

Interview

“I Was Always Interested in Capitalism.” Interview with Walter Benn Michaels

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Walter Benn Michaels talks about his trajectory from being a student involved in the anti-war movement in the late 1960s to becoming an English professor, whose critique of what he calls “left neoliberalism” and his demand for a politics focused on class have been controversially discussed. While Michaels initially became interested in literary criticism seemingly at the expense of political and economic questions, he argues that he “was always interested in capitalism” and its relationship to literary texts and other cultural artifacts. In the interview, he reflects on what made him pay more attention to class inequality and criticizes how many American liberals can only conceive of class in the same manner that they understand racial discrimination. He also discusses the impact of the financial crisis and the election of Barack Obama on the American Left, which he criticizes for its focus on horizontal forms of protest. According to Michaels, it is necessary to organize, especially in the workplace. The interview concludes with reflections on the role aesthetic form can have as an example of what it means to look at an autonomous structure—such as the capitalist economy.¹

Marlon Lieber: You were an undergraduate student in the late 1960s, which was a time of intensive political activism. Elsewhere you have said that your own political attitude at the time was the standard position of the student Left.² You were...

Walter Benn Michaels: ...very focused on Civil Rights and anti-war. I was very briefly a student at the University of Michigan, and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) was still active there. And I was a little bit involved with SDS there. But I was only there for about four months. Part of my experience of the sixties was just refusing to do what your parents wanted you to do or what anybody with any authority wanted you to do. So I refused to go to college where they wanted me to go to college; and then refused to stay at the college I went to instead—that was the University of Michigan—so there was a lot of just travelling around. And I was involved in anti-war stuff in Michigan and where I went to school next, at the City University of New York. And then, because of my girlfriend, I went to Santa

¹ The interview was conducted and taped in Chicago on December 9, 2015. It has been edited for length and content.

² Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Political Education of Walter Benn Michaels: An Interview.” *sympløke* 22.1-2 (2014): 337-59. Print. 355.

Barbara, to the College of Creative Studies. That one took. In fact, even before we started to drive to California, a friend of mine from high school told me that a guy who taught there had written a very wonderful book on Samuel Beckett. And I was a very big Beckett fan. So I read this great book, at night while we were driving to California, Hugh Kenner's book on Samuel Beckett.³ And when we got there, I right away signed up for two classes with Kenner.

I was still involved with the anti-war movement in Santa Barbara, but Santa Barbara in general was a new experience for me. A lot of its students seemed like surfers who couldn't get into Berkeley or UCLA, which turned out to mean that when they got involved in student activism, they practiced a remarkably untheorized—even semi-literate, but sometimes impressively direct—form of it—like burning down the Bank of America. There was a takeover of a building. I don't remember what particular Vietnam or Cambodian event produced it, but there was a takeover, and I was involved.⁴ But I was also becoming a much more interested student at that point. Kenner's work really excited me. I'd been doing philosophy before that and hadn't found anything that interested me as much as what Kenner was teaching. So I went and sat in at North Hall, but then left to go to class. And I said to Kenner—it was the third or fourth day of Kenner's class—"could we discuss these events"? He was very reluctant, but I didn't know why. Mainly, I didn't know that he was extremely right-wing, that he was in certain respects somewhat more than socially anti-Semitic. I didn't know that he was close to William Buckley, a major figure in the American Right. I just thought he was your standard professor, except smarter. So we had a discussion of the events in North Hall and, characteristically, I had a lot to say. This was his undergraduate class, on Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett, which met in the morning. But I was also, by special permission, taking his graduate seminar in the afternoon, on Ezra Pound. When the morning class was over, I happily went back to the demo until the afternoon class. I didn't know until years later that in between classes Kenner had gone to the director of the program I was in and asked him to remove me from the class. If I had known, I probably wouldn't have gone back that afternoon and would have had a very different life. But I did go back, and, again, had a lot to say, only this time about literary criticism, which was not usual at Santa Barbara. There were some very smart people in Santa Barbara, but it was not... Nobody was applying to that graduate program, if they were super qualified or were ambitious to be major literary critics. The people who got there tended to be people, who couldn't get in elsewhere, or misfits. Actually, some of the misfits were brilliant, people I learned a lot from. But they were, like, poets, and they were, like, selling drugs. And I myself was there only because I was following my girlfriend. But I was much more ambitious and into it than Kenner's usual students. And I was good at school, that's how you become a professor. So when I went back that afternoon, we had this great class, and I contributed, especially in a discussion

³ Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*. 1962. Berkeley: U of California P, 1968. Print.

⁴ For an account of student radicalism at UC Santa Barbara, see Klaus P. Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray: The Stormy 1960s*. New York/London: Continuum, 2006. Print. 276-77.

of some of Kenner’s own work, which I thought was brilliant and was trying to explain to the rest of the class, which left him kind of torn. On the one hand, he hated my politics; he had the standard ’68 reaction of the older professor, which is, “this is the end of civilization, next they’re going to put me in a barrel and roll me down the steps of the Sorbonne.” But he liked talking to me about literature. And for me, he was so much more exciting than most of the other professors, who had better politics but very uninteresting things to say about literature. So I ended up getting much more involved in working on his stuff and those sets of issues than I was in politics.

ML: You mentioned anti-war protests and Civil Rights organizing. Was there also an explicit engagement with Marxist theory or, in more general terms, an anti-capitalist politics?

WBM: For many people, yes. If you did this interview with Adolph Reed, who is almost exactly my age—but needless to say I did not at the time know him—and went through his experiences, there would be a much more sophisticated awareness of the relation between a kind of anti-imperial politics and anti-capitalist politics. Among the people with whom I was involved, there was a more limited reading of serious theoretical stuff. The person we read was Marcuse, and to tell the truth, I was more excited by Derrida than Marcuse.⁵

ML: Yes, I thought about Marcuse, because he was teaching not so far away.⁶

WBM: Exactly. My own exposure was not to a serious Marxist politics. I think for a lot of people who became the post-War Left, the anti-War movement turned into an early lesson in disarticulating American left politics from a class politics. If you were of a certain class in the United States, you were never going to have to go to Vietnam. Almost no one from my social class—none of my friends—got drafted; so our objections to the war got very mixed in with disapproval of the people who had gone to fight it, and a certain kind of moralism.

ML: I remember that you mentioned that you rejected what you called “moralist” politics that you experienced in Berkeley later.⁷

WBM: Berkeley was, like, ground-zero for a class-free leftism. Everybody had a sense of complete virtue, enhanced by being at a university that was public and hence in theory open to everyone but, in the event, was almost entirely upper

⁵ Adolph Reed, Jr., is the editor of a volume on 1960s radical politics dedicated—among others—to “the spirit of Herbert Marcuse.” See *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s*. New York et al.: Greenwood Press, 1986. Print.

⁶ The German-born philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who had been a member of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in the 1930s and ’40s, was teaching at the University of California, San Diego, at the time. Through his work, notably *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964. Print), and his teaching he influenced many key protagonists of the American New Left. See Angela Y. Davis, “Marcuse’s Legacies.” *Herbert Marcuse: A critical reader*. Eds. John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb. New York/London: Routledge, 2004. 43-50. Print.

⁷ Williams, “The Political Education” 344.

middle class. I was there during the late 70s and 80s—the years in which neoliberal inequality started booming—but the defining political issues were, like, apartheid in South Africa. Every feature of left politics at Berkeley was united with every other feature of left politics at Berkeley by having nothing whatsoever to do with class—even (or especially) the embrace of Foucault, who was thought of as more political than Derrida but was not, of course, Marxist and was, in fact, particularly dismissive of ideas about the exploitation of labor by capital.⁸ So, although Berkeley New Historicism was at the time identified with a turn away from Derrida and toward Foucault and politics, it was a turn to a politics that thought of itself as left but, whatever it cared about, wasn't exactly focused on economic redistribution, much less class antagonism. English departments were pioneers of a Blairite/Clintonite Third Way, which is why we both hate and love Trump. He's our ideological legitimation. American universities: better than Trump! Which we totally are—there's no doubt about that.

ML: Let's briefly go back to Hugh Kenner. His work on modernism, on Beckett, influenced you in your decision to become a literary critic. You've also mentioned that this was accompanied by a retreat from engaging in political activity.

WBM: Well I was always more of an intellectual than an activist; so I didn't experience it as a retreat. What Hugh had to say about Modernism and my own beginning relation to those texts was much more interesting to me than being against the war in Vietnam. I was not less against the war in Vietnam, but I was more interested in something else.

ML: In American Marxist literary criticism, Fredric Jameson is a central figure. His book *Marxism and Form* was published in 1971, so right after you received your B. A.⁹ Did you read it at the time?

WBM: No. The first thing I read was *The Prison House of Language* which, given my own (at the time) real commitment to deconstruction, I didn't love. And then I wrote a rather dismissive review of his book on Wyndham Lewis.¹⁰ Embarrassingly, I didn't start reading Jameson really seriously until *Postmodernism*. His essay on *The Gold Standard* was great! Partly because Jameson is a really good literary critic. For example, he completely understood that in my writing transitions were everything, because transitions were a way of trying to think about the relations

⁸ Daniel Zamora, "Foucault, the Excluded, and the Neoliberal Erosion of the State." *Foucault and Neoliberalism*. Eds. Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent. Cambridge/Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016. 63-84. Print.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971. Print. This book, which first presented the thought of a number of (Western) Marxist critics, whose works had hardly been translated at the time, to an English-speaking audience, was explicitly meant as a rejoinder to "the hostility of the Anglo-American tradition toward the dialectical" (xiii).

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972. Print; and *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1979. Print.

between works of art and other both discursive and non-discursive events.¹¹ Simply put, he understood the formal problem of how to write about the relation, for example, between some passage in a Frank Norris novel and the Free Silver movement without trying to show that the passage is *about* silver. But in my own early writing, I was much more influenced by Derrida and de Man than by Jameson.

ML: What about the older generation of Americanists? Scholars such as Leo Marx, who—while he might not have been exactly a Marxist—was, like others of his generation, a product of 1930s leftism.

WBM: Marx’s work was very American Studies and seemed really the kind of moralizing historicism that at the time I was trying to avoid.¹² The critical texts of the 60s that mattered more to me were Poirier’s *A World Elsewhere* and Holland’s *The Expense of Vision*.¹³ But the New Historicism really was an attempt to refuse all these models. That was part of what made *The Gold Standard* so visible in its moment—it was so obviously written by someone who cared more about deconstruction than about American Studies. Remember that I had not been trained as an Americanist. I had been trained by Hugh, and Hugh’s politics were so completely beyond the pale that you not only weren’t influenced by them, you couldn’t even be interested in opposing them. It was liberalism that was worth opposing. So a lot of what *The Gold Standard* is about politically—insofar as it has a politics—is a kind of critique of liberal literary criticism and of those critics of my own generation who were reading texts like *Sister Carrie* as expressions of a liberal critique of capitalism. For me the way to begin taking capitalism seriously was not because I myself had a Marxist critique of it, but because I could see right away that whatever the texts I was interested in were doing, it was not criticizing capitalism. What was interesting was the intensity of their relation to it — *Carrie* and the little tan jacket with mother of pearl buttons.¹⁴

ML: What I find interesting is that your anti-liberal critique of these literary critics who were, for instance, celebrating allegedly subversive moments in Dreiser or other literary texts reminds me of your critique of what you have come to call

¹¹ Jameson devotes a considerable amount of chapter 7 of his 1991 book on postmodernism to a critique of Michaels (see *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. Print. 192-217). The best account of Jameson’s own way of relating “discursive and non-discursive events” (as Michaels puts it) remains the first chapter of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981. Print) and particularly the discussion of the three horizons of interpretation (74-102).

¹² Leo Marx discusses the roots of the discipline of American Studies in “the Popular Front political culture” of the 1930s in “On Recovering the ‘Ur’ Theory of American Studies.” *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005). Print. When he claims that Michaels’s rejection of the older Americanists was based on the latter’s insufficient appreciation for “the creative entrepreneurial energies released by ‘free market’ capitalism” (126), this misses Michaels’s point, however.

¹³ Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966. Print; and Laurence B. Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964. Print.

¹⁴ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard or the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. Print. 14, n. 16; 19.

“left neoliberalism.”¹⁵ It’s not far-fetched to see *The Gold Standard* as a critique of liberalism from the left, even if you at that time did not explicitly identify as a leftist scholar.

WBM: My anti-liberalism was not from the Right. But what was at the time my own political provincialism—a certain ignorance about what a sufficiently theorized versions of a left politics and its relation to literature might look like—made it impossible for me to be exactly from the left. There’s really no sense of class or class conflict in *The Gold Standard*. Or rather, what sense there is comes entirely from a close reading of the texts themselves. In other words, insofar as there is a class analysis in that book, it’s an effect of the way in which just trying to understand how the literature works can help you begin to understand how the political economy works.

ML: Still, what struck me about your early writings from the 1980s—*The Gold Standard* just as much as “Against Theory”—is that they are in many ways deeply compatible with your newer work that is more explicitly committed to discussing capitalism or class.¹⁶

WBM: People sometimes say that my work has become so political and that it didn’t use to be. In a way that’s true, but in a way it’s not. It was always deeply concerned with questions about capital and the relation between capital and cultural formations. It didn’t have an overt politics; it didn’t even have a politics I understood. But when it began to occur to me—late in the day—that you could have a left politics that was not a fundamentally liberal identitarian politics, but was a class politics, in other words, had to do with capitalism, then there was a direct throughline there. I was always interested in capitalism.

ML: Sure, the point’s well taken. In a way the approach of a book like *The Gold Standard* is somehow reminiscent of a certain kind of Marxism—I’m thinking now of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* and the work that has been inspired by it—that looks at the interrelation of objectivity—the structure of a society that produces and exchanges commodities—and subjectivity—“objective forms of thought,” as Marx puts it.¹⁷

¹⁵ Michaels explains his use of this term in “Let Them Eat Diversity.” *Jacobin*. 1 Jan. 2011. Web. 1 Mar. 2018.

¹⁶ Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 723-42. Print. See particularly chapter 2 of *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2015. Print) for how Michaels’s more recent critique of neoliberalism relates to the older critique of anti-intentionalism.

¹⁷ The “logic of capitalism,” writes Michaels, “produces objects of desire only insofar as it produces subjects, since what makes the objects desirable is only the trace of subjectivity those objects bear” (*The Gold Standard* 20). This is followed by several quotations from Marx’s analysis of the fetish-like character of the commodity in *Capital*. It is here that Marx speaks of “objective forms of thought” (*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, 1872. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1976. Print. 169; translation altered). In his famous essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Georg Lukács argues that what is needed is “a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective

WBM: It’s for sure true that when I finally read Lukács, which wouldn’t have been until the 90s, I thought two things. I thought I should have read this sooner. And the other thing I thought was that I could completely see the power of this kind of criticism. It was also so different from what I had been told about Lukács. And that’s also why I started reading Jameson more seriously.

ML: Well, speaking of the 1990s—your next book, *Our America*, was not explicitly addressing class issues either.¹⁸

WBM: Well in *Our America* the missing placeholder is class. But its place is marked so clearly that even I somehow thought it was and think it is there.

ML: But your critique of thinking in terms of racial or cultural identity—or, in a more general way, your critique of the commitment to subject positions—provides a link to the books that go on to explicitly argue that the theoretical approaches that are interested in identities or subject positions precisely lose sight of class.

WBM: Yes, but also that they work by a very different logic. So that even if you don’t lose sight of class, you still can’t see it. People always say, just because they’re concerned with anti-racism or anti-sexism doesn’t mean they aren’t also concerned with class. And this may well be true, though, in practice, it’s much less true than they say it is. But even if it were more true, part of the problem is that the logic of discrimination is very different from the logic of exploitation. There is no irreducible antagonism between races—for one thing because there are no such things as races and, for another, because insofar as we nonetheless act as if there were, what anti-discrimination rests on is the assumption of their fundamental equality. By contrast, labor and capital are real; their antagonism is fundamental, and they are necessarily unequal.¹⁹ That’s why intersectionality is completely doomed to be nothing but ideology right from the start. It imagines two very different kinds of structures of oppression as if they were versions of each other and as if the trick of understanding oppression as a whole were to make sure that every possible form of oppression got included.

ML: When you wrote *The Trouble with Diversity* you explicitly make the argument...

WBM: Well, before that in *The Shape of the Signifier*.

forms corresponding to them” (*History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. 1923. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971. Print. 83).

¹⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism*. Durham/London: Duke UP, 1995. Print.

¹⁹ Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* 59-61. The argument is nicely encapsulated in the claim that “the damage done to the poor is produced by an economy, not a vision” (61). See also Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print. Ch. 9. The view that there is an antagonism between the structural positions of Blacks and non-Blacks is put forward by Frank B. Wilderson, III., in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2010. Print). On Wilderson’s “Afro-Pessimism,” see Sebastian Weier, “Consider Afro-Pessimism.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 59.3 (2014): 419-45. Print.

ML: Sure, I know, in the discussion of Hardt and Negri in the last chapter.²⁰ You said—correctly I believe—that class is essentially an antagonistic relationship. You cannot ultimately have equality between capital and labor. *The Trouble with Diversity*, however, seems to be written from a rather social democratic or reformist perspective.

WBM: It totally is, yes. It was written for a general audience and I decided I would write it from a standpoint that would make sense to that audience, a baseline commitment to equality of opportunity. I say somewhere in there that equality of opportunity is the weakest form of equality, but let's just use that.²¹ And the point was to take something more or less every American believes in and show how the identitarian forms our liberalism takes were incompatible even with that. So if anybody had ever written an attack on that book saying that a lot of things it is saying are basically true, but that it doesn't follow through on its own thing, what I would just say is, "Yeah, totally." That's exactly right.

ML: But is the argument really that diversity *itself* is a bad thing? I didn't read the book that way. Rather that the problem is with the way it is being used and that a politics committed *exclusively* to diversity amounts to a bad politics.

WBM: That's right, but the book didn't fully get at the degree to which diversity could become nothing but a class politics. Which, once you get to the point where the Left is represented by students at Yale or at Princeton outraged by microaggressions, it is. If you have to choose between rich people outraged by implicit bias and rich people denying it exists, I guess the victory goes to the outraged. But it's not a victory for the Left.

ML: Did your move to UIC (University of Illinois at Chicago) also change your perspective on these things? I think you said somewhere that before, when you were teaching at Berkeley or Johns Hopkins, your job was to turn "entitled kids" into "credentialed kids."²² But here at UIC, the self-understanding of the university seems to be different. So was that also part of what made you address these issues more explicitly?

WBM: For sure. Coming to UIC was very helpful to me. As was getting to know people in Chicago like Ken Warren and, through Ken, Adolph Reed. A striking thing about Adolph's politics is that they're deeply connected to the union movement, which is not true for a lot of American Marxists, especially professors.²³ So

²⁰ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton UP, 2004. Print. 180; see also 17.

²¹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006. Print. 134. A tenth-year anniversary edition including a new afterword has been published by Picador in 2016. The arguments of both *The Shape of the Signifier* and *The Trouble with Diversity* have been critically interrogated in *Poverty and the Culturalization of Class*, a special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* (55.1 [2010]). Print, edited by Michael Butter and Carsten Schinko.

²² Williams, "The Political Education" 346.

²³ Adolph Reed reflects on his experiences as an organizer in "'Fayettenam,' 1969: Tales from a G.I. Coffeehouse." *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American*

that actually worked for me. I had always been interested in unions—my grandfather and my great-grandfather came out of the union movement. And at UIC, the single most important political experience for me was being part of the group that organized and put together our first faculty union, and helped me to see some possibilities for a politics that were obviously only reformist but were nonetheless geared to the question of political economy. If you’re teaching at a public university now, you’re teaching at a moment when the state is abandoning the university and doing its best to abandon the idea of higher education, indeed, doing its best to abandon the idea not just of public higher education, but of public education more generally. There’s racism here and sexism, but the demand for privatization is motivated by neither—it’s motivated by profit. Which means that fighting against this involves not primarily asserting the rights one ought to have in a fairer capitalist economy, but an assertion of rights and desires that are at this moment deeply in conflict with the logic of neoliberal capital. Organizing against that produces a kind of—no doubt, partially phantasmatic, but partially also real—sense of relation between the things you’re writing about and the actual politics you have in the world. So that was huge, because at Berkeley—for me—it was the opposite—politics was just moralizing bullshit. And, of course, just being in Chicago during the period in which CTU (the Chicago Teachers Union) has emerged as a political force on the Left has been tremendously useful.²⁴ So I’ve been very lucky.

Years ago, an American Studies professor named Kenneth Lynn, who was teaching at Harvard, quit, as I heard the story, to go teach at a much poorer university, for political reasons. He just couldn’t stand Harvard any more. I was at Berkeley when I heard about this and my goal was just to be a successful professor and to teach at places like Berkeley and Hopkins or Harvard. So, I didn’t understand it. But I totally get it now. I’m grateful every day to teach at UIC. It’s not that I came to UIC for political reasons or that UIC is such a pure institution; we’re fucked in a million ways. And although we like to think of ourselves as educating the working class rather than the *haute bourgeoisie*, the truth is we’re mainly educating the petty bourgeoisie. But you don’t have to feel acute shame at every moment about what’s going on around you. Part of it is that as a professor at a public institution fighting for the idea of rescuing public education is worthwhile. The second thing is organizing your union is worthwhile; it’s fighting for the idea of the public worker.

ML: Of course, in addition to you coming to Chicago, publishing *The Trouble with Diversity*, and beginning to participate in union organizing, what happened was the economic and financial crisis.

Scene. New York: The New Press, 2000. 196-202. Print. Kenneth W. Warren is the author of the much-discussed *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2011. Print). Together, Reed and Warren are the editors of *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010. Print).

²⁴ On the Chicago Teachers Union, see Micah Uetricht, *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity*. London/New York: Verso, 2014. Print.

WBM: Along with the election of Obama. I mean *The Trouble with Diversity* argued that racism didn't play the foundational role in American inequality that liberalism assigned to it but I never imagined that we were about to get a Black president. It was nice for me, of course, that he ran for office proclaiming his love of markets and that his actions to resolve the crisis proved he meant.²⁵ So the Black president was good and, of course, the collapse was good too; the collapse was great (laughs).

ML: Well one argument in *The Trouble with Diversity* had been that no one is talking about class; and, of course, more people began to talk about class...

WBM: ...people did start to talk about class. But they managed to turn it into 'race' pretty fast.

ML: ...but you're still very critical of the Occupy movement.

WBM: Well, yeah. So, here would be a way to put it. You might think of the Occupy movement as a kind of alternative to our current obsession with white supremacy or you might think of it as a precursor to that obsession. If you think of it as an alternative, the great contribution of Occupy was to put economic exploitation on the map while the major contribution of the 'woke' generation has been to try to take it back off the map—that is, to represent it as a function of racism. But while black people are disproportionately poor, the largest number of poor people are, of course, white. And the police kill more whites than blacks. So the question is, do we want a society where people are proportionately poor or do we want to eliminate poverty?²⁶ But—and here's where Occupy was a precursor to the current evacuation of left politics—the reluctance (really refusal) of Occupy to begin serious political organization—indeed, the demand by certain intellectuals associated with Occupy to think of organizing politics as a kind of at best retro and at worst fundamentally conservative, even reactionary, response—you know, the anarchist fringe which sort of turned out to be the ideological center of Occupy—that's just more or less completely emptied it of any political content.²⁷

ML: I guess that parts of the Left committed to anarchism or, maybe more precisely, to a rather libertarian communism—or even so-called communization theory—approach this with the help of Marx's critique of political economy and a pretty sophisticated account of the capitalist mode of production, but the question perhaps remains whether each and every form of 'traditional' organizing must ultimately remain complicit with the logic of capital. So one could acknowledge that

²⁵ On Obama's reaction to the crisis, see Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal, or, Whatever Happened to the Party of the People?* Melbourne/London: Scribe, 2016. Print. Chs. 7 and 8.

²⁶ On the issue of racial disparities, see Adolph Reed, Jr., and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, class, crisis: The discourse of racial disparity and its analytical discontents." *Socialist Register* 48 (2012): 149-75. Print. Jonah Birch and Paul Heideman have criticized Reed's arguments (see "The Trouble with Anti-Antiracism." *Jacobin*. 11 Oct. 2016. Web. 1 Mar. 2018). See also Reed's response, "Splendors and Miseries of the Antiracist 'Left.'" *nonsite.org*. 6 Nov. 2016. Web. 1 Mar. 2018, and the articles in the winter 2018 issue of *nonsite.org*, published in February 2018.

²⁷ For a more sympathetic account of Occupy, see David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement*. London: Allen Lane, 2013. Print.

it’s certainly not like the union movement will get rid of capitalist social forms, but only organizes workers within capitalism.²⁸ Organizing people so that they can develop a relation to the economic structure they are living in, however, might still help them formulate demands and strategies that might, indeed, point beyond the logic of capital.

WBM: The second thing would be my view. Some people are committed to the idea that the failure of the union movement now is not a failure of organization or a political failure. It’s because, in effect, corporations cannot give unions what they want, because we’re at a moment when the rate of profit really is declining and you can’t get from capital what capital can’t give and survive. What you then have instead is this hope for a spontaneous, horizontal, alternative—for a revolutionary activity disconnected from work. So, I think there’s a problem with that. If you look at the history of American capital of the last forty years, the rate of profit is not really falling but the portion of economic output that goes to labor is. There’s been redistribution upward. To me, labor should be trying to take back what’s been lost, but that’s just the start. What we want is socialism, and neither capital nor camping out in lower Manhattan can give it to us. The fight to transform the workplace—to transform work—has to begin in the workplace.

ML: In your most recent book, art ends up playing a crucial role when it comes to understanding capitalism. You argue that art—and you are talking specifically about photography—can teach us what it means to understand something as an objective structure.²⁹ Well, for example, you are discussing a photograph by Viktoria Binshtok called *Wand #1* that shows marks left on the wall of a Berlin unemployment office, and you argue that it provides a vision of a structure that is irreducible to our feelings, that doesn’t depend on how we see the unemployed, or perhaps doesn’t even depend on us seeing them at all, because then we’d inevitably perceive them as racialized or gendered, and, subsequently, might feel empathy because of the discrimination they have experienced. But ultimately, having unemployment is simply a structural necessity for capital. So, we have an analogy between two autonomous structures, as it were. But can a work of art also do

²⁸ Communization theory is a product of debates in the French ultra-Left of the 1960s and 70s and is characterized, in Benjamin Noys’s useful summary, by 1) the rejection of a transitional stage that would precede the establishment of communist social relations; 2) the belief that communism must be conceived “from *within* the immanent conditions of global capitalism” rather than a position “outside” of it; and 3) the rejection of a “workers’ identity” that could be affirmed—instead the proletariat is grasped as a “mode of self-abolishing” (“Introduction.” *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*. Ed. Benjamin Noys. New York: Minor Compositions, 2012. Print. 8-10; original emphasis). In the English-speaking world communization theory has been popularized by the Endnotes collective. See the articles collected in the first issue of *Endnotes*, and particularly the introduction (“Bring Out Your Dead.” *Endnotes* 1 (2008): 2-18. Print) and the “Afterword” (*ibid.*, 208-16).

²⁹ For a discussion of what it means to conceptualize the capitalist mode of production as an objective structure that cannot simply be grasped from the “perspective of individuals,” see Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert: Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006. Print. 206-08.

something like provide an explanation of the underlying causes, say, of what Marx calls the “general law of capital accumulation”?³⁰

WBM: So, first of all, the work of art doesn’t need to give us an explanation. And I don’t imagine that the work or its maker has an explanation. In other words, if you asked her, where she stands on the reserve army of labor, Binschtok might have an answer (after all, her partner is a member of Die LINKE. He presumably has a pretty good answer, and they talk to each other) but I don’t imagine that the picture is produced in the effort to illustrate Marx’s argument. Rather the picture reinvents the argument, or organizes itself according to a logic from which you could extrapolate Marx’s point. And because, as you say, it doesn’t show us the faces of the unemployed, it shows us instead the structure of unemployment. The idea here is that it’s the picture’s concern with itself—its form—and its effort to assert that form that makes visible the structure also of the economy. It has a kind of emotional power but it’s the emotional power of art not of the sight of unemployment’s victims.

More generally, I’ve been interested in the relation between the internal relations of the work of art—its form—and the external relations, to the beholder and, especially in the case of photography, to the subject. It’s here that you find both the politics of the work and its aesthetics. But it’s important to remember that the artist may not care very much about or even understand the politics and, even more obviously, that you can have a good politics without caring at all about art. The argument of *The Beauty of a Social Problem* is not that it’s necessary to understand art to understand capitalism; it’s that it’s necessary to understand capitalism to understand this art. So it’s a book about the history of art; it’s not a book about the history of capitalism.

ML: One question that might come up is what might happen to art in a world without class. Of course, there are different accounts of how art is related to inequality—say, Horkheimer and Adorno discussing Odysseus and the sirens in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or Bourdieu’s account in *Distinction*³¹—but do you have a position on that?

WBM: It’s tempting to say that in a society without class there would definitely be beauty, but not art. But it might be better to say that whatever art there would be would not be produced along the lines of modernism, would not have a relation to what in modernism and post-modernism are the axial questions of the work’s relation to the world, to the beholder, to its own materiality, etc. I mean, it only makes sense to care about something like the autonomy of the work (whether you’re committed to it or opposed to it) in capitalism.

A crucial thing about modernism would be the relation the work has to its sense of its own form; that is, the degree to which the work of art must in some way theo-

³⁰ Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* 37-42. Marx postulates the “general law” in the eponymous 25th chapter of *Capital* (762-870; ch. 23 in the German edition).

³¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. 1947. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. 25-27; see also the “Postscript” in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. 1979. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984. Print. 485-500.

size what it means for it to be a work of art. In *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, I identify that commitment to form, in our period, with the imagination of certain impersonal structures, and I argue that the structure of class difference in effect makes form an allegory of structure. Thus, for example, racial difference (including what gets called structural racism) is essentially linked to—actually constituted by—the ideological apparatuses we call the social construction of race. There is no parallel social construction of class. You could say racism is constitutive of race, classism is not constitutive of class. And, even when they’re about neither race nor class, works of art in modernism are almost by definition about the ontological and epistemological questions embodied in these questions of structure and effect.

Why, if we lived in a society where the question of structural conflict had been answered (where, we might say, all conflict was affective), would we still care about the form of the work of art? No doubt, we’d still care about beauty—it’s impossible to imagine a world in which no one cared about who or what looked nice. And we could still have lots of entertainment. But Phil Chang’s *Cache Active*, or Welling and Wall and Binshtok and Ou, I don’t think so.³² Much less LaToya Ruby Frazier.³³

But, of course, the risk of art disappearing because capitalism does is not one we’re very close to running. Just the opposite. A while ago, I read an interview with the left economist Leo Panitch in which he remarked (it was in relation to what was happening with Syriza in Greece) in which he said something to the effect that the old debate about revolution versus reform was coming to seem irrelevant because they both were coming to seem equally impossible.³⁴ In fact, as we all know, the idea of reforming something has become increasingly associated with the idea of exposing it more thoroughly to the market. And I cited that in a piece for an issue of *Socialist Register* (which he edits) on revolution. I was writing about a young American photographer named Daniel Shea, whose work deals brilliantly with fundamental political issues but who—in answer to an interviewer’s question about the relation in his pictures between art and activism—says that while he used to identify as an activist, he doesn’t anymore: now he’s only an artist. I think that distinction is powerful, not only about how he feels, but about a moment when it’s not clear what activism—at least in the form of anti-capitalist political activity, as opposed, say, to calling out people’s racism on social media—can do. So if you care about politics, art seems to matter somehow even more, because it can embody a certain clarity and therefore a certain promise—form instead of reform, form as a placeholder for revolution.³⁵

³² For the photographers Phil Chang, Jeff Wall, and Arthur Ou, see *The Beauty of a Social Problem* 81-85; 28-36; and 85-97. James Welling is discussed in *The Shape of the Signifier* 100-02.

³³ LaToya Ruby Frazier is an American photographer, whose work attempts to document the effects of economic and racial inequality, deindustrialization, and environmental degradation. She has been influenced by “Gordon Parks’s idea of using the camera as a ‘weapon’” against injustice (Maurice Berger, “LaToya Ruby Frazier’s Notion of Family.” *The New York Times*. 14 Oct. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2018).

³⁴ Chris Hedges and Leo Panitch, “Days of Revolt: We Are All Greeks Now.” *The Real News*. 15 Sep. 2015. Web. 1 Mar. 2018.

³⁵ Walter Benn Michaels, “Picturing the Whole: Form, Reform, Revolution.” *Socialist Register* 53 (2017): 323-38. Print.

