

The Pot Still Boils

Introducing Totality and Culture

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As we write, tens of thousands of graduate workers across the University of California system are on strike. The key demand: a cost-of-living adjustment to our wages that would bring us out of the rent burden and financial precarity that are the basic conditions of employment for the vast majority of us. Why begin the introduction to a special issue titled “Totality and Culture” with this strike? The obvious answer: because the contemporary university’s reliance on an increasingly immiserated, debt-ridden, and precarious workforce gives the lie, for the *n*th time, to the pretension that cultural production or interpretation—the life of the mind, construed broadly—is in any way separable from the material conditions of society. A slightly less obvious answer centers on the way in which our core demand—that our wages be pegged to market values, not the consumer price index, to address the real cost of living where we work—cuts across the ideologically separated spheres of production and reproduction, the workplace and the home. As parents of young children, we are perhaps especially attuned to the mendacity of this division. In this way, the strike is a real-world, politically trenchant enactment of the

idea that capital is not so much one discrete force in a fragmented, heterogeneous world of competing forces, but that capitalism comprises a more or less organized, holistic totality, aimed not at meeting people's real needs but at perpetuating and attempting to ensure the exponential valorization of value at any cost.

Of course, questions about totality's relation to something called "culture" are nothing new. Some might even consider them settled—by Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, or Theodor Adorno, for example—and thus not a little bit passé. As Benjamin Kunkel recently put it,

It hardly requires a Marxist professor of literature these days to point out the final submission of cultural production to the dictates of capital accumulation: the impotence, collusion, and dependency of culture with respect to capital is today no longer so often a confession to be extracted from a given artifact as it is a matter-of-fact acknowledgement of the way of the world, if not a giddy boast, offered up by the artifact itself.¹

Despite—or perhaps as a result of—this state of affairs, we contend that there are at least three good reasons to attempt to think totality and culture anew today. First, because the recent (re)turn to historical-materialist theorizing, which is generally pegged to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, follows from a half century of expressly antitotalizing thought. Beginning with the Anglo-American institutionalization of "French theory" in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarly accounts of culture tended to privilege the fragment, the supplement, the remainder, the site, and the margins, over against the totality.² Throughout this period, theorists from a range of disciplines—and not only in the West—looked to cultural practice and production as a means to resist, escape, or undercut grand narratives or the bad determinism of capitalism's historical logic, be it through the relative autonomy of culture as a site of counterhegemony or subversive resignification, the political or ethical force of the literary and "the text itself," or the proliferation of hybridized identities as the privileged ground of an eruptive subaltern politics. Crucial as these interventions may have been, both politically and also for their respective disciplines, we propose that such efforts have left us, even today, with

a one-sided understanding of culture's relationship to totality, one that feels increasingly untenable in light of the multiple and interlocking crises that overwhelm the contemporary moment.

Those very crises—the litany of catastrophes that keeps us up at night—are a second reason to rethink totality today. Resurgent reactionary nationalisms née fascisms; a rising tide of racialized and racializing violence; vicious attacks on gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity by the state; climate cataclysm; wealth and income disparities to rival the 1920s; inflation; debt; war; mass migration; invasive surveillance; homelessness; and, to top it all off, the continued transformation of everything everywhere—not least knowledge production itself—into exchange value: the pace and scale of the emergency is difficult to grok, both emotionally and politically. We do not want to make too much of the rather banal notion that we live in extraordinary times—as Althusser rightly asked, “Are we not always in exceptional situations?”³ But the fact is that we find ourselves increasingly overwhelmed and, at times, transfixed by the sheer spectacle of it all. Is theoretical resistance to totality still viable today, in this moment of totalizing crisis? We think not.

Finally, while an emerging body of research across the disciplines seeks to move beyond the antinomy between culture and totality, this shift remains embryonic and, with a few exceptions, largely implicit.⁴ Our aim here is thus, first, to shape and carry forward this transdisciplinary conversation by making explicit both the coherences and the tensions that join totality to culture, and, second, to reclaim totality as the crucial conceptual ground for understanding the relationship between particular cultural phenomena and the social, political, and economic forms that render them plausible. The contributors to this special issue evince contrasting, even divergent approaches to these issues. They differ not only on how to think about the entanglement of capitalism with cultural expression, but on the very meaning of the issue's two key terms. What unites the articles collected here is the shared conviction that even today, a century after Georg Lukács reinstated the concept at the very center of Marx's project, there remains much to say about totality's contradictory histories, about its bearing on everyday life and cultural practice, and about its continued relevance for thinking the present critically, which is to say politically.

In the remainder of this introduction, we first briefly historicize some of the conditions under which recent cultural criticism has come to normatively separate culture from totality. Next, in an effort to explicate our approach to culture in situ, we analyze works by two visual artists, Allan Sekula and Ellen Gallagher, both of whom deal more or less explicitly with totality in their own practices. The introduction concludes with a brief synopsis of the articles that this collection comprises.

Thinking in Fragments

Stuart Hall once argued that

the discourses of the “post” have emerged, and been (often silently) articulated against the practical, political, historical and theoretical effects of the collapse of a certain kind of economic, teleological and, in the end, reductionistic Marxism. What has resulted from the abandonment of this deterministic economism has been, not alternative ways of thinking questions about the economic relations and their effects . . . but instead a massive, gigantic and eloquent disavowal. As if, since the economic in its broadest sense, definitively does not, as it was once supposed to do, “determine” the real movement of history “in the last instance,” it does not exist at all! This is a failure of theorisation so profound, and . . . so disabling, that . . . it has enabled much weaker and less conceptually rich paradigms to continue to flourish and dominate the field.⁵

Though Hall’s target here was poststructuralist versions of postcolonial theory, his analysis could well be applied to much critical theory of the past several decades. Seeking to historicize this diremption of totality from culture, we offer a sketch of a postwar trajectory that remains central to contemporary critical theory, focusing on two moments in particular: the political and economic crisis of Marxism that began in the 1960s and the emergence of an ostensibly seamless, globalized capitalist economy in the 1990s. While these are of course key junctures in any account of late twentieth-century political economy, to date surprisingly little has been said about how these events

shaped critical understandings of the social whole through this period up to the present.

For a generation of Left theorists, by the postwar decades many of the vehicles for social emancipation central to an older political imaginary—in short, the party-state in the socialist countries and the large trade unions and parliamentary communist parties elsewhere—appeared ossified and now looked more like barriers to than vehicles for utopian transformation. The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the French Communist Party's disavowal of both Algerian decolonization and the '68 student protests, the Italian Communist Party's parliamentary compromises and alignment with capital, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (seen as a revolution against the party) are major evidentiary touchstones here. In this context, the appearance in various translations of hitherto unavailable parts of Marx's oeuvre supported a radical renovation of the communist project in the face of dialectical materialism's transformation into a "science of legitimation."⁶ The publication of the *Grundrisse* notebooks in various translations, alongside many of Marx's early philosophical works—none of which had been widely available to or particularly influential on the generation of Marxists who had served as Marx's major interpreters to date, such as Georgi Plekhanov, Karl Kautsky, and Eduard Bernstein—provided the philological basis for a philosophical renewal. Seeking an alternative to the Marx of *Capital*—at this time widely read teleologically and economistically by "official" Marxisms—the appearance of a Marxism critical of the state and committed to human disalienation via collective praxis was taken up with alacrity.

In 1965, in the twin context of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union and nationalist decolonization across many Western European empires, Althusser's *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* appeared. Along with his 1970 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," these remain urtexts for much contemporary cultural theory. While we do not wish to relitigate the so-called epistemological break or structure-in-dominance debates here, what is salient for us in Althusser's decoupling of Marx from Hegel is the extent to which we can trace a line from Althusser's notion of the "semiautonomy" of various spheres of society—the economic, the political, the state—into the antitotalizing impulse that became a normative component

of much theory, particularly in its North American iterations.⁷ Developed initially as a Left critique of Stalinism by a long-standing member of the French Communist Party, Althusser's substitution of "structure" and "conjuncture" for a dialectical understanding of totality—at this time associated with Soviet "diamat"⁸—proved, as an unintended consequence, fertile ground for a movement away from Marxism altogether. Keeping in mind Warren Montag's critique of the caricatured historical account whereby "structuralism, soon after 1968, was replaced by poststructuralism, which in turn begat postmodernism," there is nonetheless some heuristic value—which we will complicate below—in tracing a line from Althusser's decoupling of culture and economy to the subsequently widespread normative insistence on culture's relative autonomy as a privileged site of radical politics.⁹

As a corollary to the absolutization of relative autonomy that Hall critiques, we can detect in Antonio Negri's trajectory from *operaismo* to post-Marxism a related move away from totalizing analysis. As early as 1978 Negri gave a series of lectures on the *Grundrisse* in Althusser's seminar room at the École Normale Supérieure, wherein he sketched out an argument for the necessity of locating a new political subjectivity that need not—and, if it is to be politically viable, cannot—be mediated by the factory, the trade union, or the party.¹⁰ The main thrust of Negri's post-Marxist position, here sketched out in rough, is that the space of value production has grown to include the whole of society; we have moved, that is, from the era of the "mass worker"—deskilled, inserted into a complex industrial process from which the worker is alienated and the overall functioning of which they cannot access—to one in which the working class and its institutions no longer comprise the potential revolutionary subject.¹¹ The centerpiece of Negri's reading is the *Grundrisse*'s famous "Fragment on Machines," which provides the basic premise for a host of "post-workerist" positions up to and including Michael Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000).¹² This work made famous a new political subject—"the multitude"—which, vital and creative, was meant to be adequate for a new phase of flexible, globalized capitalism.¹³

We read Negri's explicit turn away from a dialectical Marxism toward an ontological paradigm more closely associated with French

poststructuralism as emblematic of the normative and methodological commitments of the body of cultural theory this special issue seeks to distance itself from.¹⁴ Subtending Negri's move from dialectics to ontology is an argument about the "real subsumption" of all areas of life to capital. In both the capitalist and state socialist worlds, so the argument goes, people are incorporated into "a global, infernal disciplinary apparatus. . . . No longer an eight-hour wage-slave, the worker now produce[s] and consume[s] continuously for capital."¹⁵ By its post-Fordist phase, then, capital is said to have reshaped all social life such that the law of value is hollowed out, becoming essentially a form of political control. Whether they call themselves "socialist" or "capitalist," mediating structures like the party and the factory, not to mention the school and the clinic, act as forms of capture, containing and recuperating otherwise vital political subjectivities. Totality, then, becomes a form of enclosure that the theorist resists not by determinate negation, that is, critique, but by seeking its (totality's) outside.¹⁶

It is no coincidence, we contend, that the crisis of traditional Marxism that catalyzes both Althusser and Negri coincides with the beginnings of the kind of economic globalization that undergirds once-fashionable "end-of-history" narratives. In the Marxian literature the nature of this shift to financialized or neoliberal capitalism has been understood in various ways¹⁷ but is generally sketched within a historical trajectory that, in James Christie and Nesrin Değirmencioglu's recent synopsis, "centers around the collapse of the postwar consensus in the 1970s, the West's instigation of free market hegemony against both domestic and international opposition in the 1980s, the construction of a putatively universal capitalist order in the 1990s, and the economic and geopolitical crises and regressions of the 2000s which continue to be experienced into the present day."¹⁸ The former Second World stands at the center of this global trajectory as East-West competition created, for a time, the conditions of possibility for both a "compromise between labor and capital" in the First World and rapid, state-led development in the Third World.¹⁹ But by the early 1970s this compromise had already begun to break down as the United States and Western Europe, facing declining profitability, "stagflation," a global energy crisis, and overaccumulation, initiated a long and violent process of economic and social restructuring geared

toward “flexible accumulation.”²⁰ This shift in the mode of production corresponded with the beginning of the “epoch of stagnation” in the USSR, the beginning of the decline of socialist Yugoslavia, and a narrowing of developmental pathways that had facilitated alternative forms of globalization, such as the nonaligned movement.²¹ Over the ensuing decades, then, the developmental aspirations of the decolonizing world were progressively replaced by a “growing accommodation” to the terms of Euro-Atlantic capital under the auspices of Bretton Woods institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.²² Though it is difficult to assert a directly causal relationship between the ascendance of a particular form of globalization and the emergence in mainstream critical theory of a “conception of reality as a plastic system of signifiers,” to use Kyle Baasch’s formulation from this issue, we contend that the correlation is nonetheless analytically meaningful.

Moreover, we want to suggest that the slow fading away of a dynamic conception of the social whole during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s resulted in a corresponding overburdening of the culture concept, such that culture eventually became, at least in some liberal intellectual circles, both the primary vehicle of political change and, more extravagantly still, the basic material of the political field in toto. In the next section we push back at this understanding of culture. Our aim, however, is not to devalue or delimit the political import of cultural production. Rather, by analyzing two exemplary works of art—exemplary precisely for their ability to stake a critical position in the context of specific (political) debates, not least around totality itself—we intend to rethink the “affordances” of culture (as Jaleh Mansoor puts it in her contribution to this collection) in the context of a renewed, revitalized understanding of totality.

An Unfixed Site

At this point, the impatient reader may be wondering what exactly we mean by *culture*. It is of course an exceedingly fraught term.²³ We do not wish to put forward a full-fledged definition of “culture”—to do so would be not only beyond the scope of an introduction but also beside the point. That is, culture, for us, is a useful way of gesturing

toward the densely layered interplay of individual experience, collective memory, and materiality that constitutes ordinary life at specific times and places. Put differently, by culture we mean to designate what Bernard Stiegler refers to as “material culture,” that is, the objects, technical processes, and systems of signification, meaning, and belief into which we all are born, and through which we attempt to make our lives livable, free, meaningful, pleasurable, and so on.²⁴ Or, as per Marx: people may make their own history, but only “under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past”—it is these circumstantial conditions that we refer to when we use the term *culture*.²⁵

It may appear that we are setting forth an interpretation of totality as a container or an enclosure for culture and that we imagine culture as somehow always interior to or subsumed by totality, in the manner suggested by Kunkel’s description, above, of artifacts that boast “giddily” of their explicit collusion with or dependence on the violent exigencies of capital. But the cultural artifacts that we and the contributors to this volume are most interested in tend to refuse or undermine the view that totality is an enclosure of something otherwise vital and unmediated; rather, they make available a view of totality and culture as a contradictory unity. They do this in various ways, perhaps most pointedly by taking as their subject matter some iteration of the problem of totality itself. An enormous swath of cultural artifacts does this, of course, across a vast array of particular sites, technical media, artistic movements, historical milieus, and so on. Here we will focus briefly on two examples. Both are by well-known American artists, one living (Gallagher) and one dead (Sekula), and both deal explicitly with oceanic themes.

We begin with Sekula, whose work Filippo Menozzi also takes up in his contribution to the issue. At the beginning of *Fish Story*, his seminal 1995 account of the impact of containerization and financialization on the global political economy of shipping, Sekula writes of his own childhood in the port city of San Pedro, California:

Growing up in a harbor predisposes one to retain quaint ideas about matter and thought. I’m speaking only for myself here, although I suspect that a certain stubborn and pessimistic insistence on the primacy of material forces is part of a common

culture of harbor residents. This crude materialism is underwritten by disaster. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen everyday. Gravity is recognized as a force. By contrast, airline companies encourage the omnipotence of thought. This is the reason why the commissioner of airports for the city of Los Angeles is paid much more than the commissioner of harbors. The airport commissioner has to think very hard, day and night, to keep all the planes in the air.²⁶

It is the third sentence in this passage that interests us most. The verb *underwritten* has at least three meanings here. First, it refers, in a fairly straightforward manner, to the material forces—the currents, waves, pressure systems, upwellings, and submarine morphologies—that condition the movement of seawater in the deep ocean and that literally inscribe crisis onto the roiling surface in the Bay of Biscay, the Drake Passage, the Gulf of Alaska, the Tasman Sea, and other choppy spots across the world ocean. Second, it gestures toward the vast analogical and poetic deployment of the ocean in literary and philosophical writing, where humans have long sought to “grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphoric of the perilous sea voyage,” as Hans Blumenberg once put it.²⁷ Third, this underwriting of oceanic disaster signifies the rampant financialization, securitization, and speculation on risk and uncertainty that are the business of the insurance and financial services industries, both of which were birthed, in their modern forms, in service to European shipping interests.

These multiple, overlapping, oceanic disasters run right through *Fish Story*. They appear, for instance, in Sekula’s recounting of the origins of the Korean shipbuilding industry in Ulsan in the 1970s, which begins with “the purchase of plans from bankrupt Scottish yards on the River Clyde” and concludes with the “chaebol hypercapitalism” of Hyundai’s industrial empire, plus mass disenfranchisement, destroyed fishing villages, and, to top it all off, the permanent presence on the Korean peninsula of virulently anticommunist American military commanders “who understand the condition of permanent war to be the primary engine of economic development.”²⁸ Or see the constellation of disasters that lurk just below the surface of

“True Cross,” the penultimate section of *Fish Story*, which details the Mexican government’s violent effort to break up Mexico’s powerful port unions in the late 1980s. The story, as Sekula tells it, starts with Japanese NYK Line freighters full of Mexican coffee departing the port of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca State sailing up the coast to Los Angeles. It ends with sixteen hundred fired longshoremen who, with nowhere else to turn, ask the Zapatistas “to ‘undertake fiscal audits’ of the port.”²⁹

But *ends* is not quite the right word here. As Sekula himself writes, quoting from Samuel Fuller’s 1951 Korean War film *The Steel Helmet*, “‘There is no end to this story.’ The pot still boils.”³⁰ Indeed, the numerous, apparently disconnected disasters he chronicles form the corpus of a single, ongoing disaster, namely, the continuous thrum of exploitation, accumulation, profit taking, and reinvestment whereby capital ceaselessly strives to remake the whole world in its own image. *Fish Story* repeatedly directs us to the absent presence of this totalizing process. It is implicit, for instance, in Friedrich Engels’s realization, as recounted by Sekula, “that the port of London was in no respect anachronistically ‘outside’ the contemporary system of production.”³¹ It lurks, as well, just beyond the frame of the seventeenth-century Dutch maritime paintings Sekula surveys, which “in effect, [give] us two panoramas: one visible and contained . . . and the other ‘providential,’ implied and open.”³² *Fish Story* itself works in precisely this double panoramic manner. “The panorama image is consumable only as fragments, as parts that must be cognitively re-assembled into an imagined whole,” writes Jonathan Crary, in a passage that neatly (though unintentionally) describes Sekula’s approach. “A structure that seems magically to overcome the fragmentation of experience,” Crary continues, “in fact introduces partiality and incompleteness as constitutive elements of visual experience.”³³

Visual experience is of course central to Sekula’s working method and practice. *Fish Story* contains ninety-six of his own enigmatic photographs, shot during six years (1989–95) on cargo ships at sea and at ports in South Korea, Mexico, Italy, Poland, Spain, Hong Kong, the United States, and the Netherlands. The images do not so much depict or illustrate the events described in the accompanying text as gesture obliquely toward those events and also, simultaneously,

toward an endless array of other events. Initially, the scenes depicted may seem banal: a wrench on a dusty surface (fig. 1), two men at work (fig. 2), a dirty white boilersuit serving as a makeshift doormat (fig. 3), a seafarer's protective earmuffs, with the words "I CAN NOT BE FIRED/SLAVES ARE SOLD" embossed on one earpiece (fig. 4). But seen collectively, and especially alongside Sekula's writing, the images suggest an oblique organizing principle, or an invisible motive that lends coherence to the whole endeavor. Sekula's images simultaneously demand and inspire (in us, at least) a particularly active mode of seeing that is also a seeking after unseen and unseeable forces.³⁴ Here, then, we arrive at the covert presence of totality.

Totality tends to imbue things with a debilitating sense of inevitability. Per Sekula, the artist's job is to work through—both figuratively and literally—this crisis of agency, and in so doing to restore access to some more or less immediately sensible, if not representable, notion of the social whole and our place in it. In *Photography against the Grain* (1984), Sekula wonders whether or not this is an achievable task: "Perhaps the fundamental question to be asked is this: can traditional photographic representation, whether symbolist or realist in its dominant formal rhetoric, transcend the pervasive logic of the commodity form, the exchange abstraction that haunts the culture of capitalism?"³⁵ How to engage in representational (read: cultural) work of any kind without reifying the capitalist relations of domination that wholly structure our ability to understand the world in the first place? This question is crucial for Sekula, who, throughout his career, sought explicitly not only to represent capitalist worlds but to contest capitalist domination from within the sinuous body of capital itself.³⁶ For us, Sekula's method also prompts a totalizing form of interpretation, one that works immanently through the object in its sociohistorical mediations with an eye toward their overcoming. That *Fish Story* largely carries off this recursive mode of critique is in no small part a function of Sekula's allusive approach to totality. Together, the book's text and carefully sequenced images at once reveal and conceal the autonomous operation of a systemic capitalist whole. As Laleh Khalili puts it, *Fish Story* thus "allows for dreams even as the net closes in."³⁷

For all its formal beauty and analytic insight, however, *Fish Story* is not without faults. In an incisive critique of Sekula's maritime



Fig. 1. Welder's booth in bankrupt Todd Shipyard two years after closing. Los Angeles Harbor, San Pedro, California, July 1991. Originally published in Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*. Courtesy of the Allan Sekula Studio.



Fig. 2. Pipe fitters finishing the engine room of a tuna-fishing boat. Campbell Shipyard, San Diego harbor, August 1991. Originally published in Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*. Courtesy of the Allan Sekula Studio.

work, Christina Sharpe points out that the “Middle Passage” section of the book “bears no discernible relation to the planned disaster that is known by that name, nor to its long and ongoing effects.”³⁸ Sekula’s failure to reckon explicitly with the oceanic history of slavery, colonialism, and racial violence is, for Sharpe, an act of epistemological violence in itself. With reference to Sekula’s 2010 essay-film with Noël Burch, she notes that “the forgotten space is blackness.”³⁹ Here Sharpe deploys to withering effect one of the central onto-epistemological claims of Black thought, summarized neatly by Saidiya Hartman in this journal two decades ago: “On the one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order, and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought.”⁴⁰ What is this unthought position? Sharpe is clear: it is the void of oceanic Blackness.

The painter Ellen Gallagher has spent three decades playing in this void, grappling with the entangled histories of colonialism, racialization, capitalist exploitation, popular culture, and ocean space. In



Fig. 3. Filling a lifeboat with water equivalent to the weight of a crew to test the movement of the boat falls before departure. Voyage 167 of the containership *M/V Sea-Land Quality* from Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Rotterdam, November 1993. Originally published in Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*. Courtesy of the Allan Sekula Studio.



Fig. 4. Engine-room wiper's ear protection. Voyage 167 of the containership *M/V Sea-Land Quality* from Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Rotterdam, November 1993. Originally published in Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*. Courtesy of the Allan Sekula Studio.

Ecstatic Draught of Fishes (2019) (fig. 5), which graces the cover of this special issue, Gallagher layers oil paint, ink, gold leaf, and paper to produce a pale field of intricate, overlapping forms and subtly shifting hues. The piece is unmistakably abstract, but its terrain-like composition, its topographic repetitions, its variously weighted lines, and its amoebic splotches of color hint at some underlying structure or hidden representational function. The work is in tension with itself in various ways: it exudes stillness, even calm, but vibrates with pent-up energy; it is both rigorously conceived—note the faint gridded lines at the top and bottom—and simultaneously spontaneous, as in the dripped paint at right. And what to make of the silver visage near the bottom of the canvas?

Ecstatic Draught of Fishes takes its title from the seventeenth-century Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens's *Miraculous Draught*



Fig. 5. Ellen Gallagher, *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes* (2019). Oil, pigment, palladium, and paper on canvas, 97.6 × 79.5 in (248.0 × 201.9 cm). © Ellen Gallagher. Photo: Thomas Lannes. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.

of *Fishes* (1618–19), which depicts disciples pulling an enormous “draught” (or catch) of fish from the Sea of Galilee, the result of a miracle performed by Christ. The Rubens canvas was a compositional source for the nineteenth-century French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), which depicts

shipwrecked colonists off the coast of Mauritania and which was itself, in turn, a model for J. M. W. Turner's luminous, difficult *Slave Ship* (1840), which portrays enslaved Africans jumping or being thrown overboard during a storm. Gallagher's *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes* is thus heir to this classical lineage even as the painting calls into question some of the basic compositional elements of the earlier work. For example, while Gallagher retains the oceanic milieu of her predecessors, her sea creatures do not appear caught at all but instead swirl in lively undersea shoals. The dispersion of circles at the left may thus be scales or bubbles, or perhaps they are the eyes—still open, still seeing—of the kidnapped Africans thrown overboard from the British slaver *Zong* in 1781, an event that likely inspired Turner's *Slave Ship*. Moreover, unlike the Rubens, Géricault, and Turner canvases, Gallagher's painting submerges us below the ocean surface, an effect no doubt magnified in person by the size and orientation of the eight-foot-tall vertical canvas.

The silvern figure at the bottom of the painting is a two-dimensional rendering of a female figurine, specifically a nineteenth-century ceremonial wooden headrest produced by the Luba peoples, who live in what is today the southeastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The profile thus makes explicit what Gallagher has called the "Africanist presence that haunts Western painting."⁴¹ More concretely, the figure is perhaps an inhabitant of the mythical Drexciya, an undersea nation populated by the descendants of pregnant African women who jumped or were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage and who evolved in their mothers' wombs to breathe underwater. The Drexciya legend, which originated with an influential Detroit techno duo by that name in the 1990s, is important to Gallagher:

[That] an origin myth could be at an unfixed site, at the site of violence . . . and that it's actually the space of the sea, that the change happened in captivity—I mean it's such an eloquent way to speak of this terrible site as a kind of sublime, which is always about a kind of terror, right? The sublime is always about a decay and a terror, so this idea of the sea sublime that [Drexciya] come up with—it's super important to me. . . . They really created a space for me to imagine myself in abstraction and in the world.⁴²

Sites that are “unfixed” but pregnant with violence appear throughout Gallagher’s oeuvre. She excels at imbuing apparently minimalist forms with layered historical resonances that reveal themselves only after sustained looking and study. Again and again, her work poses the question of the relationship between abstraction and violence, or what she refers to as the question of “the impossibility of abstraction.” Take, for example, her 2016 series *Negroes Battling in a Cave*, which consists of four glossy black monochrome canvases. To make these works, Gallagher first layers each canvas with torn pages from *Ebony* and other magazines aimed at Black audiences. She then molds black rubber over the surface and finally paints over the textured rubber with black enamel. The series takes its title from the racist joke scrawled beneath Kazimir Malevich’s iconic *Black Square* (1915).⁴³ In this way Gallagher’s black compositions draw attention to the constitutive presence of racism at the inception of Western abstraction even as they also pose the possibility of reclaiming abstraction for Black expression. As she puts it:

The black paintings were in a sense a reaction to how people were reading or misreading [my] work. . . . Because already I was getting that kind of criticism, which you only get from white critics, which is “how dare you make this work in this environment.” It suggests that the work can only be about one thing and can only be read in one way. . . . I see the black paintings as a kind of refusal. Even when reading them—if you stand in front of them they go blank and then if you stand at the side you see only a little. They are also about memory in Bebop. And Miles Davis’s omission of notes that leaves a ragged disembodied line.⁴⁴

Like *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes*, then, Gallagher’s black paintings focus on the invisible but determinate forces that have for so long structured not only the history of art and the composition of the Western canon but also lived experience and the movement of history in a more or less general sense. As Robin D. G. Kelley puts it, Gallagher’s project “is nothing short of a deep examination, meditation, dissembling, disassembling, and remixing of modernity.”⁴⁵ In many of her images, all these things are happening at once. The images thus seem to resist or exceed interpretations that seek to reduce their formal complexity or to flatten their layered historical references. As Gallagher

herself points out, “There is something in the work that is fighting against this idea of fixedness.”⁴⁶

While Gallagher does not speak or write about totality per se, her work, like Sekula’s, both dramatizes and critiques what we take to be an explicitly capitalist social whole. *Ecstatic Draught of Fishes* is part of an ongoing series by the same name, which deals in large part with the long bloody history of what Marx calls primitive accumulation and with how, over the past four centuries or so, aesthetic objects have been used both to hide and to conspicuously reveal various kinds of dispossession and accumulation.⁴⁷ While Sekula approaches totality from Marx’s own perspective, beginning (like *Capital* itself) with the commodity in motion, for Gallagher the key to understanding capitalism is the violence associated with primitive accumulation. In this way, she might be said to effectively stand *Capital* on its feet. But despite the difficult subject matter, her work is not dour or self-serious; it is often playful, even funny. The history of art, her work suggests, is a history of absurd and violent excess, best approached either with horror or, better yet, humor.

Of course, culture’s ability to exceed its multiple (over)determinations by capital is never guaranteed. Even deeply critical works of art may eventually or temporarily lose their critical edge, as capitalism subsumes them, little by little, into its infernal machinery. Think of Andy Warhol’s Brillo boxes or Campbell’s soup cans, which today are perhaps too easily read as naive or celebratory representations of the objects they depict rather than as subtly ironic, and thus critical, “representations of the act of representation” itself.⁴⁸ If there is indeed no “outside,” what work can cultural criticism do in light of capital’s seemingly endless self-expansion? In the next section we identify some of the more promising recent scholarly developments that operate “within and against” this totalizing logic before turning to the articles in this issue.

Totality and Culture Today

In this introduction we have already identified some of the most promising ways to work through the antinomy between totality and culture that have been handed down to us from the dominant strands of theory over the last several decades. In short, the analysis

we find most interesting and productive for critical theory today thinks through the particular contours of cultural objects so as to shed light on the social whole in and through which they emerge. On the one hand, in our view the force of critical interpretation lies in the critic's ability to ground cultural artifacts in relation to totality. On the other hand, the social whole is neither directly translatable or readable from the individual object, nor is it apprehendable without it. This view of totalizing analysis as that which draws out the layered social mediation of the immediately sensible world has obvious affinities both with Marx's "critique through presentation" (on which Alya Ansari expands in her contribution to the issue) and with the kind of immanent critique generally associated with the Frankfurt School.⁴⁹

There is already today a theoretical shift underway across the disciplines that aspires to this totalizing analysis. We find this in such disparate areas as post-2008 returns to Marx and value-form theory; materialist uptakes of world literature and postcolonial studies; resurgent theories of dispossession, racialization, and racial capitalism; critical theories of art; materialist media and environmental analyses; reassessments of the former Second and Third Worlds in a global frame; critical studies of automation and logistical circulation; and the renewed interest in social reproduction theory. The work collected in this special issue intervenes in and carries forward this renewed attention to totality. The issue includes seven articles that take up the complex mediations of culture and totality in a range of specific contexts, from debates around nineteenth- and twentieth-century German organicism (Kyle Baasch), to the cutting-edge aesthetic criticism of the Chinese communist theorists Zhou Yang 周揚 and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (Roy Chan), to Georges Bataille's debt to Hegel (Alberto Toscano), to Afro-pessimist critiques of midcentury Marxist feminisms and more recent Black feminisms alike (Sara-Maria Sorentino). In addition to the articles, review essays by Christopher Geary and Ruth Averbach touch on very different iterations of totalizing analysis, thinking, respectively, through the problem of dispossession and the affordances for gender studies of a view from the former Second World.

The issue opens with Baasch's "The Symptomatological Imagination: On Cultural Analysis as Historical Diagnosis." After decades of

suspicion of “grand narratives” associated not least with poststructuralist and deconstructionist methodologies, “contemporary cultural criticism,” Baasch argues, again “aspires to furnish the minutiae of everyday life with a grand-historical explanation.” From academic theory to popular culture, it seems that there is renewed interest in conceptions of the world as “a ‘totality’ in which the most trivial surface event receives its essential meaning.” The problem, according to Baasch, is that many such attempts at divining the “grand-historical significance to inconspicuous cultural artifacts” remain theoretically ungrounded and unattached to an “overarching conception of recent world history in which these cultural particulars would gain meaning.” Baasch endeavors to show why such a grounding is justified, even necessary, if we are to make good on the promise of contemporary holisms while “still respecting the discursive character of our understanding that prevents us from knowing anything about the telos of this movement.” To do so, he takes us through debates around totality and, especially, organicist conceptions thereof in the history of German thought. We land on none other than Max Weber, who develops an essentially Kantian understanding of internal purposiveness as a regulative idea for the biological sciences. Weber, we find, offers up a useful conception of “heuristic fictions”—regulative ideas that can ground “claims about the organic structure of cultural formations.” In recuperating a critical organicist conception of totality, Baasch’s argument takes us beyond what we might call “aggregative” notions of the whole—which strive, in Hegel’s terms, toward a mere “completeness of information”—toward a more complex relationship between whole and part.⁵⁰ Baasch’s organic totality, in the end, does not leave us with a view of society as stuck in the interregnum between death and birth. Instead, we end agnostically: the old is dying, and it is time that we start looking for a memory care facility.

Chan, for his part, offers a different way of grounding cultural phenomena historically. His contribution, “Inverted Propositions: On Chinese Readings of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Totality, and Transnational *Bildung*,” considers the “transnational life” of Chernyshevsky’s materialist aesthetics through the reception history of the Russian critic’s infamous proposition—“Beauty is life”—in China in the work of Zhou Yang 周揚 and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛. Departing from

scholarship that would see the relationship of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the Soviet Union as a hypostatized one of pupil to teacher, Chan reads Zhou's and Zhu's rereadings of Chernyshevsky "as a form of *Bildung* that does not result in mere pedagogical reproduction but, as befits a shape of dialectic, leads to fundamental instability and then resettlement." In different ways, Zhou and Zhu read "Beauty is life" as a speculative proposition, part of a collective process that ultimately points toward "concretely universal knowledge." Not unlike recent reclamations of "official" Soviet philosophy, Chan also cuts through the Cold War binary between Western Marxism and state socialism, showing how PRC thinkers were often engaged in critical theory "whose insights can be paralleled with those of the Frankfurt School." Chan's deprovincializing gesture thus brings geography, interpretation, and translation to bear on totality as a methodological standpoint—not as instances of exception or resistance to totality but as social forms that render it concrete. In making possible the "Bacchanalian revel" through their critical interpretation and development of his philosophy, Chernyshevsky's Chinese critics evince a dialectical method: "a secular process of ceaseless interpretation that can never avoid the possibility of misrecognition and error." In this way, these thinkers participate in totality's very conceptual unfolding.

Next, Toscano's contribution, "The Horrible Work of History: Georges Bataille and the Actuality of Hegel," analyzes Bataille's long and productive engagement with Hegel from the 1930s through the 1950s. The piece focuses in particular on Bataille's initial embrace, subsequent disavowal, and eventual reclamation of Hegel's central contention that dialectical negativity, or what Bataille calls "destructive action," forms the (unconscious) basis of the movement of history.⁵¹ Toscano details how after 1945, Bataille sought to overcome what he took to be Hegel's instrumentality and his orientation toward "totality as teleology" not by refusing negativity, in an essentialist fashion, but by doubling down on negativity as the basic condition of human existence. Thus, a totalizing negativity, in a distinctly Hegelian mode, becomes central to Bataille's working *method*, informing not only a raft of cognate concepts that are today closely associated with Bataille's own thought, such as excess, sacrifice, and death, but also his effort to move from a restricted to a general

economy in *The Accursed Share* project. However, throughout this work, Bataille registers negativity not in terms of toil, mastery, and the (dialectical) domination of history—as evinced in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, for instance—but in terms of play and collective sacrifice, and specifically as the formal play of poetics. Thus, as Toscano movingly puts it, “true emancipation for Bataille is not a matter for historical actuality but only perseveres in the half-light of literature.”

Ansari also takes up the relationship of literature and literary criticism both to totalizing analysis and to particular receptions of Hegel—in this case the *Logic* more so than the *Phenomenology*. Her article, “Literature and Totality: *Kritik durch Darstellung* and the Crisis of Literary Production in the Twenty-First-Century Gig Work Novel,” grounds an account of the critical purchase of totality for literary criticism within the larger project of the critique of political economy. Thinking with Hilary Leichter’s novel *Temporary* (2020), Ansari offers a two-part intervention in light of the “interpretative challenge to materialist literary criticism” posed by “the breakdown of narrative certainty in the contemporary gig work novel.” First, Ansari sheds new light on the long-running debate around the relationship of Marx’s *Capital* to Hegel’s *Logic*. With reference to Michael Theunissen, Hans-Friedrich Fulda, and Peter Horstmann’s *Kritische Darstellung der Metaphysik: Eine Diskussion über Hegels “Logik”*—a text hitherto practically absent from the Anglophone conversation—Ansari draws out the methodological upshot of Marx’s dialectical method of presentation. Marx, we find, provides a critical presentation (“eine kritische Darstellung”) of the system of bourgeois political economy that is at the same time a critique of that system *through that presentation* (“*durch die Darstellung*”). Totality, then, emerges not as “a descriptive frame used to enumerate the ‘missing pieces’ of a totalizing theory of capital” but as the condition of possibility for critique that can ground a “materialist analysis that is in excess of the manifest content of the text.” There is an isomorphism here between the dialectic of essence and appearance in *Capital* and Ansari’s historical-materialist reading practice. In the second part of her intervention, Ansari extends the “*Kritik durch die Darstellung*” into the form of the novel itself. Reading *Temporary* in these terms yields a totalizing mode of analysis that can account for both formal

innovations of the contemporary gig work novel and the shifting—and arguably declining—status of the novel as a privileged aesthetic form.

Moving from the totalizing capacities of literature to those of photography and cinema, Menozzi's article, "Totality in a Box: The Shipping Container from Commodity to Allegory," centers on the role of the shipping container in Sekula's 1995 essay "Dismal Science" and Sekula and Noël Burch's 2010 film essay *The Forgotten Space*. The container, for Menozzi, "is entangled in wider tendencies at the heart of contemporary capitalism"—from extraction to subsumption of labor, from automation to dispossession—and it presents a representational problem that bridges aesthetics and political economy. As a figure of an ostensibly seamless global capitalism, the container renders opaque the larger whole of the economy; on the other hand, as Sekula argued, forms of representation that would treat the container as an aesthetic object are themselves "entangled in the system of inequality [they aim] to denounce." Menozzi traces Sekula's attempts to transcend both symbolism and photographic realism, arguing for a form of critical realist montage or allegory. The latter, not unlike Ansari's "*Kritik durch Darstellung*" or Mansoor's view of aesthetic abstraction in this issue, can "point to itself as a figurative form of representation while pointing beyond itself, by virtue of its open-endedness and polysemic aspect, and making manifest the world it depicts and distorts." Sekula's work on the container, then, recuperates a "totalizing, panoramic view" in an era dominated by the fetish of globalized capital's self-presentation. Like the commodity in Marx, the allegorical critique of the container makes available "the concrete social relations that it simultaneously embodies" and "conveys the traces of the histories of labor and of struggle" it conceals. Opening up the container yields a totalizing view that is, following Ernst Bloch, one of asynchronous temporalities and utopian potential; in the container we find not a uniformly reified world but "the expansive logic of capitalism" as it "extracts value from an exterior it constantly reproduces."

Sorentino is also interested in the negative relationship of the outside to the totality. In her contribution "Abolish the *Oikos*: Notes on Incapacity from Antiquity to Marxist Feminism, Black Feminism, and Afro-pessimism," she challenges the Left truism that political economy—and thus labor and class—subtends all other forms of

social differentiation, arguing instead that prevailing theories of intersectionality, including Marxist-inflected feminist approaches, fail to properly grasp the structural significance of race and racism in general and anti-Blackness in particular. Rather, Sorentino argues that the collapse of race into class or gender—both rendered here as forms of “reduced capacity”—is how anti-Blackness is articulated for political economy. To substantiate this provocative claim, Sorentino traces debates around the internal organization of the *oikos*—here meaning both household and economy—from Aristotle to the present day, focusing in particular on the nonequivalent relationship between women and (absent) slaves. In the ancient Greek *oikos* of the *Metaphysics* and the *Politics*, the social positionality of women and slaves differs fundamentally: while women cannot own property, they have the capacity to use it, whereas slaves are themselves property and thus fully incapacitated. Thus Sorentino contends that while contemporary Marxist feminist and Black feminist theorists aim to reclaim and reorganize the *oikos* in order to engender human freedom, both approaches tend to subsume slavery—now synonymous with Blackness—into gender and class concerns and thus to endlessly reproduce anti-Blackness at the heart of both Marxist and feminist critiques of exploitation. The solution to this problem, argues Sorentino, is to read capitalism through Afro-pessimism—to recognize, that is, that the capitalist totality is both preceded and exceeded by the incapacity/negativity of Blackness, which “cannot appear as such.” Pushing back against a century of Marxist theorizing, Sorentino proposes not so much a new interpretation of totality, but what Anthony Paul Farley calls “a general theory of antiblackness.”⁵²

Finally, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Abstraction: From Fetish to Totality,” Jaleh Mansoor carries out a detailed exegesis of artwork by the Paris-based, Italian British duo Claire Fontaine, whose practice draws not only on conceptual art and the history of the readymade but also on critical theory and philosophy. Picking up in particular on the group’s incorporation of Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s notion of “exchangism” into their creative process, Mansoor contends that Claire Fontaine’s project is, in effect, to dramatize and thus reveal the otherwise occluded moment of market exchange, which, according to Sohn-Rethel, precedes and invisibly structures consciousness and abstract thought under capitalism. In this way,

the work of art is uniquely able to provide access—albeit only ever intermittently—to a social totality that is otherwise “so fully, absolutely, and unconsciously articulated to market dynamics as to [be] all but unthinkable.” More than this, however, Mansoor suggests that by temporarily suspending our usual relationship to subjects and objects and by posing totality more or less explicitly as a social problem in itself, the artwork intervenes in capitalism’s totalizing reach, effectively turning capital’s will to abstraction against itself. In what amounts to a utopian theorization of art’s political possibilities, Mansoor’s article suggests that the aesthetic field, in certain instances, may become “a rebus through which to tease out the dissembling opacities of the open secret of real abstraction.”

Taken together, the pieces collected here contribute to some of the most pressing and significant debates in critical theory today, not least ongoing conversations around the extent to which collective action might hold capital to account *despite* capital’s apparently totalizing power. Viewed from the perspective of one of the largest academic worker strikes in history—not to mention a steadily intensifying wave of labor organizing and action around the world in recent years—we find ourselves invigorated by this work and by the broader theoretical focus on totality of late. We hope that you find this collection similarly stimulating.

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Notes

1. Kunkel, “Critic, Historicize Thyself!,” 84.
2. Incidentally, *Qui Parle* was an important vehicle of this shift in the United States.
3. Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” 104.

4. But see Floyd, Phillis, and Chandra, *Totality Inside Out*; Lye and Nealon, *After Marx*; Christie and Değirmencioğlu, *Cultures of Uneven and Combined Development*; O’Kane, “Totality”; and Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*.
5. Hall, “When Was the ‘Post-colonial’?,” 258.
6. The term comes from Negt, “Marxismus als Legitimationswissenschaft.”
7. In many ways, recent returns to Althusser have largely moved past older debates about the young versus the old Marx and into questions about class composition, worker inquiry, and aleatory materialism. In addition to the work of Warren Montag, William Lewis, and G. M. Goshgarian, *Viewpoint Magazine* has been a major Anglophone source.
8. *Diamat* was the Soviet acronym for “dialectical materialism” (*dialekticheskii materializm*). The latter, derived from Second International Marxism and later canonized theoretically in Stalin’s 1938 “O dialekticheskoi i istoricheskoi dialektike,” reads a mechanical teleology into the contradiction between relations and forces of production (within which, at a certain stage, relations of production become “fetters” on the development of the forces of production), which gives way to an inevitable succession of discrete historical stages (feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism).
9. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, 16. Indeed, as Fredric Jameson has argued, “relative autonomy” of different spheres of society has at times been absolutized such that there is little to hold them together. He writes: “The attempt to open up a semi-autonomy of the levels with one hand, while holding them all together in the ultimate unity of some ‘structural totality’ . . . tends under its own momentum, in the centrifugal force of the critique of totality it had itself elaborated, to self-destruct” (“Periodizing the ’60s,” 16).
10. These appear in English as Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*.
11. James Boggs made a similar point nearly two decades earlier in *The American Revolution*: “Marxists have continued to think of a mass of workers always remaining as the base of an industrialized society. They have never once faced the fact that capitalist society could develop to the point of not needing a mass of workers. But this is the dilemma of our time in the United States” (39).
12. For a lucid contextualization and critique of the workerist and post-workerist readings of the “Fragment on Machines,” see Bellofiore and Tomba, “The ‘Fragment on Machines’ and the *Grundrisse*.”

13. “The multitude”—which, in brief, is a plurality that never converges into a “one”—is transposed here from Spinoza’s *Tractatus Politicus* (1677) onto the political subject. Despite its global pretensions, the provincialism of Hardt and Negri’s argument de-emphasizes ongoing forms of imperialism and reinscribes a kind of normative developmentalism into the critique of ostensibly globalized capital. Hardt and Negri have been subjected to withering critique along these lines since the publication of *Empire*. For a sample, see Brennan, “The Empire’s New Clothes”; Schapiro, “Beyond Postmarxism”; Parry, *Post-colonial Studies*, chap. 6; Ahmad, “Imperialism of Our Time”; Spivak, *Aesthetic Education*, 518n57; Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities*, 144–50; and Chukhrov, “Towards the Space of the General.” Hardt and Negri answer these and similar critiques in the follow-up volume to *Empire*, wherein they rather tendentiously yoke to an argument about biopolitics Marx’s comments in the *Grundrisse* about bourgeois society’s throwing into relief the truth of older modes of production (cf. 105–8). They write that, like industrial labor in Marx’s time, “immaterial labor has become hegemonic in qualitative terms and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labor and society itself” to yield products that are immeasurable and part of a “becoming common, which tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor . . . [and makes up] the biopolitical condition of the multitude” (*Multitude*, 109, 114). Here Hardt and Negri rhetorically sidestep objections that most of the world’s production is not, in fact, “immaterial” or “cognitive” labor, but they still fail to avoid the charge of normative developmentalism.
14. Negri presents this basic shift most succinctly in “Interpretation of the Class Situation Today.”
15. Guattari and Negri, *Communists Like Us*, 22.
16. For important critiques of this fetish of the outside from art theory and postcolonial studies, respectively, see Vishmidt, “Anomaly and Autonomy”; and Walker, “Postcolonial.”
17. For example, this transition has been seen as a reconsolidation of ruling-class power in the face of organized labor’s hard-won ability to constrain capital (Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*); as a stopgap measure indicating the autumnal period of the United States’ waning global hegemony (Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*); as an effect of secular economic stagnation after a historically anachronistic postwar boom period (Brenner); as indicative of capitalism’s final crisis resulting from its immanent self-undermining tendency to produce surplus

- populations (Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung*); or as the latest iteration of the struggle for dominance between nations in an unevenly developed and multipolar world (Desai, *Geopolitical Economy*).
18. Christie and Değirmencioglu, *Cultures of Uneven and Combined Development*, 9.
 19. See Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*; Lazarus, “Global Dispensation since 1945”; and Chari and Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts.”
 20. Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, chap. 9.
 21. The reasons for the USSR’s eventual collapse are still debated in the literature, but there is a strong case to be made that, although the retrospectively named “epoch of stagnation” was likely the result of an internal lack of dynamism inherent in Stalinist developmental policies, it was changes in the world economy that brought the Soviet Union down in the end. In her pathbreaking book, Katherine Verdery makes these suggestive remarks: “The critical intersection [toward the collapse of the USSR] occurred not in 1989 or 1987 but in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when global capitalism entered the cyclical crisis from which it is still struggling to extricate itself. Among capitalists’ possible responses to the crisis (devaluation, structural reorganization, etc.), an early one was to lend abroad; facilitating this option were the massive quantities of petrodollars that were invested in Western banks, following changes in OPEC policy in 1973. By lending, Western countries enabled the recipients to purchase capital equipment or to build long-term infrastructure, thereby expanding the overseas markets for Western products.” For Verdery, writing in the 1990s, the USSR’s position in the world market and its “articulation with capitalism” were key to its fall (*What Was Socialism?*, 31–33). Likewise, Boris Kagarlitsky locates the beginning of the end of the Soviet experiment in the same decade in *Empire of the Periphery*. Simon Clarke, from a quite different theoretical orientation, also argues that “what brought the crisis [of the Soviet system] to a head was . . . [not] internal factors, but the external factor of the development of world commodity and financial markets. In this sense, the crisis of the Soviet Union is a part of the crisis of world capitalism” (*What about the Workers?*, 36). The historian Vladislav Zubok, who is no shade of Marxist, offers a similar account in *Collapase*. Finally, there is much productive work to be done in thinking about the petering out of a Soviet-style developmental model alongside related attempts at noncapitalist development in the

- former Second and Third Worlds, all of which come up against barriers to economic growth just as neoliberal reforms are being enacted in the capitalist core.
22. See Mark and Betts, *Socialism Goes Global*; Suvin, *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities*; Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization*; Kagarlitsky, *Empire of the Periphery*; and Benjamin, "Developmental Aspiration."
 23. The debate around the culture concept is long running. See, e.g., Williams, "Culture"; Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot"; and Sewell, "Concept(s) of Culture."
 24. Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, 9.
 25. Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 595.
 26. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 12. Let us briefly note and then quickly set aside the fact that today, unlike in the early 1990s, the executive director of the Port of Los Angeles is paid roughly the same amount as the CEO of Los Angeles World Airports—both pull in around half a million dollars in annual wages. What this equivalence suggests about the current state of cargo logistics, about commodity consumption, and about the relative health of the "global economy," we will not speculate here.
 27. Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 7.
 28. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 102–3.
 29. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 165.
 30. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 103.
 31. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 46.
 32. Sekula, *Fish Story*, 47.
 33. Crary, "Géricault," 21–22.
 34. Though there are important differences, the mode of seeing that *Fish Story* necessitates and simultaneously engenders in the viewer is perhaps on a continuum with what Kaja Silverman calls analogical seeing, or seeing by analogy: "When I say analogy, I do not mean sameness, symbolic equivalence, logical adequation, or even a rhetorical relationship—like a metaphor or simile—in which one term functions as the provisional placeholder for another. I am talking about the authorless and untranscendable similarities that structure Being, or what I will be calling 'the world,' and that give everything the same ontological weight" (*Miracle of Analogy*, 11). The totality that lurks beneath the surface of Sekula's work functions similarly to Silverman's "authorless and untranscendable similarities" here, but sans her Heideggerian idealism. Less clear still is the relationship between Sekula's seeing and the sexualized looking described by Stuart Hall in Isaac Julien's 1995

- film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*: “Looking always involves desire, there’s always the desire, not just to see, but to see what you can’t see, to see more than you can see, to see into, to see beyond, to see behind.”
35. Sekula, *Photography against the Grain*, 80.
 36. A significant body of scholarship deals with the relationship between artistic representation and capitalism in Sekula’s work, not least work produced by Sekula himself. See, e.g., Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary”; Sekula, “Traffic in Photographs”; Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”; Toscano, “Seeing It Whole”; Toscano, “Mirror of Circulation”; Buchloh, “Allan Sekula”; Zyman and Scozzari, *Allan Sekula*; Streitberger and Van Gelder, “Disassembled” *Images*; and Van Gelder, *Allan Sekula*.
 37. Khalili, foreword, ix.
 38. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 26. In her foreword to the 2018 reprint of *Fish Story*, Laleh Khalili writes that the “Middle Passage” chapter was meant “to include Sekula’s reflections on both slavery and current exploitation of workers in Dakar, but illness prevented him from completing the necessary research” (foreword, vi).
 39. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 29.
 40. Hartman, “Position of the Unthought,” 184–85.
 41. Gallagher, “A Brush with . . .” The phrase is a riff on Toni Morrison’s notion of the “Africanist presence” in Western literature (*Playing in the Dark*, 33).
 42. Gallagher, “A Brush with . . .”
 43. Shatskikh, “Inscribed Vandalism.”
 44. Quoted in Wilson, “Seeing Black,” 115–16.
 45. Kelley, “Confounding Myths,” 8.
 46. Gallagher, “A Brush with . . .”
 47. Primitiv accumulation and dispossession as ongoing and even constitutive dynamics in capitalism are central to recent iterations of Marxian critical theory and are an important way in which we might think about totality and culture together. Important interventions include Walker, *Sublime Perversion*; Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*; Nichols, *Theft Is Property!*; Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; and Shilliam, “Hegemony and the Unfashionable.”
 48. Deming, “Art in Review,” 182.
 49. Readers will by now have noted that we have yet to refer to the Frankfurt School and adjacent thinkers directly. In part this is because their

reception in the Anglophone context that we address has downplayed or de-emphasized their Marxism as well as their uptake of Marx's critique of political economy. What has been emphasized much more readily is the critique of "instrumental rationality." Key touchstones in this reception include Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*; Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*; and Jay, *Marxism and Totality*. This tradition has also come to be associated with a dated—even provincial—valorization of bourgeois culture at the expense of politics. However, the most salient contemporary engagement with the Frankfurt School, particularly in light of the post-2008 renewal of interest in the Marx of *Capital*, reads this body of theory differently, so that it begins to bridge the gap between culture and political economy in a way that is attuned to current political economic factors like financialization and deindustrialization. The recent multivolume *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* is exemplary of this reappraisal (see Best, Bonefeld, and O'Kane, *Sage Handbook*). See also the important rereadings of Adorno in Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*; Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*; Robinson, *Adorno's Poetics of Form*; and Bonefeld and O'Kane, *Adorno and Marx*.

50. Hegel, *Difference*, 85.
51. Bataille, "Attraction and Repulsion II," 116.
52. Farley, "Toward a General Theory of Antiracism."

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