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## I'd Prefer Another: Pub Culture as a Third-Way Resistance to Capitalism

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on applying some of Žižek's theoretical work to a specific space within the capitalist conjuncture, the pub. Jürgen Habermas' influential conception of the public sphere has shown the important role of the caffeine-centric cafés of the past in producing a lively democratic movement. As most any trip to a post-modern coffeehouse will attest, however, such locations have become little more than outlets for free and always individualized Wi-Fi. But the local pub, in the current political climate, has attained something more. The central argument here is that pub culture, built on neither action nor reaction, is the last bastion of anti-capitalism. Indeed, if Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to," was an effective response to the demands of capitalism in the work place, then "I'd prefer another" does such duty with even more resistance and relevance for the present. To make this case, and explore its implications, I will turn to key insights from theorists such as Žižek, Lawrence Grossberg, and Deleuze and Guattari, while also comparing and contrasting today's global pub culture to that of the historical role of the café.

**Key Words:** Žižek, pub culture, anti/capitalism, cultural theory, resistance

## First Round

Daniel Rodgers argues that the times in which we live may best be termed the “age of fracture,” and that such a conjuncture can be analyzed if we pay attention to certain “acts of mind and imagination and the way in which they changed America” (2011:10). And Kurt Anderson has recently argued that America has gone “haywire” and is now a full-fledged “Fantasyland” (2017). Due to popular as well as academic concern with these issues, freshly released volumes on fascism, dying democracies, and hostility to knowledge have been published by well-known scholars (for example, Albright 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Nichols 2017, respectively). The focus on the United States (US) is here intentional, as the US is but a symptom of, and vector for, the cultural shift to the reactionary right occurring globally. A crucial component of this movement is hyper-capitalism, with the onus on the individual qua consumer. Analyzing the economic as political equating to the cultural allows us to map the link between the US and countries around the world. After all, as Žižek reminds us, “today, capitalism defines and structures the totality of the human civilization” (2014:164). While it is certainly difficult to argue against any of this, the question remains: How does one go about making sense of it? Or, for our purposes, even more importantly: How does one resist it?

While the importance of popular culture’s relationship to, and effect on, politics writ large is established, (Habermas 1989; Anderson 2006; Grossberg 2010; Horkheimer and Adorno 2007; Protevi 2009; Žižek 2017) this article analyzes the precise theoretical coordinates of a relatively neoteric phenomenon. What may be, on the one hand, a domestic politico-cultural experience, it nevertheless has global consequences, as the politico-cultural norms—here the dual and dueling themes of hyper-capitalism and pub culture—are exported/imported. Such geographizing and temporalizing allows for maximum theoretical rigor relating to the construction of a new (at least in the sense of intensity, as the interpretive metric advocated by Deleuze and Guattari) politics of reaction.<sup>1</sup> We therefore know *what* political work popular culture does, but to go beyond the “embarrassingly neutral yet omnipresent term *context*,” I want to slow down and show *how* that work is carried out, its theoretical underpinnings, and its implications for better understanding the interrelationship between “current events, the ideological, and the cultural” (Jameson 2016:432-34). Indeed, specific elements of popular culture (i.e., pubs) are used here as a theoretical vehicle that may elucidate the broader implications for politics internationally. What we are seeing here can best be understood by leveraging aspects of cultural theory and applying it to the relevant

politico-cultural mechanics and machinations at work. In Žižekian terms, we are dealing with “the Universal” (politico-culture), “the Particular” (resistance to capitalist imperatives), and “the Singular” (pubs), which, taken together, provide a crucial conjuncture that works to explain, or map, where we are and what to (not)do about it (2017:xi).

In figuring out where to place and how to view the pub’s position within, and yet apart from, global capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari provide assistance by problematizing this type of an assemblage as a rhizome: “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (2009b:7). Elspeth Probyn clarifies that, “in real and theoretical ways, a rhizome is a wonderful entity: it is a type of plant...that instead of having tap roots, spreads its roots outward where new roots can sprout off old. Used as a figure to map out social relations, the rhizome allows us to think about other types of connection” (2000:17). Pub culture can be pictured, or mapped, as a landscape involving hierarchies, or topographies of power, which have become so omnipresent as to be invisible from critique. It is only by slowing down and unpacking the seemingly mundane conduits of cultural banality that critical articulations can be enunciated. The notion of such mapping comes from Lawrence Grossberg, who writes that such an “analytic project might best be described as a cartography of daily life which attempts to (re)construct at least part of the complex texture of a certain terrain” (1992:63). The assemblage of popular culture connected to the applications of capitalist violence—to bodies both individual and politic—becomes our terrain, the terra incognita, and the lines, linkages, and conjunctures are the coordinates we can use to analyze, albeit always incompletely, the theoretical argument this article seeks to elucidate as one part of a more esemplastic project. Such an endeavor is, of course, experimental. In the words of John Cage, “the word experimental is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown” (1961:13). What we know is what does not work in terms of capitalism and its associated foreign and domestic policies of violence as practiced today. Theorizing how to respond, or resist, or refuse such processes is a step into the unknown.

Following Foucault, Grossberg writes, “Analyzing an event then involves (re)constructing, or, fabricating the network of relationships into which and within which it is articulated, as well as the possibilities for different articulation...Articulation is the production of identity on top of difference, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices” (1992:54). That is, in order

to comprehend how pub culture affects the political, a high degree of contextualization, or conjuncture, is necessary but not sufficient. In this case, we must interrogate the mechanics of profit and other neoliberal imperatives (most especially the emphasis on privatization, deregulation, and cuts to social spending [Klein 2007]) immanent in the structure of producing the product of an ethos of at least subconscious resistance. Such a move allows us to disrupt the bifurcation assessed by Žižek as conceding to a structure wherein “the populist Right *acts*, sets the pace, determines the problematic of the populist struggle, and the liberal centre is reduced to a *reactive force*” [emphasis in the original] (2002:152). A way to overcome this, a “third-way,” is to neither act nor react, but rather to sit and order another. This is a type of passive-resistance used in different contexts (from Calcutta to Birmingham), but lacking such overtly colonial/racist paradigms, today’s “resistors” face the challenge of an often invisible and intangible foe. The pub provides a locus not for (re)action, but inaction: precisely what capitalism cannot deal with efficaciously.

## **Round 2**

How can one resist capitalism while simultaneously engaging in the capitalist activity of buying a product at a for-profit business? Here the answer must be that we are dealing with a spectrum of capitalist participation. One cannot feasibly divorce oneself from capitalism entirely. But one might look to the executive working on Wall Street while also influencing government policy (e.g., whether the real-life Steven Mnuchin or the created character of Gordon Gekko played by Michael Douglas in the film *Wall Street*) at one end and the humble bar fly (e.g., whether real-life Charles Bukowski or the created character of Frank Gallagher played by William H. Macy on the Showtime series *Shameless*) at the other end to see that there is indeed a wide range of participation in this regime. For Žižek, one cannot actually take the ideology of hegemonic capitalism truly seriously (i.e., be a Mnuchin or Gekko) without being “stupid or a corrupted cynic,” while attempting to “exploit and manipulate others, he ends up being the ultimate sucker himself” (2002:71). What makes the true believer into Žižek’s “*Homo sucker*” is precisely his participation in the illusion (Ibid). Pace Žižek, I claim that by leaving the game, or dealing oneself out, the pub’s bar flies are able to get around the trap set here: “When we think we are making fun of the ruling ideology, we are merely strengthening its hold over us” (Ibid.) This idea of spectrum analysis encompasses Deleuze and Guattari’s repeated emphasis on interpreting through intensities, and

relates to their idea of capitalism and schizophrenia (2009a; 2009b). The ontological push and pull of capitalism can be relieved through palliative care, but cannot be cured. One is trapped in a system that she did not construct, and (sub)consciously wishes to find an escape, but all routes are blocked. This force of capitalism produces conflict and violence, not only in and between individuals but through societies and states as well. As Žižek contends, for example, “instead of endless analyses of how Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ is intolerant towards our liberal societies, and other ‘clash-of-civilizational’ topics, we should refocus our attention on the economic background to the conflict—the clash of *economic* interests...[emphasis in the original] (2002:42). It is precisely Bartleby’s insistence on slowing down the demands of capitalism that created such angst in his social ecosystem, just as the true bar fly’s insistence on another round works to discombobulate, but not destroy, the economic architecture (Melville 1853).

The local pub (as opposed to tourist spots, or country clubs, etc.) acts as what Shachar Pinsker, in his book on the centrality of cafés to Jewish culture terms a “thirdspace”<sup>2</sup> (2018:9). The concept of the thirdspace (stemming from the work of Lefebvre [1991] and Soja [1996]) is used by Pinsker to analyze the café as an “interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined” (2018:9). Indeed, the pub (i.e., a shortening of “public house”) fits this niche perfectly, as it is, as its very name suggests, “neither entirely public nor entirely private” (Gopnik 2018). This also parallels the nomenclature of the coffeehouse, or Kaffeehaus, or beit kafe, or beit kahava, etc. It is the *public* sphere, as opposed to and in conflict with, the *private* house, that is the crucial analytical locus here. Writing on this enervating contradiction, Žižek notes, “when we try to preserve the authentic intimate sphere of privacy against the onslaught of instrumental/objectivized ‘alienated’ public exchange, it is privacy itself which becomes a totally objectivized ‘commodified’ sphere” (2002:85). Yes, and this is precisely the case of the post-modern coffeehouse, which has become a sphere of the laptop workplace. Comparing “our post-Starbucks civilization from the vanished café civilization” the *New Yorker*’s Adam Gopnik (2018) writes that

where in the classic cafés the point was to interact with your fellows, the point of spending a day working in a Starbucks, or in its cuter and more local-seeming rivals, is *never* to interact with your fellows. Spending the day online, one may be in touch with friends and advocates and lovers, but they exist outside in the ether,

not inside the coffee shop. We aren't sharing space in a modern coffee shop; we're simply renting it.

Juxtapose that with Žižek's theoretical point that, "The ultimate truth of withdrawal into privacy is a public confession of intimate secrets on a TV show—against this kind of privacy, we should emphasize that, today, the only way of breaking out of the constraints of 'alienated' commodification is to invent a new collectivity" (2002:85). It is my contention that while the cafés that served as democratic social spaces have turned individualized, the pub has created (or at least shows the potential of creating) this "new collectivity."

### **Round Three**

It is important to distinguish the pub and the (in)activities of its consistent patrons from a shooting-gallery in a public park, for instance. As Christopher Hitchens reminds us, "Avoid all narcotics: these make you more boring rather than less and are not designed—as are the grape and the grain—to enliven company" (2010:352). The heroin addict shivering in her Manhattan apartment, or the meth addled Iowan are often victims, not resisters, of the super-structure we are interested in here. Note the atmospheric differences in comparing a coffeehouse, the addict examples above, and pubs: the former two are quiet loci of faux-contemplation or pseudo-contentment, but the latter is often voluminous with cheer or infighting or gossip, in short *discourse* (very often of the sort that violates the supposedly cardinal rule of never discussing religion or politics over the bottle). In either case, the use of narcotics is one of individualization, not socialization. While not every drinker is a bastion of conviviality, the point holds that pubs provide that crucial "thirdspace."

The pub's demand is neither solitude nor gregariousness, but rather it offers the option to *not* while being. Žižek writes that, "the threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active,' to 'participate,' to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, 'do something,' while academics participate in meaningless 'debates,' and so on, and *the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from all this*" [emphasis is mine] (2014:199). Or, as a character in Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1990) declares, "withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy." Dwindling indeed are the spaces where, as St. Paul said of the Athenians, one can "spend their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas," which are precisely the spaces that are to be "celebrated and protected in a democratic culture" (Nichols 2017:16). Pinsker writes of the historical cultural and political importance of the coffee shop, while

also granting its disappearance: “The urban café [was] not just a site of consumption but also an institution of sociability and exchange” (2018:3). Writing on this point of the now “vanished” café culture of old, Adam Gopnik (2018) notes that “it wasn’t that the conversations in the café were necessarily intellectually productive; it was that the practice of free exchange itself—the ability to interact on equal terms with someone not of your clan—generated social habits of self-expression that abetted the appetite for self-government.” Indeed, today’s pubs need not be venues for reciting Plato’s *Republic* (though I’ve personally seen impromptu contests involving the proper recitation of Shakespeare’s sonnets), they need only provide the possibility of face to face interaction with a community of fellow humans preferring another round.

#### **Round Four**

The humble local pub’s value to democracy in an increasingly fractured global society should not be ignored. In a doubling down of realist-cynicism, Žižek’s basic definition of democracy as “meaning that, whatever electoral manipulation takes place, every political agent will unconditionally respect the results” barely even holds today, with the candidate Trump refusing to even pretend to ascribe to this, again, very basic if jaundiced, democratic norm (2012:119). Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, both Harvard professors of political science, have argued that while protests are fine for producing, maintaining, and expanding democratic rights, only certain types work, and violent ones are flatly counterproductive (2018:218). Furthermore, they contend that coalitions, while not sufficient for enforcing democratic norms, are important—especially “those that bring together groups with dissimilar—even opposing—views on many issues” (Ibid). Few attributes of the pub-space are more salient than this type of leveling. Where else today does one see men and women, with educations from GEDs to PhDs, from frat-boys to vagrants, and every shade of skin from black to white occupying the same social space? Indeed, pub culture can be seen here as an actual (opposed to a virtual) network. For Foucault, our “experience of the world” can be best understood as a “network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (1986:22). The pub space offers a landscape where there exists applied multiculturalism, instead of a contemplative type. It is important to distinguish these types of identity. Following Kant, Žižek contends that “when we reflect upon our ethnic roots, we engage in a *private use of reason*, constrained by contingent dogmatic presuppositions; that is, we act as ‘immature’ individuals not as free humans who dwell in the dimension of the universality of reason” (2009:104). This, of

course, is not to argue for the erasure of difference, only that, for grander (or more universal) emancipatory politics a degree of social cohesion in resistance is vital. Otherwise a situation manifests wherein there are any number of disparate groups, individualized and individuated, and thereby eviscerated of power compared to the hegemonic fidelity of the ruling capitalist class who will always prevail in such a context. Furthermore, following Rorty, Žižek emphasizes the private/public dichotomy that is crucial in my argument: “the private is the space of irony, while the public is the space of solidarity” (Ibid). Right; and it is the pub that today serves as the operative locale for *solidarity in nothingness*, the ultimate feasible resistance to hyper-capitalism.

Here it is worthwhile to pause and unpack the ontology of a “network.” The notion of network (social, terrorist, etc.) has become a dominant discursive theme of the current political generation. “Network,” however, also serves as an “order-word” for our technophilic age of the (non)social. Power—that is, control—comes in part from what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call “order words,” writing of a type of language as being “made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience” (2009b:76). The critical lexical move here is that of “terrorism” and its cognates. Terrorism is the “order word” par excellence at the nexus of popular culture and the politics of nationalist-jingoism. It is this order word that facilitates fear, and paranoia, all of which feeds into a motivational process of producing the production of culturally approved political decisions such as neocolonialism, and its attendant attributes of conquest, torture, and murder. For Deleuze and Guattari the dialectical syllogism involved in producing policies that fail is the point. “Producing a product: a producing/product identity...From a certain point of view it would be much better if nothing worked, if nothing functioned” (2009a:7). It is therefore no accident, but rather a theoretical necessity, that from Vietnam to Korea to Afghanistan to Iraq, to well beyond, the US has propagated applications of violence that were doomed from the start. The process remains consistent whether we think about political violence or economic violence: Deregulation of capital leads to the failure of massive banks, which leads to, inter alia, a multitude losing their homes; therefore, re-capitalize the banks using currency appropriated from the very people who lost their assets because of behavior allowed by the original deregulation of the banks, and repeat. Indeed, “it is *in order to function* that a social machine must *not function well*” [emphasis in original] (Ibid:151). What we are seeing is not so much the poor performance of a superpower, but rather the only performance there can be in order that *the order* continues.



Technology's importance to the cultural, and hence the political, cannot be overlooked, but as Deleuze and Guattari warn, we should avoid making the "mistake of considering [technological] tools in isolation: tools exist only in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible." They offer the example of the common stirrup, which "entails a new man-horse symbiosis that at the same time entails new weapons...Tools are inseparable from symbioses or amalgamations defining a Nature-Society machinic assemblage" (2009b:90). It is the intensified blurring of these distinctions that is the *sui generis* political move of contemporary times. The mass public, individualized, engages their personal social networks which in turn creates a simulacrum of social interaction. When that happens, we get a coetaneous noumenon of this network folded over as an adversarial network comprised of, for example, what we now know to be, Russian backed intelligence programs and their associated trolls. This is (increasingly) evidenced by latent journalistic reporting and even techno-corporate admittance to prior knowledge of the manipulation. It turns out that many Americans are acutely susceptible to what we might call "network manipulation." What happened to assist the "Trump Turn," in short, was that a Russian network was able to leverage social networks in order to turn Americans against themselves.<sup>3</sup> But this is just one recent example of an increasingly common global phenomenon of network manipulation. It is key to remember that all of the "science" that goes into producing these networks is "fully incorporated into capitalism" (Žižek 2017:9). The great "paradox" for Žižek "is that in today's digitalized society where not only the state but also big companies are able to penetrate and control *individual lives* to an unheard-of extent, state regulation is needed in order to maintain the very autonomy it supposed to endanger" [emphasis is mine] (2009:32). But I would add that there is a paradox within a paradox here whereby the agency-eradicating nature of networks is in fact sponsored (whether consciously or not) by precisely the same capitalist embeds who profit not only in the obvious realm of the monetary but also politically from the fracturing of bodies both individual and political. That is, why would the very same capitalists regulate a system that produces a double negative equating to a positive for them?

While the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari helps to explain this ontological synthesis of network—terror and pseudo-social—we can synthesize that with Žižek's focus on the powerful affective force of capitalism mentioned above. Doing so allows us to apply a distinct theoretical lens to what is happening politically around the world. Here again, we are working in Jameson's three-pronged analytical matrix, focusing on the ideological (i.e., capitalism) the

cultural (i.e., “networks”) and the current (i.e. the contemporary geopolitical crisis) (2016:432). Importantly for this project, Jameson’s model itself parallels and compliments Žižek’s theoretical paradigm involving the Universal (i.e., politico-culture), the Particular (i.e., resistance to capitalist imperatives), and the Singular (i.e., pubs) (2017:xi). Taken together these theoretical contributions provide a tool for rigorous analysis of a crucial conjuncture.

Countries including, but not limited to, Cambodia, Hungary, Libya, Poland, Russia, Somalia, Thailand, Venezuela, Brazil, Turkey, Philippines, and the United States are all “moving in a Fascist direction” (Albright 2018:246). Yes, fueled by produced fear (the order-words of terrorism, of immigration, etc.) capitalism attempts to proliferate to ever new levels of intensity. For Marx, this is the whole point of capitalism: “The circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital therefore has no limits” (1906:169-70). No limits, and no escape; correct, but there are always intensities involved as discussed above. It is in pubs where we find the thirdspace, offering a third-way, to resist capitalist exploitation. For as we will see, the pub provides its own network.

It is important to distinguish today’s expanding politics of “populism”<sup>4</sup> from a less fraught ideal. “The ultimate difference,” notes Žižek (2009:61),

between a truly radical emancipatory politics and a populist politics is that the former is active, it imposes and enforces its vision, while populism is fundamentally *re*-active, the result of a reaction to a disturbing intruder. In other words, populism remains a version of the politics of fear: it mobilizes the crowd by stoking up fear of the corrupt external agent [original emphasis].

Though written some years before the rise of Trump and Company, there is perhaps no more concise and cogent definition of Trumpism. This global rise of “populism” is correlated precisely with the destabilization (in both economic and physical senses) of populations in states largely clustered in the greater Middle East. Destabilization, which in turn proliferates, like capital itself, to ever-expanding geographies, propels the very fear and associated order-words used to re-establish capitalist control. The related crises of the US invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and perennial recession (and the capital losses and over-accumulations creating profoundly intense inequalities, as shown by Thomas Piketty (2014) in his bestselling book on the topic) have propelled global immigration to levels not seen since the sanguinary chaos of World War II.

Linking the present space of pubs to that of the past café, we can again look to Pinsker who writes of the vital cultural importance of such a locale: “Amid the enormous historical, cultural, and economic upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews migrated to large cities and found their cafes” (2018:5). Global economic upheaval, mass migration, political instability: these are once again the salient issues of the day, and once again a “thirdspace” is especially necessary. It is fear or, for Sianne Ngai (2005), “ugly feelings,” such as irritation, anxiety, and paranoia that are made to be induced by the arrival—perceived or real—of Žižek’s “external agents.” These perceptions most certainly need not be real in order to be believed and cause obedience. The great paradox of “immigration” is that the word is used to inspire fear and votes by the same capitalists who depend on immigration for the accumulation of profit. As Žižek notes, “undocumented illegal immigrants are a de facto part of our societies and even play a considerable economic role in it (as a cheap and unprotected labor force) but without being properly included in it with full rights” (2017:23). The great joke, of course, is that all of this merely masks the responsibilities of the regime of capitalism, which in turn only makes it more powerful. The supposed cure worsens the illness. Offering a respite from fear, anxiety, and so forth, the pub becomes an increasingly relevant theoretical space of resistance.

Indeed, as Žižek claims, “Capital is ultimately engaged in nothing but a desperate flight forwards in an attempt to escape its own debilitating inherent contradiction” (2014:166). Žižek furthers this line of analysis, providing a corrective to Marx, by noting that the latter’s “fundamental mistake was to conclude that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible that would fully release the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which, in capitalism—on account of its inherent obstacle (contradiction)—is again and again thwarted by socially destructive economic crises” (2014:166-7). As I’ve argued above, we cannot feasibly leave the capitalist structure (as Žižek suggests, there really is no other extant paradigm), but we can slow it down by resisting its ever-onward march of intensity. The notion that capitalism will eventually implode due to its own ruthlessness (internal contradiction) is quite plausible, *eventually*. But that hardly provides present succor for those (everyone, to lesser or greater degrees) caught in its grasp.

Unlikely is the option to resist capitalism through revolutionary means. Žižek correctly writes that, “people do not rebel when ‘things are really bad’ but when their expectations are disappointed” (2014:24). That is to say, while citizens in any of the countries mentioned by

Albright above, who are allowing increasingly fascist-leaning leaders to assume power are, on one level, registering their dissatisfaction with the status quo, the cruel irony is that this will lead only to an increase in their suffering, and an overall lowering of expectations, as Trump's doubling down on cynicism exemplifies. As expectations are lowered to ever-greater depths, the chance for true rebellion diminishes. Distraction, by mis-directing popular anger at immigrants, for example, will suffice temporarily, but the root cause, capitalism, will continue to metastasize. "It is easy to see how such a particularization of protest," Žižek writes, "helps the defenders of the existing global order: there is no threat against the global order, just specific local problems" (2014:124). More specifically, "the central task of the ruling ideology in the present crisis is to impose a narrative which will place the blame for the meltdown not on the global capitalist system *as such*, but on secondary and contingent deviations (overly lax legal regulation, the corruption of big financial institutions, and so on" [emphasis in original] (Žižek 2009:19). My point in linking the local to the global is to make salient the nexus of capitalism, the "ruling ideology," its power to be omnipresent and yet unnoticed, or masked, by the affective power of fear and its attributes. The pub provides a shelter in this storm, by allowing a networked space centered not on capital accumulation, but rather an alternative mode within the confines of the superstructure. This process is not unlike being in a car shifted to neutral—yes, you remain in the vehicle, but you're not going anywhere, and if you stay in that position long enough, it runs out of gas and remains a car, but derived of its power.

### **Round Five**

One of the marvelous things about pubs is that from Cairo Egypt to Cambridge England to Dublin Ireland to West Jerusalem to Paris France to Christchurch New Zealand to Berlin Germany to Brussels Belgium, to Amsterdam to Manhattan and Brooklyn to Austin Texas to Lincoln Nebraska to Los Angeles California, there exists a remarkable linkage in the simultaneous diversity and similarity of its inhabitants. Much like the "profoundly influential" coffee shops of old, today's pubs offer a "city's inhabitants—locals, migrants, and even visitors—an easy place" to be... "a space that can be both familiar and strange" (Pinsker 2018:3-4). While it may be true that, as Žižek claims, "The American century is over"—we must also recognize that the global architecture of human organization, capitalism, remains unhindered—"we are entering a period characterized by the formation of multiple centers of global capitalism: the US, Europe, China, possibly Latin

America, each of them representing capitalism with a specific local twist” (2010:166). Note well the local-global link: yes, difference; but yes, sameness.

Always dependent upon class distinctions, capitalism’s foundation can be envisioned as built upon three main groups. In Žižek’s paradigm of the Universal; the Particular; and the Singular discussed above, the classes are: “intellectual workers; manual workers; and outcasts [respectively]...What they all share is recourse to a particular identity as a substitute for the universal public space” (2009:147). As I have argued throughout this article, pubs offer precisely the universal space that serves to abolish these distinctions, even if only in a temporally limited context. The more time spent in pubs is more time existing in the classless potential, which equates to—whether consciously or not—acknowledging the limitations of the capitalist system. Once such an acknowledgment is made, hyper-capitalism itself immanently begins to lose its force. This formula begins to liquefy Žižek’s class distinctions. Sure, outside the pub, in the “real world,” capitalism reigns supreme. But the point remains that one can accept the “fiction” of the pub, for “even when an (ideological) fiction is clearly recognized as a fiction, it still works: ‘it is possible to use fictions in order to attain the real without believing in them’” (Žižek 2012:44). Elsewhere, Žižek (2010:70) defines this type of “fetishistic disavowal,” as “I know very well there is no special ingredient, but nonetheless believe in it (and act accordingly...this is the most elementary formula of how ideology functions today.” Yes, and there are multiple types of ideology we are dealing with here—the ideological demands of absolute hegemonic capitalism, and the ideology of passive resistance to it. Either way, whether Gordon Gekko or Frank Gallagher, the ideological tricks are the immanently identical. The potential lack of consciousness in the pub’s resistor is a key theoretical component, as Žižek notes, “it is our unconscious that does the believing;” the making real of the fiction is what’s important here, and since “this is how capitalism works,” the same can work for resistance to it (2010:132).

## **Round Six**

One of the other characteristics shared by the denizens of pubs is their agency, or lack thereof. Emily Beausoleil notes that, “Agency does not, in this light, appear as sovereignty—the ability to assert one’s will over and against what is encountered—but rather as the ability to act in response to what one encounters, to revise in light of new information and the impulses this provokes. As always-already interrelational, ‘survival in fact,’ as Edward Said and others argue, ‘is about

connections between things” (2017:305). The pub’s habitués are not unlike actors in a play directed by others, but with lines drafted by way of their own imagination. Jane Bennett contends that “Deleuze and Guattari [in *A Thousand Plateaus*] here suggest to me that thing-power, as a kind of agency, is the property of an assemblage. Thing-power materialism is a (necessarily speculative) onto-theory that presumes that matter has an inclination to make connections and form networks of relations with varying degrees of stability” (2004:354). Here again, we are dealing with this idea of an assemblage, which Žižek also helps clarify, by noting that the word itself is a “translation for Deleuze and Guattari’s *agencement*—it designates not just a state of things but above all the active process of heterogeneous things-agencies coming together and building a new agency” (2017:38). If the pub is properly analyzed within the assemblage of capitalism and it serves as a thirdspace, as discussed above, then the agency practiced by its drinkers preferring another round is both active and passive. The active component is the space provided which creates the non-virtual network of capitalist captives, who are acting passively in their captivity which in turn allows for a level of participatory (I’m here; I’m drinking) non-participation (I’m here; I’m drinking). This is a very difficult thing for capitalism to deal with as there are no police to call to suppress a protest (as at Zuccotti Park or Tahrir Square) nor is there “business being taken care of” (as at Starbucks or the cubicle). The Bartleby connection of this process should by now be clear. If, as Adorno contends (1997:31), we live in an “administered world,” then the administration—or process of capitalist control—is itself controlled, though not abolished—in the space of the pub. The “disproportion [of reality] to the powerless subject, makes it incommensurable with experience, renders reality unreal with a vengeance” (Ibid). It is in this way that a potential politico-judo move occurs whereby the pubs “powerless” use the very force of capitalism’s own hegemony against it. Where Adorno may be too dismissive of “killing time” or “escaping boredom” as being “bourgeois through and through” (2005:175), he also, in a rare misstep, misses the point. Habermas as well thought of the coffeehouse as “the bourgeois public sphere,” while also arguing that it was a major space for democratic growth (1989:30). Yes, it is a capitalistic catch insofar as one is still in a system of “unfreedom itself,” (Adorno 2005:175) and the very cause of the desire for contentment stems from the unsurpassable discontentment of capitalism, but it is not clear what a feasible alternative would be. For Adorno, even “love is followed by disgust,” (2005:176) so it is unlikely that he would be satisfied with the pub as a space for potential emancipation, but his (and mine own) dissatisfaction with it is the point. We are not dealing with utopias; we are dealing with

the theorizing of how to turn down the volume of capitalism, while not losing our humanity. The pub offers an applied site for Foucault's idea of the, contra utopia, "heterotopia," which "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1986:25). To be sure, currency circulates in the pub, but it is much less a product than an experience being purchased. Of course, anyone can be a solitary alcoholic at home or in the alley; that is hardly different than drug addicts, or PowerPoint warriors at Starbucks. The pub's role as a thirdspace, and as a heterotopia with its incompatibles (Žižek's "intellectual workers; manual workers; and outcasts") and incompatibilities (local and global; private and public) releases the potential for the third-way that I argue offers a "least worst" locus for re-imagining the real.

### **Last Call**

I have argued for what Sianne Ngai terms the "Bartlebyan aesthetic" found in pubs around the world as a potential space and means to resist the most intense demands of capitalism (2005:12). Comparing today's pub culture with the café culture of old allows us to map how a seemingly mundane thirdspace can have profound influence of politics. Exploring the concepts of order words, networks, agency, technology, and locating them within the superstructure of capitalism, we see how a particular conjuncture is produced. Finally, in applying Žižek's theoretical insights to all the above we gain coherency in the seemingly incoherent times in which we live. As Ngai suggests, "We might say that for all his passivity, Bartleby is finding a way to make himself intolerable" (2005:337). My critical move in all of this is the claim that Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to," might best be changed to "I'd prefer another" in order to make us all more intolerable to today's hyper-capitalism. It is this move that I have termed the "third-way" that may be the most practical antidote at hand for our contemporary ills. As Frank Gallagher toasted his fellow drinkers in the refuge of their favored pub, the Alibi Room, "Here's to shirking responsibilities and not working for the man" (*Shameless* 2/9).

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> After all, “Everything must be interpreted in intensity” (Deleuze G and F Guattari 2009a:158).

<sup>2</sup> Following Pinsker, throughout this article I use “space” as distinguished from “place.” Pinsker notes the difference between “‘place,’ defined as the physical setting, and ‘space,’ defined as an abstraction, the outcome of social processes by which human beings make sense of and negotiate place” (2018:317, fn28).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Confessore and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “How Russia Harvested American Rage to Reshape U.S. Politics,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html?_r=0); Scott Shane, “The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html?mcubz=3&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html?mcubz=3&_r=0).

<sup>4</sup> I recognize that this is a problematic lexical choice, as the semiotics of “populism” has largely morphed from its original emancipatory connotation, to a label that is (self)applied to political contemporaries from Donald Trump to Vladimir Putin to Viktor Orban. For populism’s historical movement, see Lawrence Goodwyn’s *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and for an explanation of the present and nearly ubiquitous misuse of the term see, inter alia, Paul Krugman, “Stop Calling Trump a Populist,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2018. Accessible at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/02/opinion/stop-calling-trump-a-populist.html>. That said, the term has been so widely applied in the context in which I am using it above, that I will do so as well for the sake of parsimony.

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