages unfolded. Though history is a process of development and somewhat unpredictable, "political genius can be recognized precisely by this capacity to master the greatest possible number of concrete conditions necessary and sufficient to . . . anticipate both the immediate and distant future and on the basis of this intuition to prescribe a state's activity and hazard the fortunes of a people." [55] (p. 86). He was also sure that capitalism was mortally wounded by the Great War. "The capitalists have lost their pre-eminence; their freedom is limited; their power is reduced to a minimum . . . The corresponding concentration of the working masses has given the revolutionary proletarian class an unprecedented power." [55] (p. 87). Soon it became clear that neither change had really happened, and Gramsci discovered a new

and troubling dimension of freedom. Recognizing error may seem an inauspicious way to appreciate the agency of human will, but the shift of focus from Marxism's genius for predictions to Marxists' responsibilities for adjusting theory and testing the conditions for intervention liberated Gramsci from the vestiges of theological and other related determinisms. Disenchanted, he will now keep a distance from mechanical historical materialism, which "does not allow for the possibility of error, but assumes that every political act is determined, immediately, by the structure, and therefore as a real and permanent (in the sense of achieved) modification of structure." [55] (p. 191). Blind to the possibility of error, leaders mistake conducive conditions for sure signs of progress, and they miss lessons of history. Gramsci's change of heart made him seek out the secular counsel of Machiavelli [130]. Without perhaps proposing the connection, Gramsci also came into the circle of Schiller and company. Error is the evidence of risk, and of freedom, for aesthetics as well as for politics. In both exercises of creativity and judgment, human decisions about form and value are provisional and retractable. Perhaps this is the boldest and most compelling way to characterize freedom: Its capacity to equivocate and therefore to harbor both dangers and opportunities for repair ([55], p. 191). Somewhat consequently, the familiar inconclusiveness of aesthetic judgment is a sign of its particular rationality [163]. In urgent need of repair, the left that Gramsci represented wondered what prospects there were if abstract mechanical reason continued to lead, with blinders against error, in order to stay on a one lane high road of politics.

Schiller indicted reason's single-minded excesses as barbarism, a charge that Walter Benjamin would repeat on the brink of World War II when he wrote that the history of civilization is also the history of barbarism [164]. The Nazis were of course notoriously rational about forging a heroic history through ethnic and political cleansing [165]. Gramsci worried that the leftist opposition would not go very far toward defending democracy if it shared this inhuman rationality, leaving change to inevitable forces or simply leaving it behind in despair. Both the arrogant and the desperate faces of reason had led to passivity, and yet Gramsci found himself actively writing in prison, where the effort was shortening his own infirm and precarious life. Alongside the pessimism of the intellect he was heartened by a stubborn and irrational "optimism of the will." It goaded him on to think and to write with an evident and paradoxically "disinterested" pleasure, although he could never have admitted this. But since his own pessimistic prospects for the effort did not dissuade him with reasonable objections to futility, the decision to write was somehow purposeful without a purpose. Perhaps he was simply and dutifully taking his own advice, while comrades were crying and cursing their fate in 1920 Turin, to keep a strong heart and a "will as sharp as a sword when the general disillusionment is at its worst." [55] (p. 103). Or had he also come to acknowledge the sheer pleasure of optimism against the odds of success? Pleasure may be the surprising point here, since we so seldom consider it as part of serious work. But when work is freely engaged for no other reason than itself, it is almost by definition an aesthetic experience. Unsolicited and perhaps even purposeless, Gramsci's work participates in some noble and tragic ways in the freedom that Schiller would have associated with play.

6. The Politics of Pleasure: A View from the (Global) South

By contrasting Protestant and Catholic dogma, Weber reminds the reader that self-efficacy had been a value for traditional Christendom long before the Renaissance returned man to the center of artistic and intellectual practices. At the other end of Europe from where Weber wrote about shrinking Puritan souls and declining opportunities for democracy, Gramsci's Catholic and capacious imagination recognized countervailing movements of history. Against the determinism of any kind, religious or rational, he weighed choices at the points where one movement put another into crisis. Preference here does not mean the kind of moral levity or whim that suggests a personal and arbitrary choice; it is a disposition to continued commitment despite the unpromising circumstances. The seriousness of Gramsci's commitments to social progress is undeniable to anyone who knows the bare outlines of his difficult and truncated life. Tireless hard work accompanied the physical pain of his stunted growth and chronic illness since childhood; and work continued to define his life

throughout the disappointments of a marriage interrupted for so long during his prison-shortened life that he never saw his only son. Perhaps even more disappointing were the failed political campaigns throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. Either the apparently lost political cause or his always precarious health might have been deterrents to the labor of promoting the Italian Communist Party throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, while he barely survived the harsh conditions of prison. International public pressure finally managed to free him, only months before his weakened body gave out. But Gramsci continued to work on his *Prison Notebooks* until the end, because he chose to do so to develop a new strategy for Italian Communism. That self-willed hard work amounted to producing a pleasure that confirmed his choice to work in a virtuous cycle of willpower and enjoyment. In Gramsci, then, a socially and politically transformational view of pleasure flourishes in the most adverse, and unlikely, existential circumstances.

On the other hand, free will to work is what hard working Puritans lack. There is no legitimate pleasure in their productivity, no matter how industrious and productive God's servants may be. Only God makes decisions for believers in the Reformed Churches, and they would be guilty of blasphemy by presuming to choose work over idleness. The injunction to work was also beyond choice or negotiation in Weber's post-Puritan world. Weber shared a political hope in the human will, the exceptional will of charismatic leaders rather than of collective movements, but as an intellectual, he was generally too pessimistic for the high hopes that kept Gramsci intensely engaged in the pleasurable work on his *Notebooks*. Historical necessity, he knew, is an observation from hindsight rather than a predetermined result of ineluctable forces. Both Weber and Gramsci were critical of the economicism that passed for scientific Marxism at the turn of the 20th century. Economicism amounted to the metaleptic mistake of taking the outcome of historical processes for the implicit destiny and cause of capital's dynamic. But while Weber remained determinist in his cultural critique of capitalism, whereby all of modern humanity ends up in the iron cage of disaffected rationality [166], Gramsci located an escape route from pre-determination by the time that Lenin interrupted the determinist narrative of standard Marxism, which would have delayed the Russian Revolution until the country's economy had matured and begun to decay. This spectacular interruption of Marxian narratives led to Gramsci's reflection on the so-called necessary conditions for revolution and to his conclusion that conditions are created by human actors, not given or secreted by inhuman forces. Lenin provoked an economically premature political revolution, since an anti-capitalist economic upheaval would have been misdirected and out of place in Russia. Additionally, Gramsci proposed a cultural revolution that would win political ground, moving slowly from one entrenched practice to another in a war of positions that avoided direct confrontation with either the powerful economic interests, that had defeated heroic Italian workers in the clashes of the 1920s, or the politics of a fascist state.

Again, a cultural revolution seems an unlikely point of departure for a major social upheaval. Culture occupies a marginal, and chronically questioned, place in the developmental discourse of capitalism. The effects of a Puritanical and principled rejection of the fine arts and of "idle" explorations have been literally chilling, Weber reports, as "asceticism descended like a frost on merry England." [18] (p. 168). Sometimes, nevertheless, the cold shoulder softened to allow cultural goods, such as athletic or aesthetic pleasures, as long as they did not cost any money ([18], p. 170). Therefore, in times of economic constraint in universities and in governmental as well as non-governmental agencies that rarely consider the arts as social resources even in better times, the general joylessness of the Protestant ethic can become literally appalling. Gloomy earnestness will undervalue both the creative spirits who might choose to take on challenges beyond the radical Protestant goal of economic gain. Additionally, close by are the teachers who hope to develop students' moral imagination through creative arts and humanities. It is not the only spirit that animates our university culture—where the Greco-Roman tradition developed into a humanism that delights in the variety of experiences and expressions; but to the extent that Puritanism breathes rational anhedonia into virtually all institutions of capitalist countries, it casts a cold glance on the irrational pursuits of art and interpretation [75]. Humanists are right to worry. It is just that our worry about the pressure to be practical paradoxically feeds the

Protestant presumption that the arts have little to do with social practice. Instead of responding to a Puritan impatience with play and appearances by defending ourselves against the implicit demand to engage productively in the world, we might play with, or deconstruct, the unstable distinctions between making art and making change.

The natural point of departure in this respect is an arts-based politics of pleasure; that is, a sort of conceptual antithesis to the instrumental seriousness of the Puritan rule. The fatal weakness of the Puritan war on pleasure, and Weber is no exception in this regard, lies in its utter lack of curiosity about the role played by pleasure in the shaping of human behavior [167], and of its pathogenic drifts [168]. Pleasure is a key element of behavioral and decision-making functions [169], calibrated through evolution to ensure that animals—including us—stay focused on a range of indispensable functions, such as nutrition, reproduction, rest, and sociality [170]. A war on pleasure is therefore nothing less than a war on human nature, a campaign that cannot be won without sacrificing its own troops. What has been the result of removing pleasure from the foundational capitalist discourse? Perversely, pleasure has been shorn of its “disinterested” freedom and diminished to a commodity, something that capitalism produces and sells [171]. If humans cannot do without pleasure, capitalism can cripple and package it through a social logic of accumulation and exchange [172,173]. As a consequence, pleasure is transformed from a liberating force of creative exploration—the play of trial and error [174] that toggles between individual satisfaction and the common good [175]—to a thing that is indifferent to liberating and communal dimensions [176]. Pleasure devolves, under the force of capital, to a restless endeavor [177] to command social recognition (an effect intensified by online social media; e.g., [178]) as it loses the capacity for free and “purposeless” play [179]. Once framed as a commodity, pleasure offers no respite from other socially “normalized” goods [180] in which materialism destroys well-being [181]. If the “moral” imperative of capitalism is “making the economy work”, consumerism becomes a moral duty [182] and the grammar of desire in the language of consumerism confirms the reproduction of capital [183]. This consumerist grammar re-programs human desire toward a new set of social instincts prompted by carefully designed cues [184]—so that learning the language of capitalist legitimization prepares us to read advertising as information rather than explicit, manipulative neuro-programming. We lack the terms to raise any serious social concern [185] or to inspire corrective policy decisions [186].

In the capitalist *koiné*, pleasure thus resurfaces as another form of commodified labor, subject to the general logic of disenchantment [187]. Additionally, the pursuit of consumerist pleasure becomes one of the most effective ways to achieve social control over individuals and communities, including the commodification of anti-consumerist dissent itself [188]. Shared pleasure is an important factor of social bonding [189], since its constitutional aspects of authenticity, accessibility, and sociality [190] ground the ritual establishment of mutual trust and collective sympathy [191]. But in the capitalist social space, pleasure seeking [192] becomes a powerful means of elitist discrimination [193]. In its capitalist formulation, “pleasure” carries a burden of stringent qualifications: Entitlement to pleasure is now linked to high performative standards, such as physical perfection [194], exclusive and exploitative access [195], and social envy [196]—while remaining indifferent to social consequences [197]. In other words, “pleasure” is now understood as the competitive domination of others [198]. Consequently, its strategic pursuit becomes a formidable driver of consumerist desire, fueled by the voyeuristic contemplation of the happy few, ceaselessly celebrated by the media [199], and tragically exposed to destructive mimetic conflict [200]. Capitalist pleasure boils down to exclusionary consumption, and its intensity depends on increasing levels of luxury [201,202]. Excluded masses feebly replicate the discriminating rituals through their low-powered, ego-reparative substitutes [203,204] in order to figure at all on the consumerist pyramid of status and privilege [205].

The war on pleasure, therefore, does not amount to its removal, but to the erasure of what may seem like a technical difference, a difference—nevertheless—on which political freedom depends: “Agreeable” pleasure that can be pursued as opposed to the unsolicited pleasure of aesthetic delight. This distinction between predictable pleasure that ignites desire and the delightful surprise that comes from beauty and play was central to Immanuel Kant’s Enlightenment project, because

surprise engenders doubt and requires judgment. Without unexpected and purposeless delight, we have no incentive to develop a free disinterested faculty of judgment (see Kant's *Third Critique on Aesthetic Judgment* [206]). That is why the reduction of pleasure to the mere pursuit of agreeable commodities—which cannot cultivate our availability for surprise or doubt—is an attack on freedom itself [207]. No cultural revolution is therefore possible without a radical gesture of individual and collective re-appropriation of disinterested pleasure [208]. This is the gulf between Weber and Gramsci: The destiny of disenchantment versus the agency of pleasure to re-enchant the world and thereby safeguard human freedom. Following Gramsci's lead, the only possible way to effectively re-enchant the world is to bring pleasure back to the very places where disenchantment banished it: Schools [209], workplaces [210], and public spaces [211]. The arts and humanities are important agents [212], if they can navigate an insidious ambiguity that threatens disinterest [213]. Like every other sphere of human activity, the arts and interpretation are vulnerable to commodification [214] that can exacerbate social distinction and exclusion [215]. A generic endorsement of the arts for their socially transformational role would therefore be naive, and many artists would make no such claim.

But many more do claim a political dimension that has gone mainstream as the disenfranchised command the attention of artists, particularly in visual arts [216]. Some engagements with marginal communities or minority groups retain an instrumental, paternalistic, or even neo-colonialist attitude [217]. A paradoxical consequence is that “political” art can elicit resentment or passive resistance from the subjects they represent [218]. A crucial issue here is how to avoid instrumentalization and commodification of social engagements [219]. Another is how to nurture artistic enchantment if the projects have a social purpose [220]. Additionally, how much should artists worry about projects that inadvertently fuel inequality [221], as in the gentrification-eviction-relocation cycles of real estate development [222], where art enters depressed neighborhoods as the Trojan horse for developers [223] with unintended but unsurprising consequences [224]? When the arts lend themselves to these dynamics, their social credibility evaporates [225] along with art's potential to re-enchant the world. The practical distinction to be made, therefore, is not between political and apolitical art, but rather between works that achieve real social consequences and those that are satisfied with ephemeral effects [226]. Tania Bruguera's *Arte Util* (useful art) calls attention to the distinction [227], as do lasting maestros, such as Augusto Boal with his Forum Theater [228], and Antanas Mockus with his stunningly effective pranks in service of civic culture [229].

For the arts to exercise a counter-hegemonic force in the Gramscian sense, they need to share his patience with process in continued, physically close dialogue with partner communities [230], avoiding the pitfalls of commodified paternalism [231]. In this way, artists can hope to develop dynamic, socially transformational processes that may support the empowerment of collective marginal subjectivities [232]. Art, in any case, is generally more focused on process than on product [233].

The commodification of pleasure in contemporary capitalism has not been equally effective everywhere. In the peripheries of capital, we still find deep pockets of resilient cultures, which have protected and perpetuated traditional practices of collective pleasure as community building activities [234], and resisted colonialist stereotyping [235]. These practitioners develop idiosyncratic bottom-up approaches to collective well-being [236] which provide fresh sources of social ingenuity, and often innovation. On the other hand, hegemonic practices of a distinctively Puritan imprint aim at the engineering of well-being and welfare through their measurement and certification in terms of a standard package of (far from methodologically flawless) indicators [237], which may be conveniently arranged to support the “normality” of the neoliberal status quo. An irony of modern measurement is that such indicators sometimes produce global rankings of happiness that may end up crowning “undisciplined” countries of Central and South America [238], an anomaly that consequently needs to be “explained away”. The problem here is clearly not measurement in itself—measurement has been and still is a key driver of human civilization. It is rather the fact that in the logic of disenchanted agency it is measurement that drives (that is, prescribes) action, and not vice versa. If it is the established logic of measurement (and thus its ideological premise) that strictly rules what is worth pursuing,

the scope for transformational social innovation is inevitably limited, and a growing blindness to the societal challenges that are not acknowledged by the prevailing paradigm ensues. We should not let the meaningfulness of social action to be mechanically ruled by the common sense of the status quo and by its way of measuring it. We should rather wonder whether the fact that certain forms of social action emerge as meaningful calls for new, more appropriate and responsive approaches to measurement that challenge such common sense and its consequential normative criteria.

7. Conclusions

Viewed from the South, pleasure knows best [239]. In some of the deep pockets at the margins of North Atlantic capitalism, there is no need for re-enchantment because the spirits have not yet been banished nor has joy lost its political meaning [240]. The global North could now learn from the South how to re-appropriate disinterested pleasure and re-discover its horizontal, anti-discriminatory, rejuvenating effects. This is no quick fix or cheap self-help advice; it entails a profound questioning of the center-periphery logic of colonial and post-colonial global hegemony. Re-enchantment requires, in the first place, undoing the paternalistic, diligent administration of “politically engaged” artistic practices—which include mining local arts as an appendix of the Western canon [241]—and therefore re-inscribing the modernist logic of patriarchal supercession [242]. In the second place, we should humbly explore creative practices cultivated at the margins of, and in response to, Weber’s anhedonic capitalism [107]. Collective and improvised performance, recycling, reciting, youth orchestras in unlikely slums, all speak in a Gramscian grammar of re-positioning as agency. Art works where interruptions of hegemonic structures are most needed: In the desolate areas of capitalist disenchantment both at the center and the periphery. Creative practices can generate new opportunities for social empowerment and mobilization through interventions that refresh a love and care for the world and that re-frame oppressive systems: “While North-South definitions essentially revolve around economic division, it is important to remember that the world will be a poorer place if artists of the South become yet another pathway for global cultural homogenisation” [243] (p. 22).

It is not only a matter of resisting cultural homogenization, but of inverting the direction of the flow, of informing rather than being informed by eliciting new forms of expressive collective action. This is, for instance, the deep sense of a project, such as Pedro Reyes’ *Palas por pistolas*: An invitation to Mexican citizens to exchange their firearms for shovels to be used to collectively engage in the planting of new trees. The arms would be then destroyed to be remodeled into gardening tools: The action broke the national record of voluntary donation and its repetition led to tree planting in a number of iconic cities of the Global North, turning utopian representations into a strategy of collective participation [244]. Or of projects, like Tania Bruguera’s *Destierro*, where the artist’s action of walking in the streets of La Habana with a human-size fetish in the day of the birthday celebration of Fidel Castro catalyzes a spontaneous procession of people by implicitly making reference to the popular credence of having a desire fulfilled by the fetish in exchange for a vow [245]. In *Untitled (Free)*, the Thai-Argentinian artist Rirkrit Tiravanija transforms a whole gallery space into a kitchen where the artist cooks Thai curries for visitors, thereby creating an inviting venue where the art becomes the support for the development of convivial exchanges [246]. In *Open House*, South African artist, Jacques Coetzer, offers a venue to be appropriated at will by all citizens to freely engage in social exchange and creative expression, or simply to have lunch or rest, as an ideal antithesis to the prescriptive space of the cultural institution with its rules and conventions [247]. However brief and fragmentary, these samples from a wide variety of ongoing practices and experiences, which are not only the expression of voices from the Global South, but also reflect ones from disenfranchised pockets of the Global North [248], are already telling enough to suggest that culturally-driven ‘re-enchantment’ as a counter-hegemonic strategy is not a simple possibility, but is a reality in the making, provided that it succeeds in escaping the trap of commodification, in becoming yet another source of ‘artistic blue chips’, luxury decoration pieces condescendingly appropriated by hegemonic agents as domestication trophies. The counter-hegemonic valence of such practices amounts instead to a “call for critical

thought generated from local axes, whose force and singularity allows for the renewal of contents and interlocutors in various areas of knowledge” [249] (p. 16).

This, in its mature articulation, is the cultural platform that can balance the governmentality of dour ‘seriousness’ with the energy of new proposals. Human creativity refreshes failing systems and nourishes itself with the inherent pleasure of making something new. It is an irrepressible fuel for sociability and development. Governments are wise to take the arts into account—as Franklin Delano Roosevelt learned during the Great Depression—in a useful and expanded toolkit for sustainable democracy.

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