The Politics of Evasion

Burgeoning national security programs; thickening borders; WikiLeaks and Anonymous; immigrant rights rallies; the Occupy Movement; student protests; neoliberal austerity; global financial crises – these developments underscore that the fable of a hope-filled post-cold war globalization has faded away. In its place looms the prospect of states and corporations transforming a permanent war on terror into a permanent war on society. How, at the critical juncture of a post-globalization era, will policymakers and power-holders in leading states and corporations of the global North choose to pursue power and control? What possibilities and limits do activists and communities face for progressive political action to counter this power inside and outside the state?

This book is a sustained dialogue between author and political theorist, Robert Latham and Mr V, a policy analyst from a state in the global North. Mr V is sympathetic to the pursuit of justice, rights and freedom by activists and movements but also mindful of the challenges of states in pursuing security and order in the current social and political moment. He seeks a return to the progressive, welfare-oriented state associated with the twentieth century. The dialogue offers an in-depth consideration of whether this is possible and how a progressive politics might require a different approach to social organization, power and collective life.

Exploring key ideas, such as sovereignty, activism, neoliberalism, Anarchism, migration, intervention, citizenship, security, political resistance and transformation, and justice, this book will be of interest to academics and students of Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, Law, Geography, Media and Communication, and Cultural Studies.

Robert Latham teaches in the Political Science, Communication and Culture, and Social and Political Thought programs at York University in Toronto, Canada. He has published widely on topics including political economy, security, digital activism, technologies of border surveillance, critical theories of sovereignty, transnational relations, migration, and multiculturalism.
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The Politics of Evasion
A post-globalization dialogue along the edge of the state

Robert Latham
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Annotated contents

1 Security, circulation, and the limits of liberal order 1

“New forms of disruption” 1
Mr V opens the discussion abruptly with concerns about groups such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous; leading into the topics of the NSA/Snowden revelations; private versus public provision on the internet; the power of corporations on the internet; and their complicity with the national security state – considered with regard to the changes and departures these developments entail as well as an apprehension that the intensification around security since 9/11 is part of a broader transformation.

“We can label this logic, evasion” 6
These developments are set against the background of what is entailed in the operation of relatively open communication systems where groups and individuals evade limits in order to confront power; as well as the broader question of what this implies for liberal versus non-liberal orders.

“Bringing risk into the picture” 12
The forms of evasion and confrontation made possible through open systems can be thought of in terms of the problems of circulation within and across spaces and social systems, as suggested by Foucault, who also viewed these through the lens of risk. The discussion addresses the question of how systems address risk – and Deleuze’s control society concept is considered. Mr V remains concerned whether these formulations can contend with innovation that actually changes the system itself and creates conditions of risk.

“Openness and closure produce one another” 16
Latham tries to push the discussion beyond risk and safety concerns, to consider how quickly a system becomes complicated that might be considered open; where even within an open system closure is required; where distinct social realms and spaces within the system get demarcated; and where, if there are no places to transfer between, forms of openness and movement that are possible would have no meaning in the first place. Mr V explains that this all makes finding security strategies to deal with circulation all the more imperative.
“Deepening security and the possibilities of protest” 18
Mr V further underscores that he is concerned not just with mobility in systems, but how they are vulnerable to being altered through intervention as a form of disruptive confrontation (for example, by hackers). These possibilities and tensions are put in historical context, specifically with regard to the complexities of global security and protest in relation to the formation of communication, public sphere, and commercial infrastructures across the centuries.

“It’s the nature of the target that matters” 22
The schizophrenic nature of US policy toward digital activism is discussed with regard to what is seen as acceptable and safe or unacceptable and threatening. Comparison to earlier forms of activism is made with the introduction by Mr V of the notion that today there is a sort of transience, where “threats can come not only from anywhere, or from anybody, but also in forms not yet known or from sources you otherwise might trust.”

“Linking anonymity and liberalism” 25
Latham argues, to a skeptical Mr V, that transience and “coming out of nowhere” is linked to anonymity and ultimately to openness and liberal order. The implications are explored, including how Anonymous and related practice can be placed on the plane of liberal logics along with mass surveillance and the logics of control societies.

“Disorder as an evasive tactic” 30
After reiterating how openness is an essential part of liberal logics and reconsidering arguments about the attempt to find a balance between liberty and security, Mr V and Latham engage the notion that autonomous sites of resistance and media are forced to practice what Mr V calls a sort of self-evasion, a self-limiting practice resulting from the tensions between liberalism’s characteristics of openness and closure. Latham brings up the question of whether forms and practices of disorder are important aspects of evasion.

“No pure, angelic form of liberalism” 34
The discussion turns to the way the spaces liberalism creates for openness, agency, and autonomy can equally create closeness and repression. The necessity for evasion in this context is considered, along with the question of what it means to attempt to advance openness in the face of increasing security and control. Latham suggests that to probe deeper it is necessary to put the state as a political form in question.

2 Resistance, time, and the state in question 39
“Between permanence and temporariness” 39
Picking up, from where the last discussion ended, on the necessity of putting the state in question as a political form, the notion of political time is introduced. More specifically, consideration is given to the ways that the state elevates itself to the status of a permanent political form; and has the power to pronounce on what else is
temporary or permanent. Latham argues this distinction – and temporality more generally – is an important consideration when determining the legitimacy of the state. Mr V defends the value of state-established permanence regarding justice, rights, and citizenship.

“The enduring and the transient” 45
How widespread the contrast of temporariness and permanence is within Western modernity is discussed. Latham explains the precarious nature of temporariness and defends the need to push beyond it, but not by recourse to state-based permanence; while Mr V maintains that progressive change can come from moving within the context of permanence to improve the enduring frameworks of the state. Consideration is given to groups such as migrants and First Nations in relation to settled citizenry and whether the types of benefits permanence ostensibly offers can be obtained without reliance on a state taken to be permanent.

“A standpoint from which to question the state” 54
It is established by both Latham and Mr V that the state as a force for permanence has a uniquely long history and has evolved many practices, customs, and rules for producing permanence; along with the power to pronounce on the permanence and temporariness of organizations and practices across social and political life. Even corporations, Mr V argues, do not possess this power. Discussion turns to the question of what it might mean to put the state and its permanence in question, specifically through perspectives such as Anarchism. Latham points to how movements like Anarchism are forced to operate in this world of permanence and temporariness and, more generally, face dilemmas around how to sustain gains in support and organization.

“The melting of all that is solid” 60
The state, Latham contends, may not be as unique as first thought as a producer of both permanence and temporariness. Institutions such as private property and forces associated with globalization also exhibit this duality. Consideration is given to the relationship between these broader global – and historical - contexts and the state. Mr V suggests that more fluid and transitory contexts explored by postmoderns may, counter-intuitively, open up the possibility of restoring a progressive, just state. Latham reminds Mr V that within those broader contexts is located the basis for hyper-security and the neoliberal state.

“Alongside permanence is the possibility of non-permanence” 66
Building on the historical contexts laid out in the previous section exploring the establishment of permanence and temporariness, Latham tries to move the discussion outside of the binary of permanent and temporary, seeking to explore its inter-subjective and contingent nature; where permanence can be seen as only a claim, however powerful, which is subject to being revoked and retrenched, leaving Mr V’s permanent justice at best vulnerable. Meanwhile, Mr V insists on the rightful dominance of the state as setting the terms for political time and Latham points to the way others senses of time might matter for political life and putting the state in question.
“Creating new meanings and framings” 72
In this concluding section the discussion touches on the political issues associated with permanence in an attempt to challenge notions of time and history that underpin the supposedly concrete nature of the state. Latham brings up relevant critical thought – such as Nietzsche’s concept of the untimely, Walter Benjamin’s “dialectical reversal,” Deleuze and Guattari’s “lines of flight,” and Alain Badiou’s “event” – in an attempt to explore ways to organize political time that are alternatives to the state. Mr V insists these alternatives have to have real traction, while Latham counters that gaining greater purchase on the value of alternatives necessitates further discussion of the relationship between political space and the state, which they agree to address next time.

3 Neoliberalism, hyper-security, and the bounding of political life 79
“The desirability of publicness” 79
Mr V returns in this meeting concerned with making sure the question of the public realm and authority is made central in any consideration of political space and alternatives. After an exchange on the merits and drawbacks of arguments in the 1990s about the “retreat of the state,” Latham addresses V’s concerns regarding publicness and argues that the possibilities and limits of public authority are shaped by how the state is present and absent in social space (or “society”). How this also relates to the temporariness and permanence of the state – considered in the last meeting (Chapter 2) - is also discussed.

“The internal/external divide” 85
The question of publicness and authority is considered in relation to the divide between the domestic and international realms. Latham insists that there are far more commonalities in what states do across the domestic/international divide than typically assumed; and that gaining some insight into these commonalities can aid our understanding of the dwindling public realm and intensification of security. Mr V asserts there are very important differences between the domestic and international realm, and this difference holds out promise for the remaking of the public-oriented commonwealth.

“A range of interventions and forms of presence” 90
Continuing with the domestic/international realm theme, Latham contends that one way in to understand both the differences and commonalities between these realms is to focus on what states do or don’t do – how they are present and absent – in social spaces (both inside and outside of national borders). This can be seen as relevant to states in both the global North and South – a claim that troubles Mr V. The role of state presence in constituting the public realm is considered. Of particular concern is the way that, despite publicness, state presence can be very narrow, bounded, and vulnerable to withdrawal. Based on observations about presence and absence, the connections between security and neoliberalism are discussed.
“Looking at the interspatial logics of deployment” 98
Pursuing these connections further, Latham argues, can be aided by focusing on the political infrastructure of the state that makes its presence and absence possible. More specifically, the state is present through the way its agencies, experts, forces, and representatives are deployed in local contexts. These deployments are interspatial in that they involve sending pieces or fragments of an organization from a headquarters or center to another space such as a local community. In this light the potential narrowness and tentativeness (temporariness) of state presence is more visible – along with the links to neoliberalism, hyper-security, and practices of evasion. Mr V, in contrast, argues that such an approach is reductive and overlooks the reality of the national public realm, along with the possibilities of strengthening it against tendencies toward abandonment of broad commitments to the public good.

“What sort of power comes along with evasion?” 104
Mr V charges that the question of power is missing here, which prompts a discussion of the notion of power set against the context, and evasion and deployments as considered in the previous section. Latham highlights how power, conceived in negative terms, is not just a matter of control over subjects, but a matter of channeling and bounding where people, discourses, and resources are injected into a contained situation for the purposes of reinforcing the flexible and adaptable control mechanisms of neoliberalism.

“The state is a deployment machine” 111
In this concluding section Mr V reasserts that there is nothing inevitable about negative power or the neoliberal and anti-public aspects of deployments; nor even that societies are stuck with a political world shaped by deployments. Latham agrees, but also emphasizes that we cannot underestimate the implications of the impact of states and corporations distributing their presence, entrenching their power, and ultimately channeling social and political life in ways that empty and level out the so-called democratic project. They agree to focus next time they meet on alternatives that might exist for challenging and transforming these conditions.

4 Toward a progressive politics of evasion 118
“Lapsing into a defeatism” 118
In this first section we are re-introduced to the debates surrounding the logic of deployment from the previous meeting. Mr V suggests it might be possible for progressive forces to take control of deployments and use them for the public good. He also argues this potential strategy should be complemented by the work of progressive political networks – national and transnational – and communities and activists congregating in the public square. Latham counters that in the midst of a world of deployments this hope may be displaced.
“Evading deployments” 124
Latham suggests that one way forward may be to evade deployments and their influences. Whereas, Mr V is skeptical that, without transforming the entire social and political system, this can succeed. Mr V insists that control of the political center, the state, is crucial, which in turn is met with skepticism from Latham based on repeated failures of progressive politics in the face of the considerable organizational presence and force of neoliberal capitalism and state hyper-security. Both agree to return to the key conditions that they believe should be kept in mind in identifying alternatives. They discuss the access the forces of neoliberalism and security have to our social and political worlds and how this underlies the abandonment of public and collective life and its replacement with debt, privatization, surveillance, and violence. The section ends with Latham proposing that they probe the question of whether groups and communities get somewhere by evading this access; and with Mr V claiming this leads either to age-old utopian escapist hopes or to protectionism.

“A progressive politics of evasion” 128
The discussion turns to whether thinking in terms of the channels – linked previously to deployments – is useful for this strategy of evasion. Latham introduces the concept of “re-collective passage,” to capture this; with passage understood as the social and political pathways leading away, evading in progressive ways, from structures of power (of states and capital) and opening up possibilities for fashioning alternatives. This is distinguished from Deleuze and Guattari’s “lines of flight.” The term “re-collective” is meant to convey the possibilities of fashioning new collective social forms out of various social histories and resources. Comparisons are made to terms such as “public” and “multitude.” Mr V worries that these terms and forms are just an application of spatial labels to familiar notions of resistance and the pursuit of autonomy.

“Entering a trajectory of transformation” 133
The attempt, by Latham, to defend the concept of re-collective passage prompts him – after criticism from Mr V that there’s little new here – to distinguish it from more familiar concepts of grass-roots activism, social movements, and prefiguration. More broadly, he argues there is a commonality among those forms of activism – even across the political spectrum – which re-collective passage unites. Consideration is given to the scale of passage, with Latham arguing that it is best to see passage operating at a meso-scale – standing between the micro-scale of individuals and small groups and the macro-scale of whole societies or entire social formations. At the meso-level there is opportunity to transform how societies are organized (such as its borders and forms of work). Mr V is concerned that this abandonment of the macro is yet another bracketing of the political center and the possibilities that electoral politics hold out as a progressive force.

“Leave it up to the people” 138
Mr V continues expressing unease with what Latham is suggesting; especially the notion that passage would be open-ended as to the strategies and tactics chosen by
collectivities. He, more generally, pushes Latham to clarify what Mr V sees as a theoretical black hole of popular self-determination and to specify tangible ways that re-collective passage can and is being used by populations on both sides of the political spectrum to circumvent and/or challenge the structures of power. Latham addresses this through examples like community banking which seeks to deflect the flow of revenues from – and generally evade – financial centers like Wall Street in order to build alternative, local public financial institutions.

“What kind of new collectivities are in play here?” 143

Despite these explanations Mr V is troubled by a sense that Latham is going in circles and offering no real ways forward for transformation, even in such areas as the challenging of permanence which had been of great concern to Latham in previous discussion. Latham defends passage by pointing to how these are open efforts that are not operating within the permanence framing of the state. The conversation also addresses scale-up issues: how one moves from distinct passages to wider macro-social and political transformation, which Mr V. contends rests on a familiar progressive hope for critical mass and widespread mobilization. Latham suggests there are instances of growth and the spread of new forms and political contestation as seen even in late 1980s Eastern Europe. They also discuss more contemporary and quite different examples, disputing whether even to include the attempt to found the non-state electronic currency Bitcoin. The section ends with reflection on what Mr V takes to be the quite real possibility that these passages are very vulnerable to being captured by state and corporate interests.

“Closure is needed to create passages” 148

Taking up further the issue of vulnerability, the discussion addresses what can be done to limit it and returns to the theme of anonymity and its relation to passage and the possibilities of evading capture. Latham argues that rather than setting anonymity against identity in re-collective passage, it is better to see the tension between anonymity and established identities and histories in far more complex ways; otherwise they might restrict the possibilities of fashioning new social and political forms. Mr V points to how this, problematically, allows for a wide range of political orientations from Left to Right. He is concerned that the open-endedness of re-collective passage does not contend with the very different Left and Right (e.g. Libertarian) politics that might be drawn up into a passage. Mr V also suspects that the shielding aspect of passages compromises their relationship to the public realm and limits access to public goods in potentially exclusionary ways. Latham addresses this issue through the example of squatters’ movements (regarding access to housing). Mr V further challenges Latham by contending that the whole approach is too strategic and does not address the value of principles as realized in human rights.

“The battle within societies over various forms of collectivity can’t be avoided” 152

The question of rights and strategy is taken up in greater detail, with Latham arguing that they can operate in tandem and Mr V arguing that this thinking can lead to
Annotated contents

undesirable political outcomes such as domination by the religious Right or new meso-level changes like closing borders to migrants. Latham claims that conflict over collective life is a key site of struggle for the Left and Right, and the attempt to prevent it means making social and political life closed to new ways of organizing it. He also draws on Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution to suggest that some change only reinforces existing order and does not count as re-collective passage. Mr V insists that this is too risky and that macro principles are required to distinguish progressive from regressive forces. The example of the movement for the Palestinian right of return is raised by Latham as an example of how progressive and regressive forces can be distinguished through the concept of passage.

“Making passage and re-collectivity constitutional logics of the state” 157
In this concluding section, Mr V is pushing Latham for tangible “takeaways” and inroads to large-scale changes. Issues taken up include the place of violence in passage, large-scale revolution, and the relationship between radical alternatives and persisting structures of power. Whereas Mr V sees continued commitments to Anarchistic thinking in Latham’s conclusions, Latham counters that we can work with both Anarchism and Statism, and obtain inspiration from Gramsci to look to how passage and re-collectivity can become logics that even help organize future forms of the state – on terms that would be quite different than any state we are aware of now; a sort of re-collective state that internalizes passage and re-collectivity.
This is a work of political imagination. The character Mr V is a fictitious composite of numerous encounters the author has had across many years and is ultimately the product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
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I was not really sure why he chose to contact me and I certainly did not trust the voice on the line when I received the initial phone call out of the blue, as I sat in the office I was assigned while visiting for a semester at a US university. In my home university office I do get calls sometimes from a government office staffer seeking my participation in some policy-outreach effort or asking me to attend some event where a high government official will typically explain (or, rather, justify) a new policy. And there has been the odd caller, here or there, claiming they had proof say that the Chinese were secretly taking over the government, wanting me to endorse such a view. I am polite but get off as quickly as possible.

This call was different. He was actually not pitching something to me but interested in some of my ideas. He said he worked for the US government, dealing with security. Naturally, I was flattered by his mention of a work or two I had written. What academic doesn’t crave such attention? When it comes it is especially meaningful since I, like many academics who do not write policy-oriented work, assume my writings are wholly ignored, if not scorned, by the official world (though of course we – typically secretly – hope otherwise).

His tone had a tinge of sociability to it as well and somehow his voice was familiar. He said he was struggling with some policy issues bearing on the relationship between security, government power, popular protest, and changing forms of domestic and global politics. Somehow, some of my ideas were relevant. He asked that we meet face to face to discuss how I might help. I was drawn in like a rapid breath.

We met in a fairly upscale and crowded cafe where I could see that our presence and lingering would not be much noticed amidst a wide assortment of customers. As soon as I approached the man in a green sweater, as instructed, I instantly realized why the voice was so familiar. He was graduate student studying at another institution than my own but whom I had come to know when he was visiting in town to conduct research for his Ph.D. thesis. I recall that he was well trained in the social sciences, aware of many of the trends in contemporary social and political thought of the recent past, and could not only engage with thinkers that are conventional (such as Isaiah Berlin) but also those that are less conventional (such as Michel Foucault). We became familiar with one another because of my participation in a faculty-student seminar series, which he joined on an unofficial,
informal basis (allowed by the organizers to be present, I suspect, because of his charm and insightfulness). Across that year we had the opportunity to spend time after the seminar sessions discussing my work and his, exploring the issues and questions that motivated us both.

But this recognition and history simultaneously deflated and pleased me. I was disappointed that this was not someone who came upon my work somehow and was impressed. However, I was also delighted to see my exchanges with a bright student had some lasting effect and even influence – enough so that he bothered to look into the ideas I struggled with long after he left my orbit. I was also happy to see that he had gone on to an important position, even if it was in the government as opposed to a university or a non-profit.

I felt like I was restarting the relationship with ease, the way I sometimes do with old friends I have not seen for years but with whom I am able to automatically return to familiar banter as though our time apart was mere weeks. He told me that he had wanted to get together to ask whether I would be willing to meet with him regularly across the next few weeks to deliberate over a range of issues bearing on the changing nature of state power and societies within and across national borders. Despite his being a former student I was skeptical and frankly suspicious as to what he – I will call him Mr V – might really want from me and from such an endeavor. All sorts of nonsense crossed my mind. Perhaps someone had put him up to it? But why bother? What was at stake for the wider world of power in engaging with me? Not much I figured. I was well aware that officials, especially at the higher-level, mid-career stage, are under considerable time constraints, with little flexibility well into the evening hours. Meeting time was very scarce.

When I probed him gently and obliquely along these lines Mr V quickly surmised that I was wary and in need of some persuasion. He said that he was at a point in his personal and professional life where he felt the urge for a sort of mini-sabbatical, knowing full well that a real sabbatical would be career suicide right now. The personal side was not about seeking a rest but pursuing some meaningful intellectual realignment. He wanted to get back to thinking critically, at a distance, about many of the weighty issues he had been confronting. He also felt he had lost touch with many of the intellectual impulses and motivations that had got him, in the first place, into political studies and now practice. As a former interlocutor who had treated him as though he was an equal, and for whom he felt some intellectual affinity, I was the person with whom he thought he could most easily re-enter intellectual discussion. Also, he thought the foundation of work I had done over the years at least touched on some of the issues he was grappling with.

The professional factor driving this desired encounter, I was informed, was rooted in his increasing dissatisfaction with what he perceived to be a growing tension between states and societies and a deepening cynicism among officials about any aspirations after the cold war ended regarding strengthening democracy and human rights, fighting inequality, and poverty, or increasing wellbeing among the marginalized. He said he had been thinking of contacting me for a few years now but just could not bring himself to actually do it. The developments of 2011 and 2012 around the so-called Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, WikiLeaks, street
protests against austerity, but also the new national security laws legalizing expanded forms of surveillance and detainment, finally inspired him to ultimately bother to try to take a bit of time to think a few things through. From what I could surmise at the time, Mr V seemed to be propelled into our adventure by a desire to gain some clarity about how to begin to align changes in the relations between states, corporate power, and societies, with some hope for advancing democracy, rights, and social justice. I think the best way to understand his standpoint is as someone both sympathetic to the pursuit of justice, rights, and freedom by progressive activists and movements and mindful of what he understands to be the challenges of states in pursuing security and order in the current social and political moment.

I think he wanted to arrive at some new plateau where the tensions, if not contradictions, at play in the early twenty-first century would be seen to begin to decrease. I leave it to the reader to decide if this objective was approached and whether it is a worthwhile one (after all, plateaus can be deadening).

He proposed that we meet once a week for four weeks, for very long afternoon coffees. He asked that I lead the discussion and treat our meetings as though they were a retreat of sorts, where we could raise issues we were concerned about and ask questions of one another about our thoughts and assumptions. I was not to worry about hitting any right notes and themes he might have in mind — though he made clear he would be bringing them to the table. He claimed he knew enough about me to know even if he did not like where I might take things that and he would have no problem working through his concerns, based on whatever I might throw his way. I wasn’t sure he did know me enough, especially my more recent thinking; and, in any event, what I might argue in discussion would exceed anything I might have published in standard scholarly contexts.

The decision to turn our discussions into a published book stems from my insistence that the exchange between us addresses issues in ways that might be of value to a body of readers. Mr V agreed with that assessment and thought in the end that some sort of record of his concerns would be desirable, given he is usually limited to governmental internal memos and reports. He readily acknowledged that any attempt at writing his own book would mean he could not express himself freely.

What follows represents my attempt to convey the substance of our discussions. I have done my best in the chapters of this book to bring our discussion back to life through as accurate a transcription as possible. References and notes have been added where either an author or a work entered the dialogue or I thought it would be useful to readers to refer to a relevant source or scholarly work. I electronically recorded our conversations with my cell phone, but only after having agreed to destroy them after a designated time and never share the recordings in any form or context. As to the boundaries of the discussion, we agreed mostly to limit discussion of specific current or planned policies, not only because they may help identify Mr V, but also because the emphasis has been put on the political, theoretical, and philosophical dimensions of the current political juncture as we understand it rather than on revealing secret, non-public developments inside the state.
We spoke briefly by phone some time after our last meeting about whether to transcribe the conversations, as accurately as possible word for word. We also explored other possibilities: I could convey the various points made in a first person account; or describe the discussions in a more general way; or even take some other expository approach. We agreed that the transcription had a few advantages. First, it holds out much greater potential for readers to take both sides – Mr V’s, and mine – seriously and potentially approach both sympathetically. In this way V’s viewpoint will not be mediated by my words and depictions and V’s voice can be sustained across the entire book. Also, there is no indoctrination, natural superiority, or student-teacher relationship. Second, it allows for potential insight into how unsettled and even tenuous arguments can be. As I reviewed the transcript I noticed that there was a great deal of uncertainty across the entire discussion. I even saw how upended I became through the engagement with V. He pushed me toward a sort of amalgam of my more Anarchist leanings with his patently statist orientation. Writing up a description of the discussion risked seeking resolution of points – if anything in my favor and back to some purer ideological standpoint. This indeterminacy is also consistent with what is discussed in Chapter 4 regarding the pursuit of contestable paths out from neoliberalism and hyper-security. Finally, the transcribed discussion allows readers to judge whether our exchange was ultimately a failure in addressing and satisfying Mr V’s pursuit of answers. In the spirit of learning from mistakes the discussions reveal, repeatedly, the limits of questions and issues as well as the potential.

As I thought about these factors in favor of transcription, I recalled some of the excellent work of Mikhail Bakhtin on the advantages of a dialogic approach in his works *The Dialogical Imagination* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. A dialogic approach opens the way for more than one distinct voice, perspective, or consciousness. Dialogue allows, potentially, for as direct a presence of these multiple individual beings as possible in written form, and as little of a mediating master expositor as possible. As a result, there is the possibility of a voice speaking through the text that is other than the author’s, despite the author’s ultimately privileged position of power over what is written. In dialogue the relationship and tensions between voices can become as central as any particular concept or object discussed or argument made. In addition, as the conflict between voices is communicated in the text there is at least the possibility that the text will not ultimately resolve in the author’s favor. Consistent with that, Bakhtin contended that dialogue makes it possible for incommensurate exchange and mutually contestable positions to potentially be expressed. In contrast, the monologic approach organized around a total, singular, textual voice, for Bakhtin, represented that of the unitary, hierarchical authority – which runs contrary to the spirit of the encounter between Mr V and me.

What results in my view is an exchange, where on one side is my own critical, post-statist, anti-capitalist perspective informed by a range of theorists associated with post-structuralism, Marxism, and post-Marxism from Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari to Antonio Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre, and David Harvey. On the other side is Mr V’s commitment to seek a
return to a state in a progressive form, tied to the development of social democracy across the twentieth century with its emphasis on social rights and a robust public realm associated with thinkers such as T.H. Marshall and Karl Polanyi. The exchange is set in the context of our current post-globalization moment and the emergence of what can really be thought of as a new seeping and permeating repression throughout society. Issues addressed range from digital activism, sovereignty, and borders to transnationalism, social control, political resistance, and intervention in social and political life.

I am convinced the dialogue offers a read on how people living in liberal capitalist states might – or might not – think through the implications of changing practices and policies around surveillance, detention, political disruption, intervention, pre-emption, and neoliberalization as a departure from more traditional twentieth-century conceptions of the liberal state: anchored, as are so many things, in concepts of the nation, citizenship, the border, effective intervention, and human rights.

While this will become clear from the first chapter onward, I can say here that Mr V entered our discussions worried. As he sees it, state officials, corporate leaders, activists, communities, and even seemingly apolitical individuals across North America and Europe – the part of the world he knows best – are making choices about pursuing security, configuring political order, struggling for justice and rights, seeking wellbeing, as well as remaining inactive and disengaged. Mr V has been concerned that the tensions and incompatibilities across these choices, and in relation to the broader transforming global context, can produce toxic political outcomes.

The initial traces of those outcomes Mr V finds in burgeoning national security programs; thickening borders; WikiLeaks, Anonymous, fears of an open internet; immigrant rights rallies; Occupy movements; student protests; global financial crises – these he held to be signals that the dream of an inevitable march toward a tidy, post-cold war globalization, comfortably anchored in a framework of liberal order, is now left behind.

This, to a degree, flows from the now widespread recognition that the standard globalization story is now patently revealed as the fable it always was. One in which the all too comfortable setting of rising transnationalism, expanding transborder flows, softening sovereignty, and social and political homogenization with a tinge of multiculturalism was to unfold against the background of a slowly transfiguring but stable (liberal) nation-state model inherited from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In its place looms the possibility of states and corporations involved in the permeating, irruptive repression mentioned above, as the war on terror becomes recognized as being a war on societies.

The discussion assumes that as in any historical moment, significant perils and possibilities both exist. The risks are that the liberal state through techniques and practices increasingly at hand, from surveillance to social manipulation and violence, can continue to morph, in partnership with corporations, in previously unanticipated ways into menacing forms. But the possibilities are that progressive peoples and groups can exploit social, organizational, and technical openings and
resources to fashion more just orderings of political and social life within, across, and perhaps beyond the state. As is so often the case, these perils and possibilities are very much interrelated and often in opposition – as policies and actions in one realm provoke counter-actions in the other.

Mr V kept emphasizing the benefits of returning to the progressive state. Whereas for me the one common theme that I came to emphasize as my thought took shape across the issues and topics we discussed it is how important evasion is, even to the very possibility of confrontation. It is all too easy to overlook how freedom to confront and oppose state organs – or more broadly to contend with the structures of power that shape contemporary life – rests on avoidance, escape, and elusion. This close connection between evasion and confrontation is not paradoxical in my view: not only does a world of increasing surveillance and control raise the value and seeming necessity of evasion. More fundamentally, as examples such as the historically vivid Underground Railroad in the US reinforce, the very possibility of freedom, resistance and confrontation, human mobility, and self-determination assumes being in some “other place” (a retreat, an in-between space, at some distance away), from which the very choice about confrontation can be made and perhaps even where alternatives can be devised or pursued. As I observe the events in Greece after the election of Syriza, well after my encounter with Mr V took place, I have only come to appreciate how fragile and difficult it is to get to and sustain such an other place.

Alas, I think there is a double movement afoot, in that the state and capital also embrace the politics of evasion, as they limit and fragment their presence whether it is in what are often called neoliberal policies, elusive security practices, secrecy, concealment, or sheer avoidance. The title of the book, *Politics of Evasion*, was chosen because the discussion kept coming back, in my view, to address in various ways whether approaches to and forms of power were becoming more evasive and with what implications, both desired and dreaded.
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When we came together in our first meeting I was not sure how to start or even if Mr V was to be the initiator. I had come with a somewhat innocent question just to start things off about what he might think is most important regarding the political and social life he thinks is disappearing in the current environment of neoliberalism and heightening security. I was thus somewhat surprised when, after a few minutes of back-and-forth about our current personal lives, Mr V jumped right into a discussion of the internet and security, rather than a more general question. He mentioned some fairly recent news items about the relationship between corporations and activists on the internet. I knew he was involved in some of the policy development in this area. Although surprised, I was not displeased since I had always wondered what some of the thinking might be behind the news headlines and official public statements over the last few years, where we have seen Edward Snowden labeled a traitor, WikiLeaks discussed by the US as an “enemy of the state,” and Anonymous treated along the same continuum as cyberterrorists.\footnote{A discussion of the possibility of this designation is available at “Exposed: U.S. may have designated Julian Assange and WikiLeaks an ‘enemy of the state’,” September 27, 2012. Available at: www.democracynow.org/2012/9/27/exposed_us_may_have_designated_julian (accessed October 4, 2012).}

I also recall thinking in the back of my mind that this topic opened up onto a few important questions about the current political moment that might help us get our discussions started – especially since it related to deepening security practices associated with increasing surveillance.

“New forms of disruption”

MR V: I want to get your take on something I’ve been puzzling over. I assume that given your interest in security and the internet, you noticed how corporations were enlisted in the so-called battle against the basically unprecedented actions of WikiLeaks and Anonymous. It was all over the news in late 2010. Both Facebook and Twitter blocked the accounts and pages associated with Anonymous and what they called their Operation Payback campaign. Anonymous was upset about the
suspension of funding streams for WikiLeaks. They were trying to attack the companies carrying out the funding cut-off. I mean PayPal and MasterCard.\textsuperscript{2} It didn’t take long for Google to enter the fray. Even though they have been known to disapprove actions that appear to limit users’ access to accounts and the net, they banned a Google+ account associated with Anonymous. Google justified this on the grounds that it violated a Google+ policy that restricts the use of false names and accounts for groups or organizations.\textsuperscript{3}

LATHAM: I certainly followed this story. One thing that struck me was how much inconsistency was flowing around. I found it funny that given the ethos of Anonymous they had a page on Facebook, a platform that puts so much emphasis on members using their “true,” single identity in as transparent as manner as possible – and this has been stressed quite emphatically by Marc Zuckerberg.\textsuperscript{4} In any event, I don’t know if you are trying to emphasize corporate complicity with state security but if you are I would go further here – and you may be uncomfortable talking about this in the current climate – but the Snowden revelations certainly point to deep complicity. All those companies from AT&T and Microsoft to Google were handing over to the National Security Agency (NSA) user data and access to their servers and networks.\textsuperscript{5}

MR V: I don’t think it’s just a matter of complicity. Of course it’s very sensible to cooperate with a government that can make life very difficult for any corporation, and the big ones most of all. I would also note that these firms also have customer preferences in mind. So if there is, post-Snowden, more demand for greater privacy or anonymity from the customer base you can bet they will find ways to accommodate that at least on some symbolic terms. But my sense is that casting the matter this way makes it seem as though the corporations are just reacting to pressure whether it’s from the government or consumers. That is perhaps a view that is convenient for them. These firms have their own views about what the


current internet universe should look like and what they might view as obnoxious and unacceptable forms and styles of collective action that also happen to displease the state security establishment.

LATHAM: You might be able to just chalk this up to both the state and the corporations seeing the world from the same angle based on their interests in maintaining a political and economic order that’s to their liking?

MR V: But I think by doing so we would be missing what I believe is a deeper and more important trend that I just have not had time to evaluate – and it’s why I’ve raised this issue. I just feel there is a politics of disruption on the internet that is becoming more intense – at least compared to the earlier generation of online mobilization. Private, commercial communication platforms, and not just state security agencies, are forced to contend with it. I’ve been watching how these new forms of disruption are provoking some fairly extreme views from officials about what is necessary in terms of expanding national security actions regarding the internet. When I look at that in combination with the whole intensification of security policies around anti-terrorism – well it’s really made me want to step back and think about if we are seeing some sort of wider more fundamental changes in what states are doing, what they might be becoming – to say nothing of what is occurring with corporations. To be frank, I had hoped the internet could have avoided the deepening security and commercialization that seems to infect so much these days. That somehow we could have found a way to make sure we could minimize threats tied to the internet and keep things open, so that the internet could become a venue for open, wide-ranging discussions about the post-9/11 world we face. But it was a false hope. I must admit I am torn between feeling that these new forms of disruption are gasoline on the fire and feeling they’re just caught up in a longer-term intensification of security.

LATHAM: I am sympathetic to some of your fears. And I also think it’s worthwhile discussing what might be going on in the digital world in political terms. It is arguable whether it reveals more than a portion of the broader developments in and around state and corporate power. But since it’s a realm that’s still very much in its early days, so to speak, maybe it’s a good place to start to get a sense of trends. I mean they might be more visible to us.

MR V: Even if we can argue forever over the so-called impact of digital communications there is no denying its prominence in most every aspect of our lives. As someone who has worked both on security and digital communications I can’t imagine you don’t agree with this.

LATHAM: Sure I do agree. But I just don’t know how far we can get in understanding any broader transformations afoot. Given how relatively new the realm is, there are still lots of inconsistencies. For instance, it struck me that the Pentagon, in a 2008 report, clearly stated that WikiLeaks is a danger to the US military, on par with terrorists; and yet Secretary of Defense Gates said no real
ultimate harm was done. The same double step emerged recently around the NSA’s attempt to get an official listing of Anonymous as a terrorist group and to pursue anyone who has any remote connection to them... and that would include people in the Occupy Movement. And yet I recall that the NSA was rebuffed by the White House, which felt this would put in place too heavy a set of restrictions and too much surveillance, all of which they saw as deeply political in nature.

MR V: Unfortunately this double step as you put it may be on the wane. Obama has done little to really counter the extensive NSA surveillance revealed by Snowden. And while Congress is showing some movement – and there is still potential in the courts – I am skeptical how far any of this will go – especially with most of the US public putting security first.

LATHAM: Still, the reactions from the mainstream media, from foreign leaders and foreign publics, even the UN... they show that what Snowden revealed is hardly to be taken for granted as business as usual. There is no shortage of apparent inconsistencies across the whole range of developments and events you are pointing to – and not just in the US. China, interestingly enough, insisted that platforms like Google+ do all they can to ensure that real identities are tied to all its users. But at the same time China doesn’t want Facebook available for Chinese use. I find this, on the surface, odd because of the big deal Facebook makes about true identities. Supposedly, of course, China is upset with how Facebook has been used, along with YouTube and other social media, to send information about the unrest and violence in Xinxiang in 2009. I also find it inconsistent that after all the attention the US state gave over the last decade to issues involving internet restrictions imposed by states such as China, we can all see clearly now that US officials were really concerned with the data and access digital media corporations like Google offer them to pursue their understanding of security. I can only guess that, given the way that US Homeland Security agencies

7 We shall have to see how this unfolds as the national security organizations across the board increasingly prioritize cyber threats.
8 The limited ramifications are discussed in Daniel Byman and Benjamin Wittes, “Reforming the NSA: how to spy after Snowden” Foreign Affairs 93 (3) (May-June 2014), pp. 127–138.
have been seeking data from corporations, the lack of attention to this issue before Snowden appeared on the scene must have been viewed as quite a good thing.¹²

MR V: The continued study of state restrictions worldwide is urgent. And clearly they fit within our typical American assumptions that it’s a good thing to expand freedom and weaken dictators we don’t like. Putting aside the data mining requests you mention – and which can be compared to the longer history of wiretapping – we have no ready models for assessing the significance of the fact that commercial internet platforms are not just supplying journalistic and media content; they are the predominant means of social communication. What we have are corporations that are now able to make decisions and do something about politically controversial material and activity that is produced by any individual or group, not just an editor or journalist. In some cases they are asked to do this, as was seen with India requesting of Facebook that it restrict content;¹³ in others cases like Anonymous it’s because the corporations themselves see violations of their policies or feel what is in play is simply objectionable material.

_I jerked my upper body back suddenly, expressing frustration. Mr V seemed puzzled by this. I then said:_

But surely you can’t mean it’s business as usual – a not great history to start with; with surveillance going back at least a century, whether it surveilling Anarchists, Germans, or what was deemed health threats.¹⁴ What do you think is different today?

MR V: The difference, I believe, is nothing that we have not discussed already. But for me it’s not just about the much talked of new surveillance capabilities, where the magnitude of what can be vacuumed up is unprecedented. I’m more concerned with how in the current configuration what we have are internet platforms, made available by corporations from Facebook to Google or even network access provided by Comcast or AT&T, that are not just being used for surveillance; they’re being used to organize for disruption, to protest, to produce content and even create new communication and media structures as we’ve seen with WikiLeaks.

LATHAM: Of course, in the past a radical political party, or union, or activist group used commercial newspapers to advertise a meeting or the results of one,

¹² A recent example of this is profiled in the article, David Kravets, “Microsoft, too, says FBI secretly surveilling its customers,” _Wired_, March 21, 2013. Available at: http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2013/03/microsoft-nsl-revelation/ (accessed April 2, 2013).


which, by the way, often led in the US to restrictions and commercial censorship.15 And let’s not forget that activists have used phones owned by Bell to communicate.

MR V: But in that case, you are dealing with a relatively one dimensional medium for disseminating the policies and programs of a single organization dedicated to reaching the rank and file; likely also recruiting new members, influencing broader political opinion, or planning a meeting and strategy. This is not the same as the creation of content and activist platforms like InterOccupy.net; or the large-scale discussions in real time; or the mass message dissemination we are witnessing today. We now even have the creation of a digital currency Bitcoin seemingly out of nowhere that presents itself as an alternative to national currency structures.

LATHAM: So while you are OK with polite discussion on existing platforms you see a real problem with the access activists have to communication tools that are made available by corporations when they risk being used in disruptive ways? But surely you don’t think that that access should be so curtailed to make disruption impossible; as in when there’s a surveillance so extensive that the ability to disrupt, to surprise, to move about with some meaningful freedom evaporates? Also you might be aware that policy advocates such as Rebecca MacKinnon argue for the establishment of principles that would ensure the internet should remain free and open based on fundamental rights to communicate and free speech no matter who provides networks and platforms.16

MR V: Whatever we may think of it I believe it should be taken as a basic assumption that states, corporations, and even social advocacy networks will not allow platforms to operate in anything approaching a laissez-faire fashion regarding both content and innovative uses of software. And there’s no easy way to establish neat boundaries of acceptable use which are far easier to establish when it comes to porno, stalking, or terrorist network recruitment. Whatever we may think of it, we have an internet that is provided by the private sector.

“We can label this logic, evasion”

LATHAM: The implications of private versus public around the use of facilities are not always as straightforward as you seem to imply. I am reminded of the Occupy Movement’s stay in Zucotti Park in New York City. Interestingly, this was actually facilitated by the Park being of a “private public” variety. As a privately owned space the nighttime curfew normally in effect in public parks was
I can imagine things might have become more complicated, in principle, in Egypt had Tahrir Square been owned by Orascom Telecome, that huge Egyptian media conglomerate.

MR V: It’s really more than a matter of whether the issue is complicated or not. The public/private distinction is something both academics and activists care about. I do as well. But with what we are talking about it does not get at the dynamics at play in the tensions over confrontation and restrictions. This is about politics.

LATHAM: I would say that the private versus public is also about politics.

MR V: OK, but I’m trying to say that what’s occurring in this tension is more than just the private provision of the internet – what we might count as a sort of semi-public infrastructure of social communication. If this is what you are implying by pointing to the complications of private versus public, then it’s tempting to just leave it at advocating for a move to public provision. I like that and suspect you do. But what I would say is if we look more closely at the events and developments we have been discussing they are not just about private versus public, or who gets to control what happens on a given platform or website or across a network. The bigger issue involved here is the terms and norms of protest, resistance, and identity as they take form across the digital spaces involving civil protest groups, corporations, and states. Even if the internet were a publicly provided good like the postal service this problem would remain. The key for me is the issue of establishing control in a way that does not undermine liberal democracy.

LATHAM: I’d say you can’t remove the private/public distinction from that issue of control.

MR V: Sure, the issue of the private provision of the internet is still significant in what I am talking about. It accentuates the problem since it means a whole lot of corporations that have to make decisions and set policies are sitting between disruptive individuals and groups and the governments pursuing security.

LATHAM: You are pushing on something that I think is important. These terms and norms don’t unfold in a vacuum but within the context of the liberal social and

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political order that essentially is the political framing for the internet\(^\text{19}\) – and which we can distinguish from, say, the economic framing associated with capitalism.\(^\text{20}\)

And from what I recall about your thinking years ago and what you told me when we agreed to dialogue it is getting back to a progressive liberalism that most concerns you. I think we can step back from the specific developments in this area you have been describing in order to consider in a more theoretical way an interesting tension that is quite relevant to all this and which bears directly on political communication within a liberal order – which is what I am certain we are talking about.

MR V: Yes, but I don’t want to get into any very abstract, general discussions here about liberal theory and how to critique it.

LATHAM: I don’t think we have to move directly in that direction. We can keep it focused on strategies of power as you’ve mentioned. Hear me out. The tension I have in mind has on one side the logic of confrontation where actors come into direct, unmediated contact, place things before one another, challenge, engage, or even attack. The types of action in the context of the internet can range from the mild monitoring and reporting to more disruptive DDoS attacks.\(^\text{21}\) In a liberal system where mobility is possible to degrees that meaningfully exceed what is possible in more authoritarian systems there are ample opportunities for confrontation. But from another angle, on the other side, when you have a system like a liberal one where movement is notably less channeled and contained than in a closed one, it means groups and individuals also have a range opportunities to avoid engagement and escape or minimize contact; to elude detection, or hide their identity, or erase their presence from view or detection as they move about; to be anonymous. We can label this logic evasion.

MR V: In Western liberal democracies the idea, though, is to make sure there are no extremes of confrontation or evasion as in the examples I brought up, like Anonymous.

LATHAM: Of course, we are talking matters of degree. There are many ways that confrontation and evasion can be limited in a liberal system as forms of control are imposed say for financial transactions, property rights, voting registration, and state security. We can see that the very meaning of confrontation and evasion

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20 While we can join the two frames in a concept like liberal capitalism, I contend there is an analytical distinction worth making between the normative-political frame – liberal versus fascist – and the political-economic frame – capitalism versus communalism. I explain this in Robert Latham, *The Liberal Moment: Modernity, Security and the Making of Postwar International Order*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

21 DDoS stands for distributed denial of service and which is an effort to take down a website, for instance, by flooding it with heavy traffic to the site (often through spam).
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stems from there being blockages, restrictions, and boundaries that are confronted and evaded. From the other side, even in a closed, non-liberal, authoritarian, or totalitarian system there are likely going to be forms of action relating to evasion and confrontation available. Orwell’s Winston Smith in 1984 found a way to try to evade surveillance by clever maneuvers in his room and we know that Syrian and Chinese activists were able to avoid the walls set up to confront and limit their communications. We can say the same thing about options for confrontation in authoritarian systems as the so-called “Arab Spring” in Mubarak’s Egypt made clear.

MR V: But the point is that these possibilities for confrontation and evasion in non-liberal systems narrow considerably. The advantage of the liberal system, in principle at least, is that it allows for challenging power, in moderate forms, of course. I’m just not sure how fundamental evasion is compared to your confrontation. Being able to be private is not the same as evading detection.

LATHAM: What I mean to say is any system, liberal or not, where there is some openness you will see forms of evasion and confrontation produced. But in a liberal system, where openness, in principle, is supposed to be a basic commitment guiding the way a system is organized, administered, and governed, confrontation and evasion become especially significant.

MR V: There is no shortage of complaints about how liberal systems, in the end, are not so open. I know you don’t mean some pure openness, but how open it is, how, say, speech is limited to prevent harm or alternative ideas about resource distribution are ignored – these are certainly grounds for criticism.

LATHAM: Certainly no disagreement here. But let’s keep the focus for a moment on communication systems. By openness I first mean the ability of individuals and groups to move about in the system. There can be open channels and pathways, ways in and out, ways to undermine security and fortification logics, involving platforms that are secured but hardly impregnable or closed. You rely on evasion to suddenly appear somewhere and confront with, say, verbal protest or by gaining access to hidden information that you judge the public should be aware of. You may see this type of practice as problematic, but think of how the confrontation you say is acceptable depends on it; in being able, for instance, to move about the streets in a protest and avoid police cordons. You may say the police are there to keep things moderate or safe but there’s likely nothing very confrontational about a protest if it does not involve some sort of containing or repressive tactics by authorities.


23 It is worth noting that it is not unusual to see a mix of evasion and confrontation. A pointed example is when you anonymously attack a website. Another example, in real space, is masked confrontation on the part of criminals.
MR V: How fundamental are you saying evasion is to today’s liberal systems and to the issues I have been addressing? Do you mean evasion and confrontation are as fundamental as the principles of liberty and security, which have been central to debates about political life especially since 9/11? Or are we just talking about two logics that go along with these basic principles in a liberal order?

LATHAM: It seems evident to me that any meaningful form of liberty depends on evading constraints, blockages, forced action, tyrannies, slavery, false witness, and forced identification. It also depends on confronting the perceived challenges to liberty, and on contesting imposed practices and forms of governance if they are seen as violating basic rights.

I would add that evasion and confrontation can also be seen as important to security. Security is meaningless without the capacity, in negative terms, to evade threats. In more positive terms security entails the capacity to confront, contest, engage, surveil, and restrain whomever or whatever is deemed a risk. But I think we can gain a better angle on the logics of a liberal system and your concern with the norms and terms of protest and disruption in a system by exploring the context and implications of openness in some greater depth.

MR V: I just don’t think openness is such a great word; and it has been exploited through the years to make claims about opening markets or establishing an open society. Why not just keep using the language of rights, for example?

LATHAM: Even if it’s not so great a concept, I think it does some work for us to distinguish when a system is organized around blocks and walls versus one organized around movement – recognizing, nonetheless, that you can view this as a continuum of openness and closure across all types of political systems. Let me clarify the relationship between openness and liberalism as I see it and its connection back to confrontation and evasion. If an order or system, digital or not, is to be considered liberal, then openness should be understood to be a basic mode of organizing it. This commitment to relative openness is in my view fundamental.

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24 As readers will see below, I believe the notion of seeking a balance between liberty and security is a questionable aim: they are in tension and not heading toward equilibrium. I think the important question is how this tension works, and the discussion ended up being in part an effort to explore one way the tension works. I also think it’s wrong to call security logics operating in a liberal context, illiberal. Security is a part of liberal order as it is part of any political order. The literature on this topic has become massive. A place to start is Richard Wilson, (ed.), Human Rights in the War on Terror, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and the two superb essays that question the formula: Mark Neocleous, “Security, liberty and the myth of balance: Towards a critique of security politics,” Contemporary Political Theory 6 (2) (2007), pp. 131–149; and Claudia Aradau, “Forget equality? Security and liberty in the ‘war on terror,’” Alternatives: Global, Local, Political 33 (3) (2008), pp. 293–314.


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to what makes an order liberal and to me it offers greater purchase on understanding what a liberal order is than say individualism – which is the typical way liberal order is conceived. I say this because to me the condition of openness bears on the very organization of a system, while individualism, or more accurately individual liberty, mostly speaks to the status of elements of a system. This offers another angle to view issues like privacy that are anchored in individualism. Instead we can see the very possibility of privacy as depending on logics of evasion; of avoiding intrusions and visibility in various personal spheres.

MR V: I am not sure what you think your contrasts of open versus closed systems and evasion versus confrontation imply for security policies. But I could easily infer that the more evasion and confrontation of a political nature that occurs or is allowed in the system, the more states and corporations will seek to close the system. This certainly seems paradoxical. I mean it implies to me that a liberal system will always be under pressure to move toward closure and away from an order that is liberal. We could take that to be a sort of self-regulating function, a homeostasis that prevents too much openness; that keeps it contained and limited. We are talking about order, after all.

LATHAM: I like that formulation. I’d say you’re hitting on an interesting way to think about this. My sense is that if we pursue this a bit we might gain some insight into how the relationship between states and societies might be transforming in the current historical juncture; and that what is at stake in what Anonymous and WikiLeaks is doing is more than just troublemaking, foul play, cybercrime, adolescent-like bravado, edgy protest or, as you put it, disruption. I’d say they push on some interesting issues about what it might mean for a free communication system to be organized and maintained – one that in its openness is going to have to create vulnerabilities and insecurities.

MR V: I am a bit skeptical how much we can draw from that to say something more broadly about the wider context of freedom in and across societies. I was thinking really of the deepening trends around security on the internet. I am not sure how much this evasion/openness tack helps us think about what is happening at borders, in cities, and so on.

LATHAM: If you can hold off on any judgments of wider relevance a little bit, I believe we can use the issues you threw on the table about disruption to maybe help give us a way to understand some of the basic framings of liberalism – understood, in this case, in the contexts of networks. Consider, a moment, Isaiah Berlin’s concept of the two liberties: one that is positive, the other negative.27 The negative side is, of course, about avoiding interventions and so on. The positive side of liberty is about the capacity for self-determination – and he meant it in both

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the individual and collective sense of self. But notice the connection. Agents can form and create in a way that is, ultimately, not impeded by forces such as other agents. I would say evasion and confrontation are the operational logics of the liberalism in Berlin’s framework. Basic liberty, especially negative liberty, depends on evading constraints, blockages, forced action, evading tyrannies, slavery, false witness, and forced identification. I think it is reasonable to say that while evasion and confrontation are not exclusive to liberalism, they take on a specifically salient form within it.

MR V: Maybe, but I need to get a better sense of whether blowing these issues up into these bigger theoretical questions about liberalism is really the right way to address my fears about deepening security.

“Bringing risk into the picture”

LATHAM: I think the best way to begin is to reflect a moment on a portion of Michel Foucault’s lectures from the late 1970s in Security, Territory, Population. I am thinking specifically of his discussion of what he called “milieu”: that’s the space containing social and physical structures and forces through which circulate bodies, commodities, germs, and texts. Foucault used the image of early modern towns to think about milieu and insisted that security is not just about controlling space: it becomes a problem of population control, which is especially intensified when the walls figuratively come down and bodies can circulate into and within the town. Foucault drew out a range of implications regarding the problems of population control that are typically thought of in terms of concepts such as biopower and biopolitics.

MR V: It doesn’t take long to hear the word “biopolitics” once Foucault is mentioned. I am not sure I am up for hearing another version.

LATHAM: Don’t worry; my purpose right now is not to get into a discussion of these concepts, however important they are. I would just like us to consider a bit Foucault’s brief but suggestive discussion of milieu – I won’t hide that it fascinates me because of what I think it suggests about liberalism, in ways that connect directly to what I said a short while ago. Foucault implies that the formation of modern individualism is linked to milieu and circulation – the circulating units

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28 The passage from Berlin I was thinking of is: “The essence of the notion of liberty, in both the ‘positive’ and the ‘negative’ senses, is the holding off of something or someone – of others who trespass on my field or assert their authority over me, or of obsessions, fears, neuroses, irrational forces – intruders and despots of one kind or another.”


making choices and distinguishing themselves within a milieu. So here we have the logic of a circulation that is open and which I take to lay at the heart of liberalism.

MR V: I thought we came to some mutual recognition that openness is at best a very qualified condition and in the end really has to be restricted in order to gain some semblance of order. Otherwise you would not have much common respect for the rights of others. This is one of the very basic ideas about liberalism we learn in any Political Science text.

LATHAM: Of course. I’m just trying to argue that various forms of mobility are central to what we can understand as the basic liberties or freedoms associated with liberalism – whether it is movement of ideas, bodies, or goods. The very possibility of being an individual assumes being present somewhere or choosing to be elsewhere. To even face restrictions and limits first of all assumes there is movement that brings individuals face to face with obstructions – imposed in anticipation or in reaction to movement. And even property, which we tend to think of in static terms, assumes access to things and a disposition of them, whether physical or virtual – this assumes movement, or circulation.

MR V: Isn’t circulation one of those fundamental dimensions of social life that could be applied to anything and be seen as central to it?

LATHAM: Well, yes, but it depends on how it takes form in one or another situation or order. Speech occurs in totalitarian systems but that doesn’t mean free speech has no meaning in non-totalitarian ones.

MR V: I’m not just trying to be reductive and dismissive here. It’s just not obvious what is special in the relationships you’re pointing to.

LATHAM: I am less concerned with that than with whether the concept helps us gain some analytical perspective. And what I find so productive about open circulation is what I tried to say before and why I have brought it up in the first place: circulation identifies a ordering logic that connects directly to confrontation and evasion; which I’m trying to convince you is, at a general level, relevant to liberalism; and more specifically relevant to the concerns you expressed about intensifying security and digital communications. I can put that another way: it allows us to see what is different about liberalism when contrasted to other types of political orders and it gives us a way to understand what is at stake in the internet examples you brought to the table today so to speak.

MR V: Can you be more specific here?

LATHAM: Coming back to the milieu framing of Foucault, it neatly sets out a basic security logic: when circulation is opened up “risk” emerges – and Foucault

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31 This is a part of the process individualization. A noted exploration of the implications of individualization is found in Ulrich Beck, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, (London: Sage, 2002).
uses this word. There is the potential for exposure to vagabonds, robbers, communicable disease, spies, and I might add risks associated with non-elite classes mobilizing and on the move on streets, in union meetings, at the gates of the state and capital confronting privilege.

MR V: OK, but once you start bringing risks into the picture it raises the question of how to contend with them. Of course we all know one way is a matter of watching what the circulators do in some sort of centralized surveillance system. This is the Benthamite panopticon approach Foucault made much of and it is what has historically prevailed among governments.

LATHAM: Foucault also focused on what he called the disciplinary approach. That’s where institutional spaces such as schools and expected roles like student, worker, family protector, or consumer shape and contain the actions of circulators so they are orderly, safe, and cooperative. 32 I would point to a third approach, especially focused on by Deleuze and which he associated with what he called control societies.33 This might really be closer to what you just mentioned because there’s not much circulation in a panopticon, is there. Instead of the more tightly contained, bounded spaces you might associate with a panopticon, in control societies circulators are remotely and passively tracked through, say, transaction records, communications, signals; where knowledge about who circulates can be gained and risks flagged. Also, channeling the very options of what might otherwise look like free choice is another way to gain such control. Deleuze makes an analogy to drivers who might think they are free to roam when, where, and how they like but who actually are still contained by the designed highway systems they move on. I would just add that in control societies all this tracking and gathering of information opens up the possibility of relying on prediction to anticipate what individuals may or may not do.34

MR V: As you might imagine I am quite aware of these ambitions. And Snowden has made sure the rest of the world knows. Alas, it turns out prediction based on big data is not as easy as one might think. That said, the other advantage of massive data collection is that it becomes a repository of evidence in building cases against suspects.

LATHAM: So then, the distinctions I’ve laid out make sense to you.

MR V: I can see how control societies, with their emphasis on circulation, relate to the internet as it operates in your liberal polity. But I would argue all three forms are

32 The best discussion of these two approaches is in Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, (London: Vintage Books, 1995).
34 From afar one can view control societies as a sort of socialized cybernetic approach to contending with risk and circulation. Twentieth-century theorization of the relationship between movement and information emerged with the founding of the field of cybernetics in the 1940s, which first focused on the tracking of the movement of planes in order to coordinate anti-aircraft artillery. See, for example, Andrew Pickering, The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of another Future, (Chicago, IL, US: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
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still very much present across digital spheres. The control society sounds like it captures what many current surveillance and data aggregation programs do sifting through data in the background in the private sector as much as anywhere else.\textsuperscript{35} I can see how the various rules and restrictions around copyright or access to restricted sites have parallels to the panopticon, in that there are systems in place to detect directly who is accessing what and if you violate firewalls and restrictions it is detected by the system. And then the world of well-behaved Facebook participation seems to be operating something like disciplinary power, in that you have roles as a participant, rules, determined ways of being social. But I do wonder whether the driver on the highway analogy is apt for the internet. There seems to be a lot of innovation happening around the internet as we already mentioned. So, what is especially notable and troubling about digital disruption is not so much that it involves circulation and boundary crossing, but that agents are changing the nature of the systems and spaces encountered. I guess the virus is one very pointed form of this.

LATHAM: Rather than see this innovation as running counter to what we discussed, I think we can take it as a form of agency that makes systems and spaces open in a particular way. Open not just for circulation, but for change in the nature of the spaces and channels through which one circulates. In this way, for sure, you are right; it challenges the Deleuzian highway image: it not only can lead to new roads but, actually, whole new forms of transport.\textsuperscript{36} Of course, seeing openness this way runs against the typical framing of open systems in natural and social science, where openness refers to the interaction between the environment and the system. In Computer Science you can see that openness in systems typically means digital communication systems that are not based on proprietary software but instead on open source or open standards.\textsuperscript{37} This obviously comes closer to the understanding of openness we are talking about since the open software can yield innovation.\textsuperscript{38} All in all, we can say the level of free circulation reflects the degree to which multiple actors can move within and across system boundaries and shape the very nature of the system itself. And to carry this further, you might expect that the logics and infrastructures of the systems are legible and transparent whether it’s software code or data categories.

MR V: I am concerned that you are trying to turn what is a problem into a virtue. Innovation per se is not the issue, as in when new approaches emerge, like crowdsourcing. But innovations that disrupt people’s lives and the state’s public


\textsuperscript{36} Readers might note, however, that it is very consistent with arguments made in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, (Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, Patrick Chau and Kar Tam, “Factors affecting the adoption of open systems: An exploratory study,” \textit{MIS Quarterly} 21 (1) (1997), pp. 1–24.

\textsuperscript{38} I was making these assertions based on research and analysis I had made in Robert Latham, “Knowledge and governance in the digital age,” \textit{First Monday} 11 (9) (2006), available at http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/1398/1316.
business are quite another matter. Control is not just about limits, constraints, disciplining, or spying. It’s also about creating safe environments where even the uninitiated feels able to circulate without fear.

“Openness and closure produce one another”

LATHAM: I don’t think this juxtaposition of safe versus unsafe innovation gets us far enough in thinking about security and openness. If you don’t mind, I would like to push you a bit more on the concept of openness in relation to security in a more direct way, which I believe will clarify a bit why thinking about safety is not enough. Let’s imagine we have a very open system where, in principle, there should be no fear of the circulators because, say, everyone adheres to common civil norms.

MR V: What’s the point of this sort of abstraction from reality?

LATHAM: Only to underscore that even in this situation we can imagine structures of closure will be seen as required by system architects in the form of rules to establish and maintain openness – to insure, for example, that even civil actors do not inadvertently establish barriers. A group holding an event or setting up a business might restrict access to what has been agreed upon to be a public road. Security is baked in to the constitution of any system and is even constitutive of such a system, since you need rules to establish and maintain openness. This liberal logic has been around since John Locke’s Second Treatise and continues in libertarian thought and debates on security versus liberty. However, once we move past the imaginary of a very generalized open system the problem of security becomes amplified by the many structures of organization and power that exist across a system – in corporations, influential networks of experts, sub-national political units, local communities, and so on. And this is one way complexity comes in. Once you have these formations, policies and practices can be put in place that qualify, contain, and channel circulation; not to guarantee maximum openness but the existence and integrity of the order.

Such restrictions are considered necessary by neoliberal theorists who accept the state as requirement for order such as Friedrich Hayek. See his The Constitution of Liberty. John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, Michael Morgan (ed.), (Indianapolis, IN, US: Hackett, 2001).

I have chosen not to introduce the label “libertarian” into the discussion and label the system libertarian because libertarianism, typically, is seen to carry a set of assumptions about property and individualism that are not essential to openness per se, and which require forms of closure that are all too evident in any libertarian treatise. See, for example, Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia, (New York: Basic Books. 1974).

I was using formation not in the Marxist sense of a particular form of social and political life but in the sense of the manifestation of an organization in social space or the emergence of a space or identifiable social entity or organization in social space. See Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen, (eds.), Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm, (Princeton, NJ, US: Princeton University Press, 2005). A formation can be a firm, an NGO network, or a trading platform.
Mr V, making expressions signaling skepticism, cut in:

You seem to be suggesting that there are two security levels involved here. One is the macro where the integrity of the system overall needs to be secured, even against possibly restrictive efforts. The other is at the level of the units within the order, or, as you say, formation. I’d add there are also the security concerns of the units themselves. All this seems to throw us squarely into the problems of federalism, you know, unit versus federation. Of course, in security terms, thinking back to what you said about Foucault’s milieu, we know all too well that formations like towns and cities gained the security advantage of a nation-state territory to ensure circulation into a town would be much less risky to the residents.

LATHAM: Federation and territorial based models, I believe, don’t help us that much because what we are trying to contend with here, on your suggestion, is mobility as a constant as well as the ability to change the system in part or as a whole; and maybe the possibility of system change can also be treated as a constant. Under these conditions of changeability, the various federal formulas and bargains between units and systems you’re referring to would be destabilized. It pays to recall what it is that the condition of openness is making possible. If we take seriously the aspect of openness I outlined a few minutes ago, then a meaningful degree of freedom to circulate and interact is essential. I take this to mean that, in practice and in internet terms, it’s the ability to avoid constraints and traverse across bounded domains; and to even invent new formations and news ways to circulate.

MR V: I am somewhat uncomfortable with what I think you are implying when I think back to your evasion points. You are saying openness and constraints go together. Otherwise avoidance or, as you put it before, evasion has no meaning. OK, I get that. But this implies, problematically in my view, that an open system should accommodate uninvited and unknown circulators who might be evading detection or identification – who might be trespassing or at least ignoring any intended identification. And when we come back to the point that openness can also mean the ability to innovate in the system, well, this is what keeps security specialists in the public and private sectors awake at night; whether it’s fear of some new way of accessing governmental networks or new software that ensures anonymity. This goes way beyond evasion into your other concept, confrontation: because it means facing and really challenging the system and others within it with new technologies, practices, or methods.

LATHAM: Without the assumption of separate and distinct social realms and spaces, of one form or another, within a system, the significance of circulation to and from somewhere drops considerably. It means being in one huge, uniform formation where the distinction between openness and closure has much less meaning. Moving from one place to another has little meaning in the political terms we have been talking of if whoever is circulating is not coming in from somewhere else, from a different space. So, yes, openness and closure produce one another, as do any concepts so obviously linked as a binary, as linguist Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out a century ago.

MR V: Let me remind you that it is not just a matter of openness and closure depending on one another. In more concrete terms, the risks and threats of relatively free circulation and innovation are what make the extensive evasive and confrontational strategies you seem fixated on necessary in the first place. As I see it, in a closed system the disciplinary and panoptic approaches we discussed are all that are required. After all, when you are already in a prison house, in a figurative sense, or a walled institutional-space, fixed constraints are in place. The way out of the panopticon is jail breaking and evasive escape. The most pointed example that comes to my mind is the emergence of the Underground Railroad that helped escaping slaves reach northern US states like Michigan and Canada.

For some reason Mr V paused by sipping his coffee, but then went on:

So if we are going to agree that what matters is what to do in a system that allows for circulation, then the matter becomes fairly simple in intellectual terms at least. As any follower of internet security developments knows, in our current moment, national security agencies and private cyber security firms are busy devising strategies for obtaining security in an open system, such as tracking social media. These strategies are trying to deal with securing systems and all that takes place within them, when circulation is relatively free. If this is what you meant before by control societies, then so be it.

“Deepening security and the possibilities of protest”

LATHAM: I feel we are somewhat going around in circles. I am trying to push us to engage with the complexities of the relationship between openness, security, and closure and you keep coming back to the risks of openness and what has to be done to deal with them. I would say to push past this impasse it may pay to step back even

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45 There are parallels here to what Delueuze and Guattari wrote about in their concept of striated space to describe the way space can be abstracted and organized in uniform grids along the lines, for example, of official territory; allowing for powers like the state to dominate it, possess it, and move about in a one dimensional, ordered system. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), Chapter 14.

more to think a moment about what openness of the internet signals more broadly about deepening security and the possibilities of protest. First off, consider that as an open system operating across jurisdictions like nation-states the internet is close to being historically unique.47 And why wouldn’t it be when you consider that the control of circulation across jurisdictions has often been a key dimension of power. We know that over the centuries the circulation of people from place to place has been controlled by documents of various forms, which in more recent history has been regularized in what is really a worldwide border regime.48 I would say the same about the control of commerce or trade, intellectual property, and the circulation of books and pamphlets, especially those that might be considered seditious.49

MR V: There have been, however, plenty of exceptions to this control like the long history of informal or black market trade that is still a significant presence everywhere; to say nothing of the networks for the illegal smuggling of migrants. I guess, for you, these are just examples of evasive circulation or evading formal regulation as in tax dodging.

LATHAM: The exceptions underscore the longstanding relevance and force of the formal economic realm, in the sense that without it there is no illicit evasion.50

MR V: But they also signal, to me at least, that there is plenty of closure out there, whether it’s produced by tight regulations or the attempts of evaders to hide from public view.

LATHAM: What you are hitting on is the co-dependence of openness and closure that I mentioned minutes ago. Let me put to you two decent historical precedents for thinking about transboundary systems that get a bit at this. First, there’s the emergence of commerce in early medieval Europe around the eleventh century onward. This occurred against the background of the Holy Roman Empire and the emerging royal states of various forms. Merchant networks, some covering the entire Mediterranean, seemed to be open and allowing for considerable innovation from trading bills and currencies to double entry bookkeeping.51

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50 Consideration of this contrast can be found in Thomas Callaghy, Ronald Kassimer, and Robert Latham, (eds.) *Intervention and Transnationalism in Africa: Global-Local Networks of Power*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

MR V: I am skeptical as to how open these were given aristocratic power at the time.

LATHAM: Open to a degree, one might say, in that royal states at that time, typically, were central in granting access and often limiting it to favored merchants, especially in the guilds. The guilds relied on royal rights and this meant trade was mostly closed to others.52

MR V: There isn’t much in this world where we can’t find hidden privileges and exclusions operating.

LATHAM: Fair enough. There is another historical precedent – much more promising – in the emergence of a transnational public sphere in early modern Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was centered in Holland involving French language publications. Ultimately, it included the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau.53 We’re talking here about the European bourgeois public sphere famously associated with Jürgen Habermas.54 I think we can say this public sphere had aspects that hint at the sort of openness associated with the internet. The difference was that participation was limited to the European elite. Also, don’t forget a significant proportion of communication was quite regularly manipulated by governmental ministries, probably most famously in the weekly gazettes that were published. So, the degree of openness in these spheres was clearly limited – I mean open circulation was limited and bounded. Of course, we know across the internet manipulation occurs and that political propaganda is widespread.55 In addition, a digital divide persists especially between the global South and the North.

MR V: As I said, there are always limits or containments. I want to come back to how the system can be altered from anywhere, by anybody. Your examples point to innovations in commerce and public sphere communication tools. I know you keep trying to get past this issue – and I suspect you think concern with it is driven by my official perspective – but don’t forget you did argue it was a condition of openness. What is different about the circulation and openness we see now with digital technologies is not just that participation involves far more than the elites, but also that a relatively wide range of non-elites can alter the form of circulation itself. Sure, this sort of action is really limited in non-liberal contexts like Iran, but it is not eliminated.56 This, from my state-official perspective, is really significant. That the code underlying our communication systems is a form of legislation, as Lessig put it,57 implies that movement is not what is at stake here but system innovation. So,

55 I am not counting commercial communications as propaganda but the parallels are obvious.
56 Readers should note that Katherine MacKinnon documents many of these based, especially, on globalvoices.org. See also Citizenlab.org.
sure it’s easy for you to put forward that system innovation is a condition of openness because I think you are implicitly assuming the historical context where most change happens from more elite sources; even if you recognize the eruptions that can occur periodically, such as revolutions or civil rights movements.

LATHAM: You mean you think I am implying a sort of tame form of innovation: a little bit here; a little bit there?

MR V: Sort of; in the sense that you don’t seem to recognize the challenge posed by system change.

LATHAM: I am getting a whiff from you of Samuel Huntington here, with his claims about the necessity of imposing operating order to have any hope of liberty that goes beyond the softer versions of the order-liberty relationship we discussed a bit ago. Of course, innovations are constrained and channeled by the contexts of national law and power – and I suspect you would agree. Besides the heavy censorship of authoritarian states like China that receives so much attention, there are also national laws everywhere that apply to the internet, especially regarding content issues such as porno or privacy and there is international and transnational governance – the most famous example being the governance of internet domain names. So maybe the point is that innovations do not pose so much of a challenge and you may not need to worry so much about them.

MR V: Still, even with these sorts of closures, constraints, and limits there is no real policing of circulation yet that is anywhere even beginning to approach what we have in migration or formal trade. I say this even recognizing the expanding capabilities of control that are emerging such as deep packet inspection. And the internet is kept open, ultimately, because the US is the internet hegemon and has made a commit as a liberal state to keep it relatively open, and is supported by and in collaboration on this with European liberal states. Non-liberal states are still very much a part of the open system, despite the much stronger controls and

60 This is a method of packet filtering where the content of messages can be inspected. One recent study of the implications of deep packet inspection is Christian Fuchs, “Societal and ideological impacts of deep packet inspection internet surveillance,” Information, Communication and Society 16 (8) (2013), pp. 1–32.
61 That said, I might add, we have to keep our eyes open to see if legislation like SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and increasing efforts at surveillace of communication represent the early stage in a process leading to far greater control. As I have argued elsewhere, states are only at the beginning stages of configuring how they might relate to the internet. See Robert Latham, “Information technology and social transformation,” International Studies Review 4 (1) (2002), pp. 101–115.
constraints they have in place. We can’t be sure how long the US commitment will hold – and it may be slipping but holding nonetheless. It is important to note that security issues that were not Western state produced or sanctioned were not in the cards with the internet originally, only exchange around science and technology, social life and culture, and then, in 1988, commerce. Security issues, from below or outside the West, started to emerge notably with the Zapatistas’ use of the internet to disseminate their message; and, more generally, with the rise of asymmetric cyber-warfare as practice and threat; with cybercrime; and with cyber protests such as the mobilization against the Clipper Chip. If openness means vulnerability and that a wide array of individuals can change the system with innovations, well, from a state perspective and my experience, this is not something you necessarily want in the security sphere; especially since technology and communications lie at the heart of war, strategy, and spatial control.

“It’s the nature of the target that matters”

LATHAM: I am not so sure. If you don’t mind, let’s come back to WikiLeaks and Anonymous, because when it comes to circulation across the internet what they have done stands out, along with Snowden and Chelsea Manning, as challenges to the policies and practices of powerful states and corporations. WikiLeaks has more or less positioned itself as serving as a “civilian intelligence” organization. You can see this right from the start in WikiLeaks’ first actions that were leaks regarding information on African government corruption. And, whatever you may think of their tactics and motivations, Anonymous has operated in the security sphere and not just by disabling websites. They have started to expose information about security organizations and practices. As I am sure you know all too well, they hacked and published five million emails from the private intelligence firm Stratfor.

63 It is known that non-liberal states have tried unsuccessfully to set up a UN-based governance structure that would very likely produce a very different internet.
64 In the 1990s US security agencies sought to have a “chip” installed in technology that would allow encrypted communications but the government would possess a key to access the encrypted content. See Laura J. Gurak, Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace: The Online Protests over Lotus Marketplace and the Clipper Chip, (New Haven, CT, US: Yale University Press, 1997).
67 Stratfor (www.stratfor.com) is private intelligence agency mostly serving corporations but with important links to state intelligence.
Whether or not the emails uncovered any significant practices, they do reveal how extensive the privatization of intelligence has become worldwide. Anonymous has also gone after Monsanto, trying to expose numerous ecological and food security issues.

MR V: Yes, but what does all this hacking and leaking add up to in terms of actually helping transform policies in the security sphere? How does it really take on the privatization of security or the intensification of security practices on the internet, in the city, at the airport, and so on? While, as I have been saying, they may be very troublesome to policymakers and specific organizations, I am not clear where they lead in terms of a program of positive change? Civilian intelligence sounds nice but I take it to be a sort of branding or slogan. It remains that until you actually see some sort of scale-up into real organizational capacities. From what I can see of both WikiLeaks and Anonymous they have not got much past depending on personalities and limited networks. The ideas behind what they both do could develop some legs and spread but not from the current personalities involved.

LATHAM: Well, there are lots of new leaking organizations that you can find very easily with a simple web search. Many of the Arab Spring activists using the web have set up their own systems and sites to disseminate political leaks, with the most famous being TuniLeaks. And, despite all the arrests of the original Anonymous members, it keeps popping up with new actions. The more significant point you make, however, about the lack of a wider organizational trajectory for broader social change – that is not so easily addressed. But I wonder if asking this of these relatively new groups is not a bit much. What WikiLeaks and Anonymous are doing can be seen as attempts to contend with what they perceive as threats to societies, groups, and individuals. How else can we understand exposing tolerance of war crimes in Iraq; ignoring environmental harms by corporations; or US governmental complicity with violent authoritarian regimes? They are using forms of electronically-based agency that are departures from the usual ways we confront power in publications or on the street. So, while they are not building movements, they are building forms of agency – social movement literature has talked for years about repertoires of contention.

MR V: This implies to me that you can separate the target and therefore the content of the actions from the nature of the actions or the repertoires, so to speak. I see this as explaining why US state reactions to what are considered extreme forms of online confrontation have been schizophrenic. One the one hand, you saw former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton going out of her way to applaud

68 A useful overview can be found in Simon Chesterman, “‘We can’t spy... if we can’t buy!’: The privatization of intelligence and the limits of outsourcing ‘inherently governmental functions,’” European Journal of International Law 19(5), (2008), pp. 1055–1074.
70 Tilly worked with this notion for decades. See his more recent Charles Tilly, Regimes and Repertoires, (Chicago, IL, US: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
freedom of communications, especially those associated with the Arab Spring.\footnote{You can see this in Arshad Mohammed, “Clinton urges industry to promote internet Freedom,” \textit{Reuters}, December 8, 2012. Available at: http://mobile.reuters.com/article/BMW/idUSTRE7B726G20111208 (accessed March 17, 2012).}

And no unkind word has been spared condemning authoritarian regimes that censor communications. The exposure of information about the Tunisian regime, for example, was certainly not an unwelcome event. This is not simply a matter of rhetoric. The State Department funds the development of software that can be used to get around restrictions on the web. One example is called Psiphon 3, which is supposedly being used by Syrian anti-Assad rebels.\footnote{“Canadian software helps Syrian activists avoid web censors,” \textit{Information Policy}, March 4, 2012, Available at: http://www.i-policy.org/2012/03/canadian-software-helps-syrian-activists-avoid-web-censors.html (accessed April 8, 2012).}

The State Department has also got behind initiatives like Movements.org, which is targeted to help youth around the world build social media campaigns.\footnote{“Jared Cohen, Founder of Alliance for Youth Movements (AYM) and member of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff (GNAZ),” \textit{Gen Next}, September 14, 2010, Available at: http://www.gen-next.org/programs/upcoming-programs/jared-cohen-founder-of-alliance-youth-movement-aym-and-member-of (accessed October 22, 2012).}

LATHAM: What I mostly remember is the condemnation coming from Clinton and the Pentagon.

MR V: Yes, Clinton condemned WikiLeaks as a threat to national security and diplomacy and, as you say, she is on side with the Pentagon.\footnote{It may help to read Clinton’s own words on this: “This disclosure is not just an attack on America – it’s an attack on the international community… Such leaks tear at the fabric of responsible government… There is nothing laudable about endangering innocent people, and there is nothing brave about sabotaging the peaceful relations between nations.” See Scott Neuman’s “Clinton: WikiLeaks ‘tear at fabric’ of government,” \textit{NPR}, November 29, 2010, Available at: http://www.npr.org/2010/11/29/131668950/white-house-aims-to-limit-wikileaks-damage (accessed February 19, 2012).} Clearly, it’s the nature of the target that matters. Again, I would emphasize this is more than rhetorical. We’ve already discussed how the US government indirectly pressured PayPal and other credit card companies to stop any flow of funds to WikiLeaks.\footnote{Yochai Benkler, “A free irresponsible press: WikiLeaks and the battle over the soul of the networked fourth estate,” \textit{Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review} 46 (1) (2011), pp. 311–379.}

policies in a direct way is not something your average state official can ignore – and they do not – especially with much of the world knowing about it instantly. On the other hand, when digital direct-action like WikiLeaks is equated with terrorism by the Pentagon and the NSA it is not just about being vulnerable, but about not knowing in the context of an open system what your vulnerabilities might be.

*I let out a sort of cynical chuckle and said:*

I guess they implicitly understand they are not dealing with the fairly well-established and issue-area focused activist networks like Greenpeace of the sort Keck and Sikkink wrote of in the late 90s in *Activists beyond Borders*. With these networks one could usually discern their strategies or you had time to study them.

MR V: Indeed, from the state standpoint, direct actions take on a kind of transient character; threats can come not only from anywhere, or from anybody, but also in forms not yet known or from sources you otherwise might trust. And, even if leaders behind a particular digital effort are trusted, there is no guarantee participants in that effort won’t appropriate a platform or space for other purposes. So, while the US celebrated the use of social media by Tunisian activists to topple the Ben Ali dictatorship it’s not like we have been very happy about the use of social media in Tunisia to mobilize against the current US supported Tunisian government. What we have is a sort of digital transience and this means orientations can shift or remain ambiguous; groups can form and fall away; tactics can change almost instantly; and new information techniques can be innovated. This creates real problems for policymaking and order more generally.

*Mr V paused and after staring off in the distance said:*

The one thing we have working in our favor is that the characteristics that make this transience different also make it more vulnerable. If you don’t have a well-established network behind you, it means what you do might easily be disrupted or fall away from lack of resources. Look how vulnerable WikiLeaks showed itself to be in the face of efforts to cut off funding. I think you can say the benefits of transience are not a one-way street.

“*Linking anonymity and liberalism*”

LATHAM: You are raising some rather weighty issues in my view. They cut right to the heart of evasion and confrontation, in that transience rests on the combination

of these two logics, given the way you describe confrontation all of sudden coming out of nowhere. I know I have been pushing us toward more theoretical and even historical ways to frame the issues. But my intention is not to ignore relevant events. I believe theory helps us to speak in more informed terms about the relationship between security and open systems. I think it will help us get a better sense of the logics in play.

MR V: You know that I’m not allergic to theory, just to abstract concepts that rarely touch down into our world if they ever do at all.

LATHAM: Noted. Let me point out then that we may really only be tapping at the surface of what might be at stake in the relationship between the transience you raised and security logics; especially when viewed through the lens of the societies of control approach I raised earlier. This is the approach that seems to make the most sense for an open, liberal system. I would say the point of departure for the control society approach is cybernetics, which is all about the tracing of movement through feedback mechanisms. There are basic assumptions about the nature of the mobile target and the predicting of anticipated trajectories of movement and position. This would seem to imply that anonymity – and by implication Anonymous – is inconsistent with, if not antithetical to, security in a control society framing.

MR V: But I thought you seemed to be saying earlier this afternoon that anonymity should be seen as eminently consistent with liberalism and the openness you argued is historically tied to liberalism? So maybe you have to modify that, at least in the case of Anonymous or any other such effort that uses anonymity. Maybe we have to modify your approach to anonymity.

LATHAM: Not so fast. Let me suggest that in thinking this through we might see that there are meaningful consistencies between anonymity and the control society approach liberal order now relies on – or, at least, we might just agree that the relationship is much more complicated than we might think.

My reply seemed to cause Mr V to pull away from the table and ask:

Why are you keen on establishing this link?

LATHAM: Basically, it undermines the claim that security requires full disclosure, that digital transience must be undermined, that only fully publicized identity is reasonable – as Facebook’s Zuckerberg has suggested.

MR V: I’m not so sure finding consistencies does this sort of work, assuming one prefers this undermining.

LATHAM: Let me start with the simple task of linking anonymity and liberalism, based on what I think is obvious in the liberal tradition. You seemed to agree that relatively free circulation is a starting point of liberalism. This means being able to move without having to identity oneself or obtain permission for being somewhere – coming to somewhere or leaving it.
MR V: This is fairly straightforward and obvious.

LATHAM: Well then, this entails forms of anonymity. This is most pointedly seen in modern cities in liberal societies, where flows of nameless individuals and groups around commerce, culture, political, and social life are allowed or even facilitated on the streets; even if these flows produce senses of threat and attempts at closure, say to protect against what is considered strange.\footnote{You can see the contrast well in the two essays “The metropolis and mental life” and “The stranger” in Georg Simmel, \textit{The Sociology of Georg Simmel}, (Glencoe, IL, US: Free Press, 1950), pp. 409–424 and 402–408, respectively. See also Alan Hunt, “Governing the city: Liberalism and early modern modes of governance,” in Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (eds.) \textit{Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neoliberalism and Rationalities of Government} (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), pp. 67–88.} In doctrinal terms, abstract individualism – and I underline the qualifier abstract to emphasize the nonconcrete – this is a significant aspect of liberalism. Probably the most famous fairly recent articulation of this is in the work of John Rawls.\footnote{John Rawls, \textit{A Theory of Justice}, (Cambridge, MA, US: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).} You will recall, he based his theory on the notion of the “veil of ignorance,” which basically suggested that, in a liberal polity, individuals should arrive at just policies and positions by ignoring the specifics of their life circumstances and abilities.

MR V: Sure enough, but how do you figure in the relationship between liberalism and Anonymous and what is associated with its particular version of anonymity? After all, there are lots of ways that anonymity has entered liberal worlds as you say. You could add the reliance on anonymous sources as central to a free press; privacy; and freedom of exchange, with the best example maybe being the use of cash. There’s also freedom of expression, which in democratic contexts is realized in anonymous balloting. I could even add a more obscure point that I am not sure is intrinsically liberal but since it involves individual freedom I can think we can count it. That’s the freedom to determine to what degree we might engage with the specifics and depth of other lives – their life history, feelings, or entanglements. I recall reading Richard Sennett long ago on how individuals can evade engagement by immersing themselves in a homogeneous, singular community, like a nation or some identity group.\footnote{The book he was thinking of, I discerned later, is Richard Sennett, \textit{The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life}, (New York: Knopf, 1970), and this is discussed on pages 34–36.} Anonymity is everywhere. So, what makes Anonymous and their pernicious antics so special when it comes to liberalism?

LATHAM: It’s not that they’re special in themselves; it’s that we can view Anonymous as an identity and practice that is consistent with liberalism. Not only do they render themselves as abstract individuals, but they also are civilly disobedient in the name of protecting basic liberties and human security.\footnote{Rawls (\textit{Theory of Justice}, p. 59) argues there is a right to civil disobedience if the protection and existence of the constitution comes into question. How and when that is the case is open to debate. But the point is civil disobedience is not justified say over arguments about unemployment or health care access.} I
concede that they may be pushing on the limits of liberal order with their tactics, as is WikiLeaks. And I mean by the phrase “pushing on limits” that they are still within those limits. Of course, because Anonymous is pushing things, it’s to be expected that some individuals would accept the claims of harm made by a targeted, hacked organization like, say, the Australian government.

MR V: OK, limits have been repeatedly tested throughout history. There’ve been labor strikes for the eight-hour day, which some saw as harmful to the firms that were struck.

LATHAM: Yes, but what do we make of this testing? That’s the point here. I would argue, the alignment of Anonymous within liberalism sits on one side of a figurative crease along the plane of liberalism organized around anonymity, identity, and information. On the other side of the crease sit the logics and apparatus of control societies. On that control society side there is the cybernetic logic of black box nervous systems and abstracted concepts of agency.82

MR V: Are you saying there is some equivalence between these two sides?

LATHAM: I am drawing a link between anonymity and faceless aggregations of data. You have operators in states or corporations surveilling and tracking based on abstract aggregations of data, like uses of the word “death” or people in New York between 18 and 25 years old. Deeper layers of information not only might overwhelm the tracking systems and their automated routines; they also might commit operators to certain forms of fuller engagement and that would be impractical and risk sympathy with the target— to say nothing about the possibility of undermining openness. Once a circulator is singled out and personally tracked and surveilled, their freedom of movement becomes illusionary: things move closer to the panoptic approach. Again, this is avoided by limiting action to tracking positions, flagging risks, and predicting the trajectories of movement. The study of past behavior is central, which is different than knowing the mind and life history of the target of tracking. In a control society what is interesting about the past is not past feelings, thoughts, or experiences but past actions, very narrowly defined through what I elsewhere called rendering regimes that move across physical bodies and data.83

MR V: As I see it what you call rendering in this context ultimately means being able to place individuals in categories with labels that allow for further action. Sometimes, yes, that means assigning labels such as terrorist or subversive. I am aware that academics who study the relationship between borders, surveillance,

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82 The relationship between cybernetics and liberalism, read through the lens of Norbert Weiner’s writings, is explored in N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Post-Human (Chicago, IL, US: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

and information technology have been busy making this point for some time. So, we are really moving back in circles. I mean how does this matter beyond the fact that states feel it is their prerogative to do a better job of screening and tracking? And revealing the identity of someone who might want to hide it makes perfect sense if you have grounds for suspecting some potential for harm being done. Programs and officials may get it wrong but we don’t seek the end of policing and civil and criminal justice because that system gets it wrong sometimes.

LATHAM: I have to grant that this seems to be legitimate security practice, but you are overlooking the potentially pernicious form when you start to aggregate all the discrete programs, machines, agents, interventions, and your renderings into state-based knowledge claims about groups and society. We already have the folk theories that underpin state-sanctioned racial profiling.

MR V: There’s no way to avoid potential downsides in anything we do.

LATHAM: I think you’re looking at this in too instrumental a way. What especially disturbs me beyond the very important injustice of wrongful detention or even violent extermination through, say, the use of a drone, is what it says about the possibility of anonymity in relation to rights. If I am not signaling in depth the specifics of my identity in ways agents, officials, or officers consider reasonably authentic, then the ambiguity of my identity allows for observers to fill in the gaps of the profile they have on me as they see fit. Say someone is anti-religious, but they regularly visit an Islamic faith website or a mosque down the street. These two practices flag potential religious fanaticism in any surveillance system, even if the person is actually anti-religious.

MR V: Think about what you are implying – that there should be more and more, deeper and deeper surveillance to get it right, no?

LATHAM: Deeper and more doesn’t guarantee getting things right. We spoke of how in the absence of extensive, deep transnational networks on the part of transient activism it is more vulnerable to counter-action by states and firms. Similarly, Anonymous is more vulnerable to security forces defining what or who its members are, be that labels like terrorist, punks, or the mischievous. While


85 Even further, what analysis of the sociology of neoliberalism has helped show is that – self-regulating and governing – individuals might fill the gaps on their own by living according to abstracted categories of identity like contented consumer or liberal humanitarian citizen. All of this we know from decades of critical theory from the Frankfurt School on. See Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). This implies that the thickening of knowledge about identity on a personal and scientific basis may not be enough to avoid neoliberalism, in that it may only further entrench the hold of these assigned roles as we see in the world of self-help or the therapeutic society, where adopted identities can be thick but also deeply programmatic. For those interested in this, the thought of Jacques Lacan is relevant.
Anonymous can assert the purposes and spirit of their black box organization, as long as they are essentially black box they can be informationally outflanked. Let me add in more general terms that this can apply to any individual or group that is sort of facing an identity blackmail that goes like this: you must either authenticate or be tagged. The question is: can this stark binary be evaded?

MR V: I am still not really certain how much that question matters.

LATHAM: I am confident it matters because freedom, openness whatever term you use to describe especially the positive side of liberty where groups and individuals can develop themselves and contest the political and the social – well, this requires uncertainty in that the place or situation from where you start to where you go needs to be open. It can include the sort of thing so valued by urban theorists like de Certeau and Richard Sennett, the ability to amble freely. So, even if we are only dealing with automatic, control society surveillance working, evasively, in the background – which is only, say, assigning red flags to potential violations or what is deemed harmful action – freedom, in the sense I put forward, is only helped by evading this control.

“Disorder as an evasive tactic”

MR V: I feel there are some important intermediate steps missing in your assertion. We are speaking here of security efforts that should in principle try to avoid violating civil and political rights and use non-invasive technologies operating in the background.

LATHAM: Very funny. Snowden has shown the world that these violations are not being avoided.

MR V: I am talking about trying to see if it’s possible to establish some norms against which violations can be identified and corrected. In that spirit I think we need not despair that these programs may lead eventually to the end of liberty, as you imply, based on this undue attention, in my view, to the ability to move about anonymously. Why can’t we set up protections all along the way?

LATHAM: It’s certainly important to try to identify the nature of the logics that might be accepted or not by a collectivity. But it’s my hope that you might recognize that relatively open systems, operating in the context of liberal orders, are not just a matter of one or two principles about freedom of communication or a right to privacy. Such systems carry with them logics of security and politics. I mean that by accepting certain principles we get stuck with certain logics that we

86 In contrast is the “We are the 99%,” See http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/ (accessed August 29, 2012).

may not like. That is one of things I like about Foucault’s circulation concept. Accepting circulation, even open to a limited degree, carries with it the logics of risk and threat. These logics will naturally be most evident among governors and elites. In this sense, anonymity is not a cost-free position since it can provoke reaction, as we have seen these last few years in terms of surveillance and punitive actions against whistleblowers like Snowden.

MR V: I doubt any disruptive groups see themselves as stuck in a web of liberal logics.

LATHAM: It’s fair to say I think that any individual or even group is, de facto, accepting liberal logics when they celebrate and defend open systems – even if they really are critical of existing liberalism, as I certainly have been. It is likely that Anonymous or any advocate of free movement also might fail to recognize the darker side of that acceptance. I mean that their assertion of the right to circulate anonymously, if not also invisibly, carries with it the logics of insecurity tied to circulation; and these logics will be articulated immediately or at some point in control and governance orders.

MR V: But even if they were to recognize this, there is still the question whether any mobilized group can move beyond the traps and vulnerabilities they face? This takes us right back to thinking about the trade-off between liberty and security, which I still happen to believe is a legitimate way to think about all this because it forces us to weigh the implications of the policies and practices we might or might not support.

LATHAM: I think your attempt to snap us back to the possibilities of a trade-off between liberty and security is an effort to get to some imagined golden mean where just the right amount of both can be obtained. But don’t you see that such a mean can never sustain freedom because a huge amount of order enforcement is necessary to keep it operational. Otherwise the mean or balance could never be maintained beyond some limited originary moment.

MR V: It might be the opposite, where we have historical periods when organized power like security programs move out way beyond what a polity is able to govern in some collective or democratic fashion – and that creates a tension as we see with the attention given to the Snowden revelations. In time, formal mechanisms can emerge to contend with it.

LATHAM: You mean as in conventions on war and nuclear weapons that, it has been often observed, serve to legitimate war and weapons?

MR V: I am as concerned as you about the extremes of security, which have brought us to this table in the first place.

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LATHAM: Yes, but is it really reasonable to assume just because we get formal regulation it means some sort of balance is achieved? Why not the regulation of non-balance? For the NSA the FIFA court seems to be good at that; and we’ll see whether Congressional regulation just ends up normalizing total surveillance. When we started today you seemed quite cynical about anything real happening in terms of reining surveillance programs in. So, if you apply that to your notions of trade-offs between liberty and security, it looks pretty bleak.

MR V: Perhaps rather than seeing balance as something that can actually be obtained, it might be best to treat it as a norm that allows societies to make claims against states and corporations when things get extreme.

LATHAM: That assumes that society is aware of the extremity. One of the important things Snowden showed was how much surveillance and intelligence work has moved to the private sector. It was an evasion that commenced in a big way earlier in the last decade when Congress rejected the original total awareness program associated with John Poindexter.90 If officials face limits established in some great “collectively arrived pursuit of a just balance” – well, they just try to avoid them. From the perspective of those surveilled and the harms produced by surveillance, evasion is the strategy most likely adopted to avoid attack, infiltration, or being labeled and identified. It entails either moving outside the terrain of governance, power, surveillance and constraint, or remaining within the terrain and attempting to circumvent these forces; in effect running in between the sinews of order and governance, say, to create micro islands of self-determined collectivity.90 We typically think of evasion as a practice of avoidance, and avoidance can be thought of in spatial terms as requiring movement. When we move away to avoid something like a gaze or force put on us we are trying contain that gaze or force and keep it from intruding or engaging with us. We position ourselves elsewhere. There is also a less directly spatial approach to evasion that complements this directly spatial approach. It entails establishing and enforcing norms that prevent intrusion or constructing restraints such as physical and software barriers or walls. The powerful get to do this with laws, especially relating to property. But we think in more general terms about national borders doing the same thing for an entire society.

MR V: Actually I’ve always been a bit troubled by this. Boundaries and constraints are easily understood to be consistent with liberalism. Otherwise, the sort of liberty Isaiah Berlin wrote of has little meaning – you create the spaces of liberty, of self-determination.91 And what I also see is, once you bring security into the

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90 This important aspect of evasion was discussed in greater detail later, see Chapter 4.

mix around the issues we’re talking about, walls become problematic because they are a way for groups like Anonymous to form a sort of cocoon. To evade intrusion allows for the creation of spaces that are like the black boxes you mentioned – and this only prompts the state to speculate and suspect. This puts us right back to your concern with the imposition of identity by the state.92

LATHAM: A cocooning strategy has another problem that I think is even more significant than the potential it has to limit access or trigger the state to impose identities. That’s the prospect that it might limit the circulation of the group itself, cocooned or stuck within its own social spaces.

MR V: If the social purpose of the group is confronting power over issues of rights and security, then this becomes a self-limiting approach. It’s sort of like a self-evasion. In security terms, states might welcome this limitation, even if they don’t like being blocked from accessing these groups and achieving some legibility. Of course, the way out is to rely on spying. You could say the state gets a triple payoff: the cocooned group is self-limited; the state can still access it through clandestine methods; and they get to construct the identity of the group according to state security interests.

LATHAM: Well, state espionage is not the only way to contend with this tension. Even though there are differences between media and self-consciously disruptive, civil disobedient activism, what we call autonomous media seeks to overcome the limits we are talking about and is suggestive as a model. Autonomous media, as opposed to just alternative media, seeks both a separate zone and interaction with power and authority that is confrontational.93 Autonomous media like pirate radio stations seek to circulate in a clandestine or elusive fashion to avoid the constraints of state and corporate security forces.94 It depends on operating from a relatively safe place that can also be a space that such groups and individuals govern themselves.

MR V: In the model you seem to be talking about autonomous space seems to be walled off in a soft or porous sort of way. Soft because there have to be points of exit and entry in order to confront, circulate, or disseminate information, music, or whatever. But once this sort of soft separation approach is adopted the insecurities around penetration and infiltration come back into play.95 And this means that a

93 On the distinction see Scott Uzelman, “Hard at work in the bamboo garden: Media activists and social movements,” in Autonomous Media: Activating Resistance and Dissent, (eds.) Andrea Langlois and Frédéric Dubois, (Montreal, Canada: Cumulus Press, 2005.)
94 The blending between the two occurs in pirate media, made famous in the 2009 film Pirate Radio. The evasive tactics of pirate media are well known.
group might have to adopt tactics of evasion within their own space. It’s easy to see how this produces a lack of trust among group members.

LATHAM: Fair enough. That’s why taking on more radical tactics and strategies might be expected. Two approaches to this come to mind. One approach can be borrowed from Anarchism, and that’s to foster or at least accept disorder as an evasive tactic. I remember a very interesting book about invisible governance in Africa pointing out that in African societies disorder can be seen as protective or progressive because as it offers a cover or mask to avoid direct, deep conflict across say ethnic and class lines. For Anonymous sowing disorder and confusion can potentially render identities, strategies, and organizational structures illegible, helping make surveillance less effective; and maybe this approach even incapacitates programs and strategies that attempt to establish control.

MR V: But there’s an argument to be made that powerful state and corporate interests can exploit disorder quite effectively. Let’s not forget that just as disorder might create an opening for the weak, it might make it that much easier for the strong to, as we’ve said, outflank opponents through identity construction. We saw this recently in the designation of the Occupy Movement as confused and unfocused.

“No pure, angelic form of liberalism”

LATHAM: There’s a second approach. It perhaps addresses the flaws and weaknesses of the disorder approach. It’s the attempt to use fragmented and distributed organization. It is well known that distribution, dispersion, and fragmentation were originally celebrated in the military and defense worlds as desired characteristics of networks. Distributed structures were seen as being resilient even when faced with disruptions as extreme as a nuclear attack. In terms of confrontation and evasion, this distribution can be put in practice by making sure that only isolated aspects of a group are visible in such things as forums like 4chan or websites like anonnews.org. Or by making sure that in any alliances or collaborations, say between Anonymous and WikiLeaks or Occupy Wall Street, only limited aspects of the groups are linked. You might also establish minimal, weak, non-hierarchical (“leaderless”) connections among sub-units.

MR V: This sort of tactic was famously applied by the French Resistance during World War Two, so it’s nothing new.

LATHAM: Absolutely. In terms of vulnerability, what the organizational technique of the clandestine cell holds out is the promise that the exposure and destruction of any given sub-unit will not undermine the entire network. The main vulnerability, of course, is to a successful so-called “counter-insurgency campaign,” that can include widespread use of undercover or counter-agents or informants who can take up positions within the dispersed network. But even if a large number of sub-units are destroyed a collective, organizational identity can still persist, ready to be reproduced, in the least because new sub-units and recruits can emerge. And, as this circulating group identity is distributed and gets reproduced it can develop and deepen, making it less vulnerable to the information outflanking efforts we spoke of just before. We might have seen this with Al Qaeda as the identity seems to have been taken up across the globe.

MR V: I’ve let you go on with this familiar talk of distributed tactics in hope you would arrive at some ultimate evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of various evasive tactics and strategies. How do you evaluate whether the adoption of a clandestine cell organization runs counter or not to the advancement of open systems and communications rights in a progressive liberal context? Evasive confrontation is one thing, say, where anyone motivated and able can participate, under the veil of anonymity, in a digital campaign to confront what offends them politically. We saw this with the Anonymous-related group Lulzsec in their effort to expose the widening role of military-industrial firms operating at the US-Mexico border. Despite the problems I might have with these sorts of efforts, at least I can see the connection to open systems. However, it’s quite another thing when talking about building a clandestine cell network – with all the forms of closure, containment, restricted communication, and mistrustful scrutiny. From my side of things, I have not lost sight of the possibility that state security outfits and corporations might be making these sorts of actions seem necessary, given how involved we are in framing evasive confrontation as terrorism – a framing that is backed up with deepening surveillance and restrictiveness. This risks more than

99 See, for example Kevin C. Leahy, “The impact of technology on the command, control, and organizational structure of insurgent groups,” (Scranton, OH: University of Scranton, PhD thesis, 2005).

100 In the case of Anonymous although phony or frivolous hackers can also take up positions this is less likely if extreme repression is underway, as the cost of pretending or dawbling is too high.

101 Readers can see one example studied in Maria Ressa, Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda’s Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia, (New York: Free Press, 2004). That the US government may also overplay the Al Qaeda card and “see Al Qaeda everywhere” likely reinforces the value of the identity.

mistaken arrest or detention. It means moving away from the maintenance and development of liberal communication norms.

LATHAM: The strategic and tactical are as much a part of liberalism and openness as rights and principles are. After all, the basic logic of circulation is a strategy of social relations and the organization of space. Liberal order is full of designs and design principles. If the right to free speech is meant to establish certain capacities and limits, the same can be said about the organizational tactics of Anonymous. These tactics make possible meaningful and robust confrontation.

MR V: In the end this sounds like an indirect endorsement of liberalism. I hear you really saying that liberalism is the best route to openness, which I think is consistent with what you said earlier. In that spirit, I have to say that the continued commitment to openness on the net is heartening, even though it is increasingly tenuous and limited. We are running out of time today. So let’s take a second to think about whether there might be some ways forward for dealing with the deepening security we see today, without forcing our systems and lives into chaos – with groups popping up making order nearly impossible. Perhaps the two forces of security and free circulation can serve as moderating cross-pressures: the one keeping systems open while the other is insuring such openness does not make safety untenable.

LATHAM: My view on liberalism, at least from the perspective of political orders that have been put into practice, is that it is the system that most establishes the possibility for mobility and expression. Academic critiques of liberalism – and I include my own – often take that possibility for granted. That said, the criticisms we’ve touched on especially of specific liberal formations need to be taken seriously – their coexistence with racism, neglect of social rights, emphasis on market relations, and repressive encounters with identity and criticism. I take our whole conversation so far as to suggest these co-existences don’t only exist because liberalism and openness is shot through with structures of power, as is any social form; but rather that they are produced by liberal order. Perhaps the wider point is that openness and freedoms are not the only stakes of an order, with social justice and material wellbeing being two other stakes. But these are issues we can take up another time if you like. I would say, for now, I think we have some basic agreement that no matter how strong liberalism’s commitment to openness might be, it will still entail closures and containments.

MR V: But this just goes back to the well-worn point we’ve already reminded each other of: order, no matter what its form is, well, ordered and thus closed and contained as you say.

LATHAM: Yes, but that is just a starting point, a point of departure for thinking this through, like the observation that power runs through an order. What matters is how these elements take form in an order – how those forces and logics become part of an order. I think our discussion of closure and security suggests that there is no pure, angelic form of liberalism. Security is baked in to it.
MR V: Sounds a bit like rewarmed Frankfurt School.103

LATHAM: My point is to underline how much we might have to be alarmed about any developments around power, security, and containment; and be mindful of emerging forms of domination that do not fit the traditionally-made distinctions between freedom and authoritarianism.104 I would also suggest that as we look to the future we might be able to extract the elements that are valuable in the liberal tradition like its language of rights and resituate them in newly imagined formations that move beyond the unfortunate limits of liberal order. We have the example of liberal socialism, however flawed, as a very early twentieth-century attempt at this.105 It well might be that the confrontational groups Anonymous and WikiLeaks help us think more productively about this. I also think it fair to say that seeking to reduce the tensions between openness and security is an understandable desire. But eliminating them is ultimately impossible. Circulation is not only a core aspect of liberalism; it’s also a core problem. If we are only focusing on the positive side to freedom of movement and rights to communicate, we risk missing how even the openness to openness that marks liberalism is also productive of closure and fear. I think this makes any moderation a bit of a chancy prospect and one that might only hold for specific moments.

MR V: But it’s a big jump from these general points to communication politics.

LATHAM: Digital communications systems represent a sort of new terrain for liberal order. It is hardly clear, based on what we have discussed, whether it will remain ordered liberally even in the form that’s been diminished by the practices of the NSA and Facebook. It’s not even clear how it might be configured if it does remain open. Anonymous and WikiLeaks represent the limit or test cases for this digital terrain, as do all the individual and collective efforts to contest political and economic power online from the Middle East to Latin America. And, I would add, the whistleblowers like Snowden.

MR V: Heaven help up us if our political future depends on them. In any event, where do we go from here?


LATHAM: I have to say I am not content with the way that – despite my best efforts – we have failed to avoid the freedom versus repression framings that call out for a resolution at the level of the nation-state. I don’t think it takes us nearly far enough in gaining some analytical vantage point to better understand the deepening security trends, to say nothing of neoliberalism. And if, more broadly, the contexts of political and social order are changing then the very meaning of openness has to be re-evaluated. Also, we have to consider how we might begin to think about what progressive alternatives might counter these trends and changing contexts. In my view, this suggests that to make some progress in thinking about this it would be helpful to put the state itself into question as the locus of justice and rights. Something I hope we can address next time we meet.

*Mr V. responded somewhat skeptically, clearly wanting some closure on the day:*

If we must. It’s time to run so we can consider that next time.
2 Resistance, time, and the state in question

When I joined Mr V for our second meeting at the same cafe as agreed, meeting him next to the service counter, I felt some anxiety about his sense of how things went last time. After some quite polite greetings, we sat down at another booth. Mr V all but burst out:

I have to tell you I am starting this meeting a bit wary because of the challenge you laid on me about the state at the end of our last meeting. I acquiesced pro forma when we departed but I don’t know. As I hope you understand, I’m quite game for questioning all sorts of institutions, relations, or logics of power. But there are limits to even that. I really don’t see what might be gained by bringing into question the legitimacy and existence of the state. Either it’s done from an Anarchist perspective or something like a state of nature. And we both know that what the early modern political theorists like John Locke did in imagining a pre-state world with their states of nature was to create a device that really just made a case for the existence of the state. This is quite the opposite of questioning its existence.

“Between permanence and temporariness”

LATHAM: Perhaps I was being a bit presumptuous in trying to justify shifting our discussion in this direction, just as we were ending things last time. Let me just say that you might be looking at what can be gained or lost in questioning the state too much from your own historical vantage point. Even though those early modern theorists surely were not in the least Anarchists, in their time they could easily be seen as questioning the taken-for-granted, legitimate authority of their day. They were asking, after all, about how the state justifies itself without relying on concepts of divine right. I would argue the equivalent of that now might be the assumption that the state is a natural, settled institution.

MR V: With all the politics running through the state, how is it ever to be taken as settled?

LATHAM: By settled I mean something that is taken for granted as fundamental to the very existence of the contemporary social world, the way language is. For
the most part, the early modern and modern theorists – and it gets complicated with Hobbes – were successful in showing how you could justify the state by anchoring it in the rights of peoples and nations; and then connect these rights to specific forms of political life. Of course the form we spoke of quite a bit last time is liberalism. We can add republicanism and the civic life its adherents aspired to. Through the centuries it became apparent that these forms of political life could be varied and not necessarily progressive, in some cases because of the linkages to the socio-cultural aspirations of nationalism or the longing for order and security in the face of disruptions – even the kind we dwelled on the other week.

MR V: It may be a bit too convenient and neat for you to let the theorists stand in for all the political messiness and overlap across the centuries.

LATHAM: Yes, but if we get caught up in the specific, historic political forms and order we never to get to question the state. We just take it for granted as an historical object. The point is to at least start with the justifications for a state that seems to no longer need much justification as a political entity. So, maybe to better understand the state’s necessity – and how we might question it – we need to think about how it might be rendered illegitimate today. I have no intention of rehearsing and interrogating the arguments of modern political theory for the state or a particular form of state. I think we will gain a much better sense of where the state is and might be going in the current political moment by un-naturalizing it. This should speak directly to some of the concerns with which you came into the discussion with me.

MR V: This approach does not make that much sense to me: analyze the state’s necessity by seeing if it’s legitimate or not? But I will give you some benefit of the doubt to see where you want to take this.

LATHAM: Then let me start by returning to the Foucauldian concept of circulation we considered quite a bit in our last meeting; and let me see if I can summarize your position. Although the circulation concept as posed by Foucault is meant to suggest that circulation produces threat and the problem of security, I think you basically implied that when all is said and done about disruption it is not clear there are any serious threats to existing states and social orders posed by the seemingly decentralized, fragmented, and evasive forms of activism of the last decades. This seems to hold whether we are dealing with the streets or the web.

Mr V shot back very suddenly:

I would go along with that assessment, on the assumption that the state can maintain its authoritative – and sovereign – claims over the nature of territory, borders, society, and of course movement of people, goods, and what not. And I mean authoritative in the sense that its actions and pronouncements are adhered to.

LATHAM: I might add – and I want to emphasize this today – we have to also consider the authority the state has over claims about political time itself;
especially what counts as permanent, and what counts as temporary. If you think about the challenges we discussed in our last meeting – whether it’s protests against current policies or alternative assertions for organizing social and political life – these are based on temporary organizational formations. You applied the label transient to this sort of activism last time. This is why I raised the circulation concept again. We didn’t really get into it, but I think it is obvious that advocates of alternative or experimental approaches to political and economic life find this openness or provisional status attractive – whether they are formally identified with Anarchism or not. And they can feel that state-like claims to permanence and closure are exactly what should be resisted. The price of this inclination, as you have maintained, is that the claims of states to be permanent and sovereign are likely consistently to outflank and overwhelm alternatives, whether we are dealing with the organization of space, social relations, justice, or political status.

MR V: You might add to that assessment, what I thought you were just getting at. OK, you have the state laying claim to being a permanent political form, against other potential forms; and this is something that troubles advocates of these non-state, non-permanent forms. But their purposeful aligning of themselves with temporariness is in part what puts them in a very weak position. I thought this was the case given the dominant orientation in the Occupy Movement toward horizontal experiments and such. But I would add something here. The state’s authority to pronounce on or designate what or who is temporary versus permanent goes to something very fundamental. I don’t just mean your non-state organizations or even temporary social programs or interventions that could be domestic or international. I mean also pronouncing on who gets to be a permanent member or citizen or who is limited to temporary status, say, on a work visa.

LATHAM: Yes, that’s a very important distinction. But let me push you on this a bit. Bringing political status and migration into the discussion is indeed quite consistent with that Foucauldian framing around circulation.

MR V: At this point I’m not sure what’s not consistent with it.

LATHAM: OK, but think about it: the prime threat to the town is the unknown or undesirable visitor or migrant. When I reflect on our discussion last time about transient activism and agency, I wonder if lurking behind your thinking is a desire to retain judgment about what you see as desirable or undesirable circulation. Being troubled about Anarchists, internet protesters and attackers, document-leaking enemies of the state… well, that is one side of a coin. On the other side are the undocumented migrants, refugees judged to have dubious claims, travelers who might be threatening, temporary workers that might be seeking to stay on. All of these groups stand in contrast to what we take to be the settled, assured citizenry; the ones who are supposed to be getting benefits from the state and justifying its existence. I suspect your desire to puzzle over the current political moment and the permeating, irruptive repression underway since 9/11 is directed to the welfare of this settled citizenry. But it is all these other categories of people that don’t fit
the settled citizen frame that allow us to treat the justification of the state as problematic.

Mr V raised his hand as though to signal I should stop. He then said:

You are being unfair; I can certainly be concerned about justice and status for, say, migrants, just like I can argue for internet freedom as long as such freedom is not abused through mischief. But I also can be wary, personally and officially, about people who violate or disrupt and generally raise serious security concerns. This includes for me actions from the Left or Right that might challenge ongoing efforts to reform migration and border enforcement or threaten violence and express intense hatred. I think you can guess I remain fully sympathetic to previous movements for justice and rights tied to African Americans, women, or gays. And I certainly think well of efforts to aid migrants like the US Sanctuary Movement that was organized around Central American refugees during the wars of the 1980s. But these movements were anchored in the domestic citizenry. The Sanctuary Movement was based on fairly widespread mobilization across the US, in churches and so on, even though it was directed to non-US citizens and was based on evading law enforcement. I have to say I do not understand how we would today even begin to approach movements advocating for meaningful forms of inclusion for those who might be seen as threatening and perpetually marginal. Look at the lack of civil engagement around Native Americans. I am aware that there are activist groups operating like No One is Illegal.

LATHAM: There were rallies for immigration rights across US cities that were hardly small-time affairs.

MR V: Even so, these seem to be more marginal efforts compared to the wider, sustained social movements of only a couple decades ago. To my mind our primary attention has to be given to making our domestic realm work for our citizenry. What I am worried about is the way the state may be drifting into increasing distrust toward the citizenry at the same time as it opens the way further toward abandonment of public welfare. If we can’t get this right then what do these marginal groups have to aim for when they seek inclusion in a society like America?

LATHAM: I would like to come back to the distrust issue later. It is an important issue, for sure, but right now I feel you are avoiding the question of the status of the state that you agreed you are willing to discuss. You seem to be trying to


construct a circular trap, I mean a chicken and egg problem with the “why bother be part of America” logic. But this thinking assumes the states we now have as the basis of political life. I am asking us to look past that circle and ask what happens if we question the permanent political settlement that is the nation-state. I think avoidance of any serious questioning is a rather significant evasion, and you are playing right into it.

MR V: But if the state and most everyone else takes this permanent settlement, as you call it, for granted as a natural reality – or fact on the ground – then there is no evasion going on, since evading has no meaning if there is not some conscious effort to avoid or circumvent.

LATHAM: I am not singling you out personally as being evasive. I’m just pointing to a sort of existential evasion that takes place in the naturalization of the state’s permanence. The formation of the state as permanent evades the possibility of taking on a political form or status that is temporary.

MR V: I think you can say this for just about anything that takes on one form and not another. Just by being X, you evade being Y. OK, so what?

LATHAM: That this form of evasion is prevalent makes it trivial in your view. In my view, it lends significance to it. It appears throughout the political world and in ways we take for granted. It appears, for example, in the context of secession movements and civil wars; where typically the state per se that is being challenged is not put in question as an entity. It’s just one particular settlement or version of it that includes the part seeking independence, to form its own state. We can see this in movements in Spain, Canada, Belgium, and Sri Lanka to name but a few.

MR V: I’ll grant you there’s a great deal of socio-legal machinery and thought set in place to guarantee the permanent status of the state in the worlds of law, territorial organization, and citizenship; to say nothing of the fact that the state not only lays claim to permanence and endurance but also to its standing as the arbiter of justice, right, and security.

LATHAM: Recall Locke may have left open the door to revolution against a particular government, regime, or form of state if a people came to believe it was not benefiting them – but he also assumed an enduring people and its need for a state.

MR V: We get nowhere politically if we can’t count on some authority to take us there.

LATHAM: But that’s exactly it! I am coming to believe that the distinction between permanence and temporariness really is critical to understanding the authority of the state and to how we might begin to question it in a particularly vital way. This is not just a matter of the state setting itself up as permanent but of permanence itself being a very attractive status. Through this status the state has managed to anchor itself in powerful ways within modernity. So if you are willing to run through some arguments on this with me, I think we might be able to better
understand what could be at stake in any attempt to arrive at a political and social outcome at this juncture that is just if not also more free. You have said that is your ultimate interest, even though I am sure you would not chose to arrive there based on what I am proposing.

Mr V smirked and then quickly said:

That hasn’t stopped you so far.

LATHAM: Well, at least there is the further attraction that by exploring what I propose we can actually discuss forces and logics that relate to all three categories we just spoke of: settled citizenries; politicized challengers to settlements, such as Anarchists; and migrants, who can be seen sometimes as challengers – say, when they defy migration restrictions. Although, of course, we might more easily see them as supporters of permanent settlement, when they do all they can to join a settlement like the US in pursuit of citizenship.

MR V: But I am not sure, I get where this will lead because we can’t wish permanence away from our political life. As you imply, it has value and this means that it does not make much sense criticizing the state because it tries to establish this value in its laws, human rights norms, or efforts to provide physical security. Also, I’m not sure whether in the sort of critique of permanence you seem to be after you are, ultimately, looking for a way out of being forced into these categories. I don’t see any way out. I say this not just as a naysayer but because I think it is obvious that the distinction of permanence and temporariness is fundamental in a Kantian sense, basic to our perceptions of time, history and so on.

LATHAM: I think you are right that moving beyond the binary is a difficult matter. I am less certain than you it’s not possible. And by “moving beyond” I don’t just mean a continuum of permanence and temporariness, where one could point to hybrid categories like the “temporarily permanent” or the “permanently temporary.” These hybrids do usefully express inconsistencies in policy and practice, say where a migrant is allowed to linger with temporary work permit status for years on end; or someone faces the potential of their citizenship being revoked.

MR V: These are unfortunate complications.

LATHAM: The problem with them is that hybrids also reinforce the legitimacy of the temporal distinctions they are based on in the first place; especially because they imply that a just status is a truly permanent one or one that is permanently permanent. If we are serious about questioning the supremacy of permanence…

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Mr V jumped in:

You mean you, not we.

LATHAM: OK, me. Either way, to question this requires a far more radical approach than hybridization. To get to that approach I’m asking that you consider the possibility that these durational distinctions are, in the end, temporal claims put forward by state agencies as well as by social groups.

MR V: Of course, that is easy to grant. After all, what else do we have in the socio-political realm other than claims that are taken as legitimate and become institutionalized – or they fall away into oblivion. But I am afraid recognizing that conventions and norms are constructed is not really what you are after, or what you mean by a more radical approach. I have to say that I have some real hesitation considering any more radical approaches right now.

LATHAM: Well, I don’t think we can get at the full extent of what you are calling a more radical approach with the time we have this afternoon. So you are off the hook to some degree. But I do think we can consider a starting point that puts into question the status of the state as a natural political condition and confronts the existential evasion I spoke of.

With raised eyebrows and a slightly bobbing head Mr V said:

MR V: If we must, we must. But I’m not sure I see the point of this.

“The enduring and the transient”

LATHAM: Hear me out and let me begin with the point that there is really nothing exceptional about trying to contrast the state’s claim to permanence with the range of things thought of as temporary, from migration to street protests. In the bigger picture, the contrast of the temporary and permanent is part of whole bodies of thought in Western modernity, critical, and otherwise. Recently, I’ve been interested in how the distinction between permanence and temporariness can be seen to really be just one form of a much more general distinction between what we can call the enduring and the transient.

MR V: I really don’t get why you are trying to take this discussion in this sort of direction.

LATHAM: I am bringing up this theoretical context because I want to start our discussion off by recognizing that the state’s claim to permanence is not some arbitrary political move but a status available to it because it is part of the context of Western modernity.

MR V: And it’s no surprise that, in that context, the state would chose to identify itself as permanent.
LATHAM: No, it isn’t but the state is not in a political and social vacuum. For instance, while the nation-state is taken to be enduring, it has often been contrasted, these past decades, with the forces of globalization that are typically understood to be fluid flows of images, ideas, goods, technologies, and bodies. Another version of this sort of contrast was articulated by Manuel Castells in his space of places versus the space of flows,⁴ where the places can be a national territory as well as a corporate headquarters, factory, or university. You can even see something related in the work of Deleuze and Guattari.⁵ On the one hand, they put forward state territorialisation and what they call striated spaces that can be seen as spaces ordered like graph paper. This is contrasted, on the other hand, with rhizomatic and nomadic mobilities operating in smooth, non-striated, spaces. And, of course, Nietzsche opposed Dionysian frenzy to well-ordered and mannered Apollonian forms.⁶ Related to that is the opposition anthropologist Victor Turner offered between the normal or structured forms of life and culture and the liminal periods when roles and expectations fall away into open and more chaotic moments of celebration or even orgy.⁷

MR V: It feels like a great distance to move from these lofty frameworks to political life on the ground.

LATHAM: It’s not hard to find meaningful contrasts in everyday institutions. Take, for example, political institutions like a political party that is meant to be an enduring political force and contrast it with flash mobs that come together for political action but are meant to just as quickly dissolve away.

MR V: Thank you.

I could not help but laugh at this and understood it was meant to be funny. I then said:

But seriously, these theorists are speaking to real social and political life. Consider, for a second, how the enduring-ephemeral distinction has appeared across bodies of sociological and anthropological thought. George Simmel distinguished what he called constancy with flux. On one side, he saw a world with its more enduring objects like buildings and selves struggling to build a sustainable life. On the other side, he had the transient money values and emotions.⁸ There’s Hannah Arendt’s thought of enduring works in art and institutional life that she contrasts with the

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comings and goings of everyday life.9 Also relevant is James Scott’s distinction between state systems of order and visibility that take on an enduring character versus the untidy and intricate relations of society that don’t.10 In history there is the well-known *longue durée* of Fernand Braudel that stands opposed to events.11 In philosophy we have Badiou’s distinction between a situation, which is in part our enduring social structures or fields versus an event like a revolution, which can rupture a situation.12 And in Ranciere there is the distribution of the sensible, which is – to be simplistic – a sort of semantic context that is contrasted with specific discourse and acts.13 These binaries are not just lofty concepts; they tell us about the character of our social and political life.

MR V: I imagine this list could go on for some time. What I’m concerned with knowing is how to judge the value of the permanent versus the temporary. Obviously my bias is toward the permanent. But I can see in your suggested examples both have value. I guess you want me to recognize that there is no intrinsic reason to judge that the just or the good is associated with only the enduring. Although, if I had to say it, among the most contemporary thinkers you mentioned there seems to be a bias toward the transient – which is, of course, consistent with an interest in openness, possibilities, and ruptures. This likely reflects your bias. I notice you didn’t mention John Locke and the difference between enduring natural rights and more transient arbitrary tyranny. When I think in these terms I find it understandable why our political life has valued the enduring and why I might like to keep it that way.

LATHAM: And how do you fit in revolutions?

MR V: Certainly there would be little political and social progress without ruptures, openings, and even versions of political revolution as we have just seen in the Middle East. Locke worked both ends, so to speak, as he surely was no enemy of political change and revolution as you already mentioned. We all know well that political and social possibilities in history have depended on rupture, rapid transformations, and reworking of the world as it is.14 But it’s because permanence is so important in political life that the change has value. I mean rupture moves us from one condition of persistence to the next, we hope in a progressive direction.

LATHAM: Thank you, another example of existential evasion.

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MR V: Maybe so, but permanence, or endurance as you put it, is what is needed to put in place some sort of lasting common good. It’s what law offers us as a dependable way forward to find some lasting justice. I cannot imagine that you would accept that efforts to, say, undo sexual exploitation, racist practice, or workplace abuse should be open to revision or revocation. A point has to be reached where citizens can come to count on the persistence of some fundamentals in their social and political lives. You mentioned refugees. Well, I can’t imagine many who would be content to remain as refugees and would not feel more secure being granted citizenship. I wonder if people we can identify as economic migrants who happen to feel forced to shuttle periodically between their old and relatively new residence wouldn’t be far more content to be able to settle in the new one. We might say the same thing about indigenous people that are contending with oppression and dispossession faced decade after decade. They are not out looking for a way forward that is provisional.\(^{15}\) From a very different angle I think it’s fair to say that democracies depend on some stability in conditions or relations so there is some transparency. It takes time for the public to figure things out – and then to fashion strategies to challenge things observed that are objectionable.

LATHAM: Actually, Sheldon Wolin and Sylviane Agacinski are two political philosophers who each in their own ways argued that the time of democracy is slower than the time of global capital and media which have been associated with speed: a point I think that is consistent with your observation.\(^{16}\) Of course there is a difference between slowness and the temporariness we have been discussing, in that you could have different durations of temporariness – three year temporary stays somewhere as opposed to one year visits.

MR V: Either way, it is clear to me that both speed and temporariness involve movement, rapid change, and flexibility. And I suspect you might be interested in them because speed and temporariness allow for significant evasion – not just of the democratic process but also of lasting, abiding commitments to the public good and popular institutions. While you may be concerned with an existential evasion in the very establishment of the state, I am concerned with the ongoing

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forms of challenge to public life, such as sudden shifts in domestic policy or the relatively swift introduction of military technology like drones that run way ahead of any lasting commitment to an ethics that might help inform a foreign policy.

LATHAM: And yet it’s the baseline existence of the authoritative permanent state that allows for these shifts. They depend on the ever-ready reproduction of the permanent settlement, in the laws, policies, and doctrines that express themselves as permanent. The state’s rejection of the claims of groups such as migrants or the indigenous, who might contest the settlement, also depends on it.

MR V: I’m just not sure there’s a way, even if one wanted to, to upend the core relationship between a people and the assertions that it requires a state.

LATHAM: Once you define a people as state-needy you have already disregarded and circumvented – or really evaded – the forms of possible social and political life that do not fit this concept of the people. Historians have begun to analyze the quite different social and political possibilities imagined by indigenous communities in North America as it was being colonized.17

MR V: But I would venture that any attempt to reject a given permanent settlement in practical terms will in the end lead to secession. These outsider or marginal groups will go about establishing their own states so they can have independence and self-determination. I recall this sort of repetition was criticized by Frantz Fanon.18 How often has this played out in the history of the last century from Africa to the Middle East? The alternative to this quest for permanence would be to suffer a temporariness that really means considerable insecurity. Without a durable way to overcome what a group believes are basic injustices like land seizure or ethnic cleansing, it risks reducing much of the group’s collective action to a fleeting process. You mentioned Hannah Arendt a bit ago and I think we both can recognize that she considered permanence to be very important for political life.19 I was always struck by how she went out of her way to make clear that the creative activities of all of us who are politically active should be able to leave an enduring mark on the world – a mark that should not just be left to the leaders to decide on. I recall that she compared slaves as notably unable to leave any marks on the world, passing without any vestige. From the other side, she held that those who are new to a polity, like migrants or newborns, should be able to come into a world that is legible to them so they can act politically. Legibility of this sort presupposes some settled social facts that can be mapped out and known, from laws to public squares.

18 You can see this in Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 148–205.
19 This is most pointedly explored in Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, (Chicago, IL, US: The University Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 50–54.
LATHAM: You’re right that I feel compelled to search after some way to make the temporary have resonance in the world; to somehow make the transient into something that increases justice and transforms social and political relations in ways that enhance wellbeing. At the same time I do recognize the value of the enduring from a justice perspective, as you make clear. I would say what I puzzle over is whether it is possible to unhinge this value from permanence and allow it to be connected to political formations and acts that do not rely on permanence claims. This means finding links between the sort of values you point to and the things I find compelling about non-permanent forms – like the possibility of open, provisional alliances among social movements. The larger question in all of this is whether we really are just condemned to bounce between the two temporal registers of permanence and temporariness. Addressing that question starts to move us toward the basic challenge to the state I have asked us to take seriously today. If we can find some way to at least mediate temporality to get somewhere else politically, then it suggests the state, at least as we now know it today, need not be taken as natural, as a political necessity.

MR V: But why go through all this effort when we have the state and the promise of permanently arrived at justice, with the possibility of building on prior accomplishments as citizenries strive for greater and greater justice? In this formula we get the best of both sides of your binary: temporariness in the strivings for new forms of justice and permanence in the locking in of what is achieved. This standpoint is easily transposed to the concerns you mentioned earlier about migrants and Natives. Very simply, both groups should be able to achieve citizenship with all the benefits and securities it offers.20 Even though, like all forms of progress and change, it will come only with political struggle.

LATHAM: Let me address your last point, and by doing so I hope to establish why your reasoning leads me, at least, to put the state in question. The argument that the best way to achieve justice is to seek permanence, I’d say too easily evades the matter of what happens after permanent status or recognition is offered to some people or a group. How many migrants will be granted the option of a road to citizenship? How many First Nations might achieve some fair recognition of tribal rights or full autonomy while others are left out? The very effort to achieve permanence sets up a divide between those for whom permanence becomes feasible and those who are still on the outside. This divide and emphasis on the benefits of permanence, of course, does the work of reinforcing the inferiority status of non-permanence. I might add, this becomes especially problematic when you consider that all along any route toward permanence – or permanently arrived at justice – those on their way there typically face some form

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20 The argument Mr V is putting forward has a long history but most recently it has been expressed in recent legislation in the US around pathways to citizenship for undocumented migrants already in the US. Relevant also is the notion of “pathways to permanence” starting with residence. See S. Valiani, The Temporary Foreign Worker Program and its Intersection with Canadian Immigration Policy, (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 2008).
of transient or provisional status. Legislating pathways and roads to citizenship in the US holds out hope of offering the undocumented a way toward permanence – but actually, historically, migrants have faced and likely will continue to face a very long and iffy road there – last I looked the road was fifteen years long. 21

MR V: But again, the pain of struggle in the face of tenuous conditions from unemployment to lack of citizenship status is only worth it if the prize of permanence is at the end a real possibility.

LATHAM: This suggests that it matters as to who must face this transience; or even risk never getting to your prized permanence. You acknowledge the necessity of politics and social conflict – and therefore transience – in order to gain progress, but I suspect for you the transience is meant to apply to settled national citizens even if they are unemployed workers; or those on the way to that status like documented migrants and refugees, rather than the undocumented. Theorists such as Michael Walzer justify self-determination and the right of a limited community to fashion a world for itself. 22 But they fail to bring political temporality into the picture. If they did, they might have to recognize that the pursuit of this just community, even with struggle, evades putting into question its own existence as a permanent community. Not only are certain community members coming together to say they can restrict membership in order to preserve a just community through a state, but they are far more profoundly, in my view, coming together to restrict what is asked of about the community. I find that more objectionable because it presupposes a limit on the very meaning and extent of justice.

MR V: But these undocumented are there in need of permanent status based on their own choices and actions to move, which of course can be very rational in the face of economic hardship, or, with refugees, in the face of war or environmental crises. Even in the case of Native Americans they often choose to contest permanent settlements over treaties because they are seen as unjust – and by doing so they remain in a provisional condition regarding all sorts of rights to land and self-governance. My point is that, just like those seeking progressive political change, things sometimes need to be thrown open in order to get to a new political settlement that, yes, is permanent.

LATHAM: We would not be first to point out that mobility is important to rights and justice, 23 in that if you cannot get from one place to another, whether these are real places or political conditions, the options for individual and collective change

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23 See for example Peter Adey and David Bissell, “Mobilities, meetings, and futures: An interview with John Urry,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 28 (1) (2010), p. 8. Of special note is Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), p. 120, who points to the importance of "the capacity to escape, to disengage, to 'be elsewhere.'"
are limited. So, we might both agree that we need to keep transience open as a political and social possibility. But how open and for whom? And why accept the permanent settlements of states that can be challenged by migrants, the indigenous, and those seeking substantial political change? That openness is by definition limited in Walzer’s world.

MR V: Political community and establishing enduring justice is exactly what makes the challenge to those limits possible in the first place. Otherwise, what do you fight over in your transient world?

LATHAM: You are putting this in stark, take it or leave it, terms. Consider for example the non-elite migrants, who are mobile in very limited ways. And the tragedy is that while they are condemned to temporariness it is a very narrow band and form of it. It’s not the progressive form you spoke of on the way to desired permanence. It’s a temporariness that is very much subordinate to and dependent on the permanence associated with the states and settled citizenries they confront; who have power over their destinies, which holds true even if they try to remain in the shadows of society without legal documents.

MR V: I did not say the struggle is an easy or short-term one. As I said, Native Americans have faced an almost unspeakable degree of struggle.

LATHAM: Yes, and First Nations have confronted a, so to speak, kettled politics of temporality. Most reservations were presented as temporary measures that slipped with time into permanent outcomes as the claims to permanence by Western states became clearer. You might have been alluding to this a minute ago. But it is really important to recognize that along the way in this process, transience was both imposed and contained as First Nations faced inconsistent and changeable policies by government agencies and rulings by courts.

MR V: OK, but how do we begin to think more broadly about these issues? You might also be setting up a stark contrast of privileged mainstream citizens versus the other, the migrants, the indigenous.

LATHAM: Right off the cuff I can say this same logic of contained transience might also be visible in austerity measures and cutbacks tied to neoliberalism, which I know you are concerned about. These have been especially pronounced since the crisis of 2008. I’d go as far as to say that the various social rights achieved by citizenries in the global North have shown themselves to be ephemeral in areas such as social security, education, and workers’ rights. It would seem your progressive two-step between transient struggles and permanent achievements is


hardly stable if not just plain elusive. What we end up with is permanence that is only really sustained in the claims of the state to its own authority over peoples and spaces – not in your permanently achieved justice. It’s not too much of a jump to claim that the mirror image of this within societies is seen in the hold settled-citizens of the right class and race have on what is taken to be permanent possession and inclusion versus exclusions and dispossessions that are changeable and transient for First Peoples, the poor, people of color, and non-elite migrants.

MR V: At least you are overcoming your own stark contrast by increasing who counts as the other to the permanence-seeking class. And I note you have citizens among these others. In any event, why can’t this dispossession and exclusion represent exactly the sort of challenge that any group, citizen or not, needs to mobilize around, just as labor, women and African Americans have done across the last century? They contested permanent settlements around work, gender exploitation, and race. I might add that they did so taking for granted the permanent state as a target of struggle – in order to make the permanent state better and more just. This is what makes progressive politics historically meaningful.

LATHAM: But why justify the existential evasion as to whether the state form is the best way for your progress?

Very quickly Mr V cut me off to say:

Please do not forget that you spoke at some length last time we met about how evasion need not be seen only in negative terms, as in when it seems necessary to evade surveillance, external control or a constraining set of norms – as we might see around something like racism that is institutionalized in laws such as Jim Crow. Also, historically, activists have pointed to the advantages of focusing on single issues like abortion rights, certain racial laws, or national independence. Meaning they strategically would need to evade the broader issues, say, of class or economic inequality that might otherwise take attention away from the issues their work addresses. So in order to get somewhere politically it is sometimes necessary to bracket the deeper issues you are concerned with. You can call it evasion but as we cleared up last time strategic evasions can be a good thing.

LATHAM: You are again assuming there is nothing that lies outside of the state as a context for justice and progress. I see this, really, as a containment of our political possibilities to one political form. It is an evasion. But you are right, strategically, around a single issue, it may be beneficial to evade. I guess my problem is that I am not sure what thinking or framework we use to decide when it is best to evade or not. What logic says that the political progressive aspirations of the dispossessed or excluded have to be addressed only through state-based

26 A classic study that addresses this in the feminist movements is Joyce Gelb, *Feminism and Politics: A Comparative Perspective*, (Berkeley, CA, US: University of California Press, 1989).
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political life? For you those needs and aspirations challenge the state to be better. Why not challenge the state over its very existence?

MR V: Given the monopoly over political life the state has enjoyed, any plea by you or anyone to look beyond the state seems fanciful.

LATHAM: I do understand that the examples that fit what I am talking about are few and far between. One that stands out is the Zapatista movement that does not seek to secede in the classic sense we spoke of but rather sees the Mexican state as something to be challenged in the hope that some post-state political form might be developed in Chiapas.27 I think the fancifulness of my plea will look less extreme once we discuss in more detail the nature of the state’s monopoly over political form; and once we consider the potential the alternatives to that monopoly may hold. These alternatives at this point are by definition limited to lurking in what you see as the realm of the fanciful. If you agree I would like to explore this terrain a bit.

MR V: I’ll go along just to get this out of the way. I think you will only end up validating my point that the only feasible way forward is to try to make the state more just and progressive.

“A standpoint from which to question the state”

LATHAM: We agree that for the state permanence is a pre-eminent status. To be able to endure or persist through time is a form of power.

MR V: I think the operative word for that persistence is sovereignty.

LATHAM: Certainly, sovereignty without endurance would be hard to make sense of. For me, at least, sovereignty assumes that there is at any given point in time, somewhere, an enduring locus of sovereignty, at least in symbolic terms. Perhaps ironically, that locus can change through time. Even if we assume that it’s the “people” that is the symbolic locus of sovereignty, what counts as the people changes across decades if not also centuries, taking on varying identities of race, ethnicity, and class.28

MR V: So what? The point is that the variation should not prevent us from recognizing an enduring, permanent general subject, a people in general terms such as the term “Americans” represents, that corresponds symbolically to the authoritative sovereignty of the state. If you think about it, without this enduring subject the very meaning of change evaporates since some stable entity needs to

27 You can gain a sense of this difference in A. Khasnabish, Zapatismo beyond Borders: New Imaginations of Political Possibility, (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
be there, so something can transform through time in its specific form: basic metaphysics here.

LATHAM: Touché. But there is a more interesting point here. OK, so we have a permanent subject – abstract, general, or whatever – on one side, and then the temporary manifestations and articulations of it on the other. It is not just the underwriting power of permanence that matters. The extent and scope of what has been put in play to produce permanence also matters. I have found the work of Ernst Kantorowicz and his great book, *The King’s Two Bodies*, extremely helpful for gaining a sense of the acts, practices, and logics laid down that sort of “permatized” the state from the Middle Ages onward, in such things as law and ritual. He shows how this was all done, initially based on the model of what the Church did to make and maintain itself as enduring. But what is done can be undone.

*Mr V jumped in, stepping on my last words, to say:*

Are you implying that these various customs and rules of Kantorowicz – that were put in place, as you say, to permatize the state – can somehow be de-permatized by comparable customs and rules that work to opposite effect? If so, you are really calling for an enormous effort. I do not see in the present or near future anything like the royal power that kings in the Middle Ages possessed to anchor and advance such an effort; certainly not civil society organizations, publics, or even corporations – whether acting on their own or together. Mind you this also would assume that the goal of taking on the state as permanent could somehow become a priority for a whole range of actors. I am aware there are anti-statists out there on the Left and Right, the Anarchists and Libertarians; and there is that Hardt and Negri argument about how progressive networks and communities could be seen as a multitude that can take on the state system and capitalism. But where is the political power that has the autonomy to undertake this effort that is even remotely like royal power in history? Not even the corporations have it. The communications activist we spoke of last time, Rebecca MacKinnon, calls them the new sovereigns but they have something approaching autonomous power at best only in their own internal business worlds. And why would corporations take on more if it doesn’t directly affect their profits?

LATHAM: Of course, when that world is global finance they exercise considerable power, don’t they?


MR V: I am not so conditioned by official life to not also see that while they don’t have the power to unwind the state, so to speak, they do still have tremendous private power that has huge influence on the state.

LATHAM: Yes, and one thing to consider is whether the private power of corporations over domains like health, energy, or housing in the end accumulates into a sort of distributed domination over an entire national realm— even in the absence of the concentrated authority of states or royalty. I guess it’s sort of the multitude in reverse. My sense is that this raises the stakes of creating and maintaining public institutions and spaces. I wrote a piece that made this argument about the internet where I tried to show that if the internet was left open it would be colonized by corporations. I suggested a public space or sphere had to be established and maintained. I didn’t use the language of permanence but now I realize clearly that I was taking for granted the claims of permanence that would maintain such a space as an enduring presence within the internet. I didn’t realize how much I was implicitly reinforcing permanence as a value, if not also the state.

MR V: Nothing wrong with us sharing a sense of realism about the relationship between justice, rights, and power. What’s the alternative?

LATHAM: Let’s consider this a bit through scrutiny of the standpoint of Anarchism, which is very clear about its aims of fashioning political life outside the state. We only really touched the surface in our last meeting.

With a wide grin Mr V quickly stated:

It’s not clear to me there is much beyond the surface.

LATHAM: I’d like to consider this a moment. Just because Anarchism emphasizes contingency does not necessarily mean it’s superficial; nor does it let it off the hook regarding the difficulties of building a movement or achieving change. Building a movement or community, even if you do it based on provisional networks or transient occupations of spaces, requires some approach to accumulating support and resources. And this means facing the tensions associated with permanence versus temporariness — and we raised this last time. Building a movement implies some sort of holding ground. At the same time, you face all sorts of injustice, control, repression, discipline, and hyper-security; and these


32 Readers should be clear that the state is a central but not exclusive focus of Anarchism, which also has concerned itself with the dominating power of capital and political parties. Those interested in gaining a sense of some of the range of issues in Anarchism can start with Jonathan Perkus and James Bowen, (eds.), Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005).
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Factors certainly do not make a normative commitment to contingent, open relations easy. You are forced to confront the question of what sort of actions to take and how to organize it in temporal terms. We have seen this dilemma play out in the ideas of Anarchists such as Hakim Bey, who felt compelled to move away from the exclusively fluid and temporary orientation that was inherent in his concept of temporary autonomous zones; arguing, subsequently, for a commitment to establishing permanent temporary autonomous zones. The idea is to create makeshift or interim formations that allow for a sort of foothold, even if they are experimental.

MR V: I’m not at all surprised this is an issue for them. It speaks to the power of permanence.

LATHAM: Another aspect to confronting the challenge of political accumulation might be to build spaces and organization that try to secure some lasting social change, without attempting to mirror state permanence claims. You could create an autonomous local community that refuses to speak and organize around permanence, contrary to the way Kantorowicz shows the state had historically done. Either way, in our current moment, Anarchism – and I’d say the same of almost any post-state movement – faces a double challenge: to identify desirable ways to organize political and social life that scale up in sustainable ways; and to do so in a way that doesn’t reproduce the permanence claims of the state. This is an important evasion for Anarchism and the politics of it is far from obvious.

MR V: At this point, I have lost track of how this line of argument helps me see from where and why the state ought to be questioned in a fundamental way. From what I can tell, you are trying to say that alternatives like Anarchism are what need to be brought into question.

LATHAM: What I’m trying to locate is a standpoint from which to question the state. What Locke and Hobbes did was locate a standpoint within an imagined past or counter-factual alternative government-less world to question divine, hereditary rights and power. That standpoint of course was a state of nature either as a basic form of civil society as in Locke’s case or an assortment of security-seeking individuals as in Hobbes’ case.

MR V: You’re not trying to reproduce that with Anarchism, are you?

LATHAM: I am suggesting that now that we’ve undergone the history of European state development – and moved long past those earlier theories – we can look to an imagined future that challenges and maybe negates the state. This is why I keep

See the description here by Hakim Bey, “Permanent TAZs,” Dreamtime Village, Winter 1994, Available at: http://dreamtimevillage.org/articles/permanent_taz.html (accessed January 7, 2011). See also how some of these dilemmas are considered in Richard Day, Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements, (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Day advocates concepts such as critical mass in limited spaces as a way to negotiate the binary.
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coming back to Anarchism. However, I would like to treat Anarchism not as some endpoint but as a departure point for thinking about challenging the state.

MR V: Being a point of departure assumes there is room for development. Only the state has shown that so far, not Anarchism.

LATHAM: I say departure because Anarchism faces the problem of temporality we keep coming back to. The question is whether it faces this problem because the state embodies permanence in its claims and this forces Anarchism to oppose the state with non-permanent approaches. Or perhaps even if we imagined the state out of existence, Anarchism would still have to contend with a temporal problem; in that it still would face the task of how to establish and maintain any hard won gains advancing justice and non-state life, without reinventing what, in effect, would be state power to embody or enforce the gains. Even long before achieving any hoped for Anarchist victories or post-state political moments, permanence and durability haunts Anarchist activism and mobilization.

Again Mr V jumped on my words, basically cutting me off, saying:

You can hardly blame any Anarchist activists for trying to build support for it as a movement. Being loose about this might partly explain the ephemeral appearance and disappearance of Occupy.

LATHAM: It’s still too early to make judgments about the wider impact of Occupy and how much we can blame anything on the movement per se, as opposed to the counter-actions of the state.34

MR V: It’s always easier to say something along the lines of, “but for the repression we faced we could have made a difference.”

LATHAM: We won’t get anywhere at this point arguing either way. I want to return to Anarchism in relation to the question of the state. I would say Anarchism, no matter what strategy is chosen by Anarchists, still must position itself in relation to a state that is designating all sorts of things as temporary or permanent.

MR V: I smell a whiff of blame again here.

LATHAM: No, there is a wider point at stake. The state tends to designate the status of temporary versus permanent on most any social form it comes in contact with, whether its migration, labor, education, or social welfare. That said, we still have to consider that, even if we imagine away the state in some desired future, the question remains as to what force all those enduring versus ephemeral binaries I laid out earlier have in shaping our modern existence; like Simmel’s distinction between constancy and flux.

MR V: Yes but, modernity or not, the state has been a force in shaping these binaries and the very terms of temporariness and permanence, as you yourself pointed out – for example, in the legal regulation of economic life. It would be a waste of time today to try to imagine a modernity that never saw the state come into being.

LATHAM: Even so, it would be reductive to see everything deriving from the state, especially since Kantorowicz actually showed how much the state relied on non-state orders like the Church as a model to establish its own claims. I think the overall point is that the various forms and registers of permanence and temporariness within modernity have been exploited, absorbed, or appropriated by the state – but the binaries are nonetheless distinct from the state; and I’d venture they can be worked with in different ways than the state historically has worked with them.

MR V: I would expect that in order for the state to be effective, it has to exploit both temporariness and permanence. As your modernity examples show for me – and as we agreed in our discussion of change earlier – there are good sides to temporariness; but mostly when looked at against the background of permanence as the primary good.

LATHAM: One way to exploit the binary that is not so good is for the state to make itself, its presence, temporary as well as permanent. In the Occupied Territories of Israel and Palestine the state can be on the move, opening up a checkpoint, closing it down, and opening up another. They can change rules and alter procedures and schedules. I mean here is a set of evasions directly put in play by the state. I have in mind here how the Israeli state is quite adept at setting itself up in a temporary way in the Occupied Territories, while all along seeking to entrench its permanence claims over what it now defines as Israel proper.

MR V: This is the sort of SWAT\(^\text{35}\) team approach to the state and I guess it’s the flip side of the changeability of policies under austerity we spoke of; and of altering treaty terms faced by Native Americans.\(^\text{36}\) As you know this aspect of state action deeply troubles me. Maybe I could borrow your label and call it a particular type of state, the evasive state: evading commitments, evading visibility, and evading democratically established presence. You’re troubled by permanence and the state. I’m troubled by temporariness and the state – at least the wrong type of temporariness.

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35 Special Weapons and Tactics.
36 I am aware of one well thought through exploration of this in Ariel Handel, “Where, where to, and when in the Occupied Territories: An introduction to geography of disaster,” in Adi Ophir, Michal Givoni, and Sari Hanafi, (eds.), *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*, (New York: Zone Books, 2009), pp. 179–222. Attention is notably given in Handel to how this makes life very difficult for Palestinians, who might otherwise seek predictability, even just to better know how to go on. It would have been nice to have addressed this issue in this context of the broader idea of permanent possession of the Territories by Israel that hovers over these temporary practices. We did get to address this concept in the next meeting. See Chapter 3.
LATHAM: So, what happens to your desire for a return to permanent commitments to rights and social welfare? The state’s evasion of these occurs in awful combination with the increases in extra-legal, stealthy security practices we spoke of last time, tied to surveillance, domestic counter-insurgency, and expulsion. It’s a sort of double evasion by the state.

MR V: Maybe where this is leading is a state that is permanent as an institutional identity, entailing the basic claims over a space and a people. But the same state might increasingly be taking a temporary form, in its policies and governance over that space and people.

LATHAM: So, the implication is that if Anarchists are worried about establishing sustainable beachheads of resistance and difference, they also have to worry about the inventive temporalities of twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism.

MR V: Sure the state today is quite able to exploit a considerable mix of temporary and permanent forms of power. And it’s helped especially by collaborations between states and other organizations like corporations. Think of all these new forms of instantaneous digital circulation and exchange that require state central banks and massive globe-spanning financial institutions like J.P. Morgan-Chase.37

LATHAM: These are important points but I want to make sure we don’t lose sight of how they might relate to the questioning of the state that I believe is important here.

“The melting of all that is solid”

MR V: You might consider that my point about how states can be at home in temporariness as well as permanence implies that states are unique in political history and truly stand out above all other forms; and that the fact that we depend on them for any hope at achieving justice is no accident. So putting the state in question might be somewhat superfluous.

LATHAM: Let’s not forget we suffer greatly from the injustices states support or put in place directly. I thought we were meeting together because of them. But let me address the point you just raised about the uniqueness of the state. I think it’s not as unique as you suggest – and that it’s not tells us something about putting it in question. Consider how the idea of property as a permanent form co-exists with the practices of instantaneous dispossession. You can see something similar in norms and concepts like human rights and citizenship that circulate across societies and even across historical eras – we can see permanence notably located in them as well, along with the ever-changing forms they take as policies and practices that transform in specific times and places. And, if we are going to take the notion of permanence versus temporariness in the global realm seriously, then

37 An excellent recent analysis of late capitalism along these lines is Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism*, (London: Sage Publications, 2005).
we might also want to consider what gets so much attention in the well-worn descriptions of globalization. I mean things like digital financial capital or environmental threats. As we know these are typically experienced as forces of flux or change, if not upheaval, that also unsettle and destabilize local forms of life – that make those local forms more transient than they might otherwise be.

MR V: Even so the state as the basis of political hope endures. The concept of the state as an idea constantly appears in various spaces and times, as we saw with the building of states at the end of the empires in the mid-twentieth century. In that presence, states achieve a sort of permanence – even if, in practice, they can take on very temporary forms as you rightly suggest.38 The French went through how many republics over the last century or so? And yet France as a nation-state always is sustained.

LATHAM: I’m not trying to say the state doesn’t also involve this dynamic – just that it’s not unique. Global forces of change and disruption like global finance or even climate change also endure as permanent concepts or categories as does the state or human rights. The non-state forms are, of course, realized in specific times and places in very different ways, as, say, when new practices such as credit derivatives are invented and deployed.

MR V: When it comes to concepts such as austerity and complex credit schemes these sorts of global circulations become factors in the restriction of the social policy and public service realms. Yet, the very fact we that we notice the emptying that’s in play in these realms tells me that the possibility of restoring public services endures for progressive political efforts and movements.

LATHAM: Perhaps we can think of this by recalling that Kantorowicz put forward the contrast of the two bodies of the king: one body that was eternal and relatively empty; another that is the time-bound, specific person who actually wears the crown and then passes it on to the next in the royal line.39 I would suggest there is a parallel here to your contrast between the concept of the state – as the eternal body – and the specifics of state practices – the specific person. The point is that the concepts and forms we think of as permanent – be it the state or global finance – can be thin or

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38 Readers may notice that this perspective runs counter to the arguments associated with sociologist John Meyer around the concept of world polity, where a global institutional ecology tends to lead to institutional isomorphism in specific state organization and structure. The difference here is that the emphasis has been put on the possibility of another trend emerging around state forms and practices that emphasizes temporariness, which can co-exist with the more traditional state forms discussed by Meyer. Meyer’s argument about a world society of institutions helping reproduce the state can of course be seen as supporting the permanence of the state in the way we spoke of it further above, where the idea of the state and the form of the state are better matched. See John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez, “World society and the nation-state,” American Journal of Sociology 103 (1) (1997), pp. 144–181. Readers will also note that we never raised the all too relevant Hegel here.

appear empty,\textsuperscript{40} at least relative to the dense forms of life in societies or cities that appear to be thicker but also more ephemeral, because they are vulnerable to shifts in policy, funding, and practices. The question is, does the relative emptiness of these circulating forms allow elites the option of emptying or filling them based on their strategies and agendas, not unlike the way the determination of who might ascend to a throne has often been manipulated by all sorts of interests in and out of court. Also, the relative emptiness at the global level might help them evade the effects of their actions and any generalized connection to injustices that are tied to the history of specific actions. I would say the anti-globalization movement can, in this light, be seen as an attempt to fill in the global realm with the specific histories of injustices tied to global capital, extraction, food production, and so on.

MR V: I recall that political theorists and philosophers have made much of this distinction between thick and thin. There was the thick versus thin norms and membership that Michael Walzer explored.\textsuperscript{41} If you think about John Rawls’s\textsuperscript{42} original position, you mentioned last time, it was all about emptying specificity from consideration of the rights of individuals; and Michael Sandel put a great deal of emphasis on the significance of thick national history and community in contrast to Rawls.\textsuperscript{43}

LATHAM: I realize that there is a tendency to favor thickness, history, and cultural specificity; but I think we can see from another perspective that emptiness can be a good thing, in that it frees up individuals and groups to invent themselves and even create alternatives. It is a longstanding desire in modern life to open the future and liberate subjects from a past.

MR V: I’d say it’s only elites who get to do this, to exploit emptiness, especially the neoliberal ones.

LATHAM: This does not make sense to me. I still remember well how Marshall Berman reminded us decades ago about the wide-reaching implications of Marx’s clever aphorism about the melting of all that is solid.\textsuperscript{44} Workers and not just

\textsuperscript{40} Readers interested in the exploring the notion of emptiness situated at the center of democratic politics can start by looking at Claude Lefort, \textit{Democracy and Political Theory}, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{41} Readers can see Michael Walzer, \textit{Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad}, (Notre Dame, IN, US: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

\textsuperscript{42} Mr V is referring to John Rawls, \textit{A Theory of Justice}, (Cambridge, MA, US: Harvard University Press, 1971).

\textsuperscript{43} This is in Michael Sandel, \textit{Liberalism and the Limits of Justice}, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Looking a bit further back we can see that Merleau-Ponty contrasted a form of subjectivity that could be seen as empty, thin, free-floating, easily reproduced, or abandoned with what might be taken to be a fuller subjectivity anchored by the thick specifics of the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, (London: Routledge, [1962] 2005). Additionally building on Jacques Lacan, Claude LeFort points to the emptiness at the center of democracy and modernity more broadly. See \textit{Democracy and Political Theory}, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{44} See Marshall Berman, \textit{All That is Solid Melts in Air}, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).
Capitalists could take advantage of the openings. The line of thinking I am pointing to leads us straight to Nietzsche, who put forward that forgetting is necessary for meaningful, fulsome agency, and clearly he did not have the bourgeoisie in mind. Similarly, Renan said that a people needs to forget things like the history of the empires that it was part of in order to form itself into a nation.

MR V: But how do you know where the possibilities of agency begin and end? What are the limits to invention or reinvention? Since both elites and non-elites might gain and lose in this context I don’t see how we can fashion some way to temper or qualify the possibilities. And that gets us back to the problem of how to secure progressive victories. In the liberal democratic model we have rights and concepts of justice that temper democracy that might otherwise be dominated by repugnant racists or sexists who see themselves defending racism through democratic elections. That said, I condemn early twentieth-century liberals who feared the expansion of the voting franchise on a universal basis would be a destabilizing force. But I am not clear on how one contends with groups that mobilize through democratic politics to limit rights, justice, and progressive politics. We saw these tensions in the American Civil War as Democrats in the North vehemently opposed Lincoln’s wartime policies especially around slavery.

LATHAM: So, clearly, you are very much attached to the notion that in the background there should exist a permanence-claiming state, or system of such states. And that, even if some of them are busy emptying or extinguishing parts of themselves in fits of neoliberal erasure or operating in some SWAT team logic like the Israeli state, what matters to you is the possibility of the progressive state. I have been pushing us to drop that attachment, which I recognize is not easy. I would venture that the most productive first step is to stop looking for some sort of centered context for the temporary and permanent and the thick and thin, whether that is the state or some ordered legible concept of modernity.

45 This was put forward by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Use and Abuse of History,* (London: Cosimo, Inc., 2006).


MR V: What could it mean to stop looking for an ordered legible concept of modernity and how could that possibly matter in this context?

LATHAM: Postmodern orientations and sensibilities approach analysis from this angle. And the approach allows a great deal of interesting agency and practice. For instance, you can be anachronistic and introduce objects and ideas from lots of times and places; you can join memories from many contexts and histories. In the realm of cultural production, it’s called mash-ups and pastiches; put an emphasis on the hybrid, on flux, or on turbulence. Lately there has been attention given to notions like contingent publics and flash mobs that come together and fall away. Even mainstream analysts have started to notice because of their prevalence in the so-called Arab Spring.49

Mr V cut me off with an insistent tone to say:

There is a reason you mentioned it is not so easy to overcome our reliance on solid, ordered contexts. And I would say that it’s because we have to ask where the things that make up a hybrid fluid field come from. I would look for existing social formations and orders. All these inventive, temporary, or contingent forms that emerge and then are mixed and maybe erased are not just produced out of thin air. They are taken from established, permanent contexts like state-centered modernity or capitalism. A pirated bunch of music or images of the White House do not just appear out of thin air.

LATHAM: I am not so sure that these contexts are as centered and ordered as you suggest. Certainly our typical inclinations are to view broad historical contexts like contemporary liberal capitalism as thick with institutions and practices that are often assumed to be not only lasting but also developing and expanding. Say, something like democratic expression.

MR V: Or that at least we expect that it should expand under progressive conditions.

LATHAM: Right. But I am not sure this is the only way to see historical context. Walter Benjamin discussed the concept of empty time.50 It’s a fluid, cloud-like historical context that allows for rupturing events to have incredible effects – like revolutions and political foundings. Benedict Anderson drew on this concept in

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Imagined Communities. He claimed empty time allows for the imagined community of the nation to be the predominant force in shaping worlds and social life. If time is not seen as relatively empty, and you are trying to establish a nation, then all your efforts at founding are very contained because of the hold of established histories and identities. An attempt to establish an order that would be, for example, in accordance with understandings of Christian time – full of concepts like eternity, sainthood, legitimate hierarchies, and moral norms – tethers you to a thick context that can set the basic terms for organizing a new social order.

MR V: I would turn this way of looking at things around. Once the nation-state is established it can become the basis for a foundational context, a modernity centered on the public, the people, as we have discussed it. And this is a context we should seek because it allows us to hem in other contexts like capitalism through regulation. Without the possibility of a founding context anchored in commonwealths, what hope is there of preventing capitalism from being the founding context? Corporations or religious organizations can try to free themselves from state regulation. And that then should become a political battle where progressive forces can rely on the sort of context I’m talking about. If this public-centered context is not cultivated, what would stop even states from joining with corporations and freeing themselves from the obligations to the welfare of their citizens and residents built up across time?

LATHAM: If I follow out this logic I wonder how much emptying of the state do you have to witness before you start to question whether it can ever be the sort of context you desire? What do you really have in hand if neoliberal oriented policymakers and political parties can extinguish important aspects of the social being of the state? Just as you asked from where cultural producers and activists are building hybrids, I might ask from where and against what context could policymakers remake the state at this historical juncture – a juncture marked by the proliferation of the hyper-security, neoliberalizing state.

MR V: We have the history of modernity to build on and take from; the progressive aspects I mean.

LATHAM: I am not sure how you designate what history is chosen for the foundation of a restored commonwealth. After all, the hyper-security and neoliberal state is part of that historical context now.

MR V: Come on, the history to build on is popular mobilization, movements, and struggle. You are asking a rhetorical question.


52 To clarify, just to say that the context is capitalism or modernity is to forget that the state is an essential element of both these. We can say the same thing about society, even though that might be the context an Anarchist seeks to set politics and social organization within.
LATHAM: Perhaps the broader question is whether we have actually to think in terms of recourse to any permanent, encompassing context. This risks counter-mobilizations as powerful elites exploit permanence to construct new undesirable permanent forms, including new empires, states, and/or repugnant political movements?53 What if we focused on avoiding this recourse and didn’t attempt to locate our claims in an historical context? Perhaps this is one way we can carry out a contemporary version of the sort of putting into question of a set of institutions like divine right – as Hobbes and Locke did. I mean our standpoint for questioning the state might be best seen as questioning the very need for a solid, thick, permanent contextual standpoint from which to carry out that questioning. What Hobbes and Locke in part sought was a shift of our starting point for building an argument about power and political life away from the context of traditional, religion-based hierarchies of rule.

With a broad smile Mr V said:

Well, it might be the easiest thing in the world to just evade the problem you set us upon by combining the two well-worn attitudes of postmodern pastiche and 60s-style refusal of existing structures and cultures of power.54 LATHAM: Easy is not the word that comes first to my mind.

“Alongside permanence is the possibility of non-permanence”

MR V: In any event, your suggestion to sidestep a state-centric view seems to me to leave us with the question of what sort of political and social organization you would put in its place. It seems to me to be just about fluid networks of events, objects, practices, interventions, and orders – all subject to change and, at best, temporarily established. So, sure, this restates the sentiment and values of a post-structural starting point. But it does nothing but avoid – or evade as you might put it – the concerns I have raised all afternoon. If what you are pointing to is going to have some significance, it has to at least serve well as a starting point for further analysis. The problem is, I am not sure what it would help with.

LATHAM: Might I suggest that the best way to see that starting point is to return to the issues of temporariness and permanence. I would argue, to begin with, that without the possibility of claiming permanence – and the ability to pronounce authoritatively on what is temporary and permanent – the state holds no truly special place for us in our political and social world. It would join the many

53 Those interested in the concept of what can be thought of as “new times” as a way to view the political currency of temporality in modernity can see Reinhart Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, translated by Keith Tribe, (Cambridge, MA, US: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 231–266.

54 Readers can find a good example of the latter attitude in Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man, (Boston, MA, US: Beacon Press, 1964).
organizations and networks out there like large public corporations – even though it could be the most powerful force among them in the global North.

MR V: You make it sound as if the state’s ability to govern over political time were a crime or something. But we’ve both recognized the state’s importance, above all else, because of its role in arriving at some lasting forms of justice and rights, to say nothing about sovereignty in relation to people and territory. I’ll admit I’m hardly happy about the other side of the coin, the unwanted uses of temporariness: austerity and retrenchment of state activities – being able reset a realm of policy like public assistance from permanent to temporary. But at least since the state has the power to make things permanent, we have the opportunity to turn that retrenchment around. The non-state world does not have this choice – or only to the extent that the state grants it to them. A corporation can get a charter to operate in perpetuity, or a homeowner can exercise the right to hand down a property to future generations. Your Anarchists can declare a zone to have permanent aspects as much as they like, but that claim stands or falls on what the state does, say, to dismantle the zone or declare it illegal.

LATHAM: And what makes this ability to govern time possible in your view?

MR V: I think we’ve already, more or less, said it’s a function of the state’s political authority, its sovereignty over the political world. So, somewhere here there is the far more fundamental force of state authority. And this is quite in line with standard thinking about the state through the centuries. You’re making all this more complicated than need be.

LATHAM: It is more complicated than that. We’ve talked about how the ability to have an enduring presence is essential to sovereignty. I would add at this point that the very possibility of authority presupposes this enduring presence. This makes possible the pronouncements, laws, orders, and rules that are abided by in a society. To me there is a classic circular, chicken and egg problem lurking here, because both permanency on one side and authority and sovereignty on the other reinforce one another. You persist because what you do is authoritative and vice versa.

MR V: I don’t see this mutual reinforcement of authority and permanence as an issue. The authoritative status of institutions and their rules depends on being able to govern political time. Permanence is always there, as a necessary condition for authority, even if temporary actions and rules are being established. Think about how in establishing a temporary authority, say, in an investigative commission, the warrant for such authority comes from a permanent authority that sets the terms for

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55 I would like to point out that Derrida writes of the “extraordinary right of the present” anchoring the good and right, in the Western philosophical tradition. Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, translated by Alan Bass, (Chicago, IL, US: Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 38. Analogously, in the context of this part of the discussion the state’s permanence claim can also be seen as asserting an extraordinary right over space, physical presence, access, and the distribution of justice.
what the commission does on a temporary basis. So, laying out your argument for temporariness and permanence as a useful starting point is one thing. Sure, it helps us understand better why permanence is attractive in relation to the undesirable aspects of temporariness like retrenchment. But I will listen with some skepticism as to whether it actually helps us put the state into question – not to mention, I remain unconvinced that is a task worth bothering with in the first place.

LATHAM: Let me offer a clarification that may explain how it might contribute to putting the state in question. Permanence does not have to mean it endures forever. That might apply to something we consider eternal – which essentially means it’s out of the range of time; it’s timeless, so to speak. Permanence, in contrast, is better understood as the status of something where there is no termination date identified or set. The temporary has a defined future endpoint.

MR V: But you could designate something as temporary like a social program without any fixed end point.

LATHAM: Yes, you could still say something is temporary if there is no set endpoint, providing we can say that there are potential endpoints, even if they lie out in the future. In this case you can even have temporariness where endpoints or the potential to define them can move through time, through delay, evasion, or the establishment of new endpoints. You see this all the time with extended deadlines or extend terms of a contract or the hybrid concepts we spoke of like “permanently temporary.”

MR V: So, this all seems straightforward to me.

LATHAM: Not so fast. Standing right alongside permanence is the possibility of non-permanence. For individuals this can mean the revoking of citizenship that otherwise is thought to be permanent on terror charges. Or a whole people can face expulsion and dispossession, and land can be annexed through conquest. In the end, temporariness and permanence are no more than claims and assertions that are reified and naturalized in social and political life. What is claimed can be revoked.

Mr V quickly set down his coffee cup and interrupted:

Hold on here. If you are going to jump right into an assertion that the basis of permanence and temporariness are nothing but some inter-subjective understanding,
then I want you to make very plain what you think is implied by this. With the, by now long, legacy of seeing categories as socially constructed it’s easy to acknowledge temporariness and permanence are just political claims as opposed to, say, reified categories that exist above or beyond our actions in the social world.\(^58\) Didn’t even the mainstream realist Stephen Krasner basically make this argument about sovereignty as organized hypocrisy, as he put it?\(^59\) Even so, we know most social categories are treated as though they were natural to political life – so it’s not clear their claim status matters in the end. Either way, what does this mean for the issues we have discussed this afternoon? I suspect you are trying to sneak in a way to question the state and the contexts we have discussed, which you have tried to come back to without much success, I think. I mean to say that once permanence is seen as ultimately arbitrary, it suggests that, really, the state itself is arbitrary and that it can’t really deliver the lasting victories that I take to be its best attribute. Just because I lament the hollowing out of the state in the realms of social policy and welfare – and fear unhealthy security practices – it doesn’t mean you should assume that what underlies all this is a belief on my part that a progressive state that guarantees rights and justice is impossible.

LATHAM: I don’t assume that about you. But your assessment of my intentions I think is basically accurate. Let me clarify. We have already discussed how elites put forward claims, embed them in social fabrics, and defend and manipulate them – as when neoliberals turn permanent social entitlements into temporary social programs, exploiting permanence-claiming state authority to do that.\(^60\)

MR V: At least in the way I’m thinking about this, I’m not just focused on whether or not elites are or can impose some new forms of imperial power and permanent authority on the world. I am working more from a focus on how non-elites have something to gain from permanent victories in social justice.

LATHAM: I agree we have to be careful about focusing just on powerful claim-makers like colonizers, imperialists, nationalists, and neoliberals – and then treating non-elites only as victims of these actions.\(^61\) But I don’t believe the answer is just to spread the benefits of permanence claims all around. If non-elites are able

\(^{58}\) Mr V likely has in mind the well-known work by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (Garden City, NY, US: Anchor Books, 1966).


\(^{60}\) A pointed example is the reorganization of the Department of Social Services in NY State into units such as the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, where the emphasis is on making aid temporary. See the discussion in D.M. Van Slyke, “The mythology of privatization in contracting for social services,” *Public Administration Review* 63 (1) (2003), pp. 296–315.

\(^{61}\) I believe my discussion here regarding whether the recognition of the claim-status of permanence opens up a way to unsettle the state is consistent with the way it has been spoken of in critical, postcolonial circles. The concept of unsettling settlers has been a part of postcolonial, cultural, critical social science studies for decades. See Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
to devise non-state-centric approaches that avoid claiming permanence, or temporariness for that matter, this to my mind undermines the necessity of the state as guarantor. It also opens up a more potent way to question and denaturalize our world of modern state politics. Once again, it might be fair to look back to Locke and Hobbes and their imagining of the bourgeoisie lurking about the state of nature. In doing that, as we said before, the old religio-political hierarchical order and its principle of eternal, divine right was de-naturalized. And while they sought after alternative logics to justify the state, I would like to seek after a logic that justifies a combination of justice and post-permanence politics.

Mr V let out a fairly pronounced “hhmmmmm” and then said:

Post-permanence politics? Really? The recognition of permanence as a claim does not put the state as the seat of justice and authority into question. So, non-elites don’t have much to go on. It’s just a matter of accepting the post-structural line of thinking about how stable meanings and orders are constructed. Where I get concerned is what you might say follows from that. What would that logic you just mentioned look like – the one combining justice and post-permanence? Are you looking for some way to justify claims by those who suffer under state permanence to advance their own type of temporal claim-making? I mean the groups we spoke of earlier: migrants, indigenous, and the economically and socially marginalized.

LATHAM: What I’m interested in is the possibility of a logic that evades pronouncing on temporal status. Why claim either permanence or temporariness?

Mr V: Of course the problem is just because a community or group evades claim-making about permanence, it doesn’t mean other forces like the state can’t do it for them.

LATHAM: You’re right. And to me what’s key for identifying a logic of political justification around these issues is to begin to address the question of how the less powerful who do not govern can start to break down distinctions of temporary versus permanent status and open up new forms. And by this I do not mean just various ways of combining or qualifying temporariness and permanence, as you see in the hybrid concepts that I’ve mentioned already, like quasi-permanence or permanently temporary. I am after the possibilities of conceiving and experiencing political temporality differently.

MR V: And thereby putting at risk the possibilities of achieving further, permanent, justice for non-elites.

LATHAM: But risk cuts both ways, especially for those who face the state’s great power over political time. We discussed this already. And I have in mind, for instance, how the state can take the various senses of time that migrants experience, as they come and go from one place to another, and reduce them to the stark terms of temporariness and permanence with things like temporary work programs.
MR V: Despite this, I still think we can see ways that individuals and groups are able to fight off, if not evade, the state’s colonization of their lives. The long history of migrant incorporation in the US suggests this to me.

LATHAM: Yes, people are forced to cope. Diasporas, for example, sometimes generate narrations about their presence somewhere – about how they feel displaced and about their connections to a homeland. They do this using far more fluid and ambiguous senses of time than allowed by the binary of temporariness and permanence. Women can frame temporalities of cycles and familial logics. And gay men can define what has been called “queer times” where youth or longevity are understood differently than is typical in mainstream cultures. Also, I recall that in writings about resistance from a global South perspective, you can see attempts to evade the temporal orders imposed by Western power.

MR V: But surely you realize that these evasions just get you into different articulations of temporariness, as people try to contend with instabilities and make a life against the background of a permanent state. More generally, these sorts of resistances – or so-called alternative times – remind me of what you said before about the traps Anarchism faces. I also see parallels here to those hybrid concepts of time and status you keep bringing up, such as the “permanently temporary.” Keep in mind, these efforts at constructing alternative temporalities or hybrid-times, leaves intact the state-based temporary/permanent binary you dislike so much. Maybe it’s because the alternatives you just described are marginal to the social and political worlds of people in the so-called mainstream. Or maybe it’s because those resistances against imposed times end up as the basis for new forms of permanence as groups try to make their institutions permanent. The Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society were both established in the nineteenth century and are still active today.

LATHAM: If I were looking for a hard-nosed, skeptical view what you just said might be a reasonable response. However, that kind of attitude can overlook nuanced differences. And it is in those nuances where the alternatives can emerge and move beyond the margins. Sure, we know that the state creates a dominant framing and colonizes senses and experiences of time – and that makes the alternatives appear marginal. I was always struck by David Landes’s description of how the Chinese...

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Resistance, time, and the state in question

imperial state developed an annual calendar that was important to their claims to dominate time as well as space.64 It parallels what Kantorowicz describes. We might see something similar in how contemporary Western states have been insisting some people like migrants can be somewhere on a temporary basis as temporary workers.65 But to accept your realist view really in the end constitutes an evasion of what the subjects of political time might be experiencing and struggling with.

MR V: Yes, of course, they are struggling with the dominant state-based framework.

LATHAM: Your view also assumes that the society a migrant lives in is made up of some uniform one dimensional, unified temporality.66 If you consider the diversity of classes, races, and spaces that any society comprises, then you might realize that these various facets can have different times associated with them. As when the history of the presence of blacks in the US is tied to a long and complicated history that defies the neat binary we keep coming back to today.67 What I think is important here is a focus on the possibilities of opening up political time so that all those subject to a state might create conditions of temporal openness. I have in mind that groups, communities, even individuals can negotiate and alter their own way of being in time and really in the end undermine the state’s ability to make temporal claims. The idea is to sort of democratize political time. And I don’t just mean helping decide the duration of this or that policy but how we think about land, social space, presence, intervention, collective action, access, and rights in temporal terms. This is what I see is at stake in those different or other times. The state may be dominant but it’s not necessarily subsuming all ways of being in time.

“Creating new meanings and framings”

MR V: You may, however, be underestimating the hold the state has on political time – even when there is change and instability. Consider the history of revolution, which seems in the end to be about state transformation.68 But it reinforces the

65 These contemporary impositions of timeframes are considered in detail in Deepa Rajkumar, Laurel Berkowitz, Leah F. Vosko, Valerie Preston, and Robert Latham, “At the temporary-permanent divide: How Canada produces temporariness and makes citizens through its security, work, and settlement policies,” Citizenship Studies 16, (3–4) (June 2012).
development of the state as a permanent form rather than something else because revolutions come back to the state form, even if things are organized differently. With the state so able to organize time for us and so able to absorb forces of historical change, how can you expect challenges and alternatives of the sort you are hinting at? Don’t forget that you also have the modernity you described earlier that is shot full with those binaries, suggesting to me we are all trapped in one form or another of the binary of endurance or transience.

LATHAM: I would answer your two basic points this way: on the first, regarding the relationship between the state and social and political change, not only does change and rupture occur only sporadically; when you do get change it typically moves along a rather limited band where the basic, identifiable elements nonetheless persist. It’s the reason you can, century after century, call a place on the map the same name, like Spain or China. The uses and extent of national lands can be altered, but typically state territory more or less endures through those changes. So, really there’s not as much change or transformation in play as you imply. Revolutions as we have known can be mostly understood as state revolutions.

MR V: OK, but then you’re really saying there have been no real challenges to the state.

LATHAM: Your second point about modernity is far more fundamental and I believe it addresses this lack of challenge to some extent – but not in the way you seem to think. Let me explain. I am valuing an orientation that is radical in its confrontation. This requires, to my mind, that challenges are made not just to the legitimacy of a state’s permanence claims or its status as a force designating what is temporary or permanent in our worlds. I would add another register of confrontation; confronting how understandings of the past are constructed and viewed. I suspect you will recognize with me that these pasts and the histories and narrations about them are the basis of permanence claims – along with the material-organizational deployments across national spaces. I mean the administrative offices, signage, flags, borders, and so on. So, this is why the only way out I can see is some kind of meaningfully radical stand. It suggests, as a starting point, that any given state ought to be radically challenged. Clearly this is a formidable task for all the reasons we have said: for the international recognition of juridical sovereignty as a system and the way states can reify permanence claims and the status they deploy in a range of objects like property titles, and cards for citizenship and permanent residence. I would say the only real sustained challenges, other than from Anarchists, have been coming from First Peoples. But for the most part the enduring existence of given states, even among many

69 Political theorist Jacqueline Stevens discusses a range of these sorts of capacities in Reproducing the State, (Princeton, NJ, US: Princeton University Press, 1999).

70 I would direct readers seeking a way better understand First Peoples’ questions to, especially, Jeff Corntassel, “To be ungovernable,” New Socialist 58 (1) (September–October, 2006), pp. 35–37.
First Peoples, is more or less acknowledged. Seeking already negotiated rights, justice, or autonomy is one thing. Challenging a given state’s existence is quite another.

MR V: Just to clarify: are you suggesting that those subject to a given state should challenge that specific state? Or should they challenge the state as a political organizational form in general? As you said, a bit ago, the modern political theorists like Hobbes and Locke were never challenging the state itself as a way to organize authority and order lives, or locate justice. You have certainly not convinced me of the wisdom of the Anarchist position; that somehow we can do without all that the state holds out for us, when it is well organized and run for justice, rights, and everyday human security. Maybe, if you are looking for grounds to question a given state – I mean how the state has taken form – I am open to that, since this might be one more route into pushing on the state to live up to its progressive potential. But if you require that the state take a different, more open approach to temporality, it’s hard to envision what such a post-permanent state would look like or how it might be possible to establish.

LATHAM: My sense is this is an unfair way to frame things, since for me it’s not just a matter of state or no state, but what the state puts at stake; and one of these stakes is the monopoly over political time. Perhaps a post-permanent state might be an acceptable middle point on the way to some other post-state political world.

Mr V let out a quick laugh and said smiling with his brows raised: Not sure you can have it both ways – unless it’s a temporary state on the way to no state.

LATHAM: With our time running short now, I don’t want to get caught up in any language games. Instead I would like to probe a bit deeper into the state’s politics of time that might make clearer exactly what the stakes are of putting the state into question.

Mr V shook his head with hesitance but to affirm OK.

LATHAM: I’ll start if you don’t mind by first pointing out that the connection between the past and permanence is not just about a sanctioned history and origin that allows for authority and power over the present, including over territory. The permanence-past connection is also about how the founding of a state and society comes to mean that a specific history becomes permanent. And we know that what is in play here usually is a national story of settlement or emergence that becomes the official past. It’s a past, as we’ve discussed, that’s built on the

71 There is a sort of self-generating autopoiesis in play here. See Homi K. Bhabha, Nation and Narration, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 229, where he suggests Poulantzas’ analysis of state temporality and spatiality in State, Power, Socialism indicates such a self-generation.
proverbial forgetting of histories of expropriation, violence, and colonization. It has only been reinforced by the waves of migrations, new settlements, and births that get corralled into that official past. It is worthwhile remembering the concept developed by Walter Benjamin. He called it victor’s history and it is a victory twice over. Once in the past, in the founding, say, where indigenous or labor struggles are erased and then, second, in a present that is dominated by this history, which leaves little room for historical recovery of evaded pasts. Benjamin thought the sort of double-edged closure he wrote about could only be challenged in a meaningful way by arriving at some process of opening up history and, of course, then political time. The aim of this opening is to undo the evasion of the histories of victims. The result could be ways to understand and organize the past, present, and future, where a previously evaded history can become a real factor.

MR V: Calling for an opening of political structures is already quite the challenge. Opening up understandings and approaches to history is a far more formidable challenge. After all, as you’ve said, the whole basis of a political and social order such as France or the US is at stake. And I’d add, once again, that the power of existing states and corporations is standing in the way of any serious challenge; to say nothing of the deep connection between modernity and the state – with the state being the site of social and political progress.

LATHAM: I will not deny this would seem to be a nearly insurmountable task. I recall that Benjamin was not as despairing as Nietzsche might have been about the prospect of prevailing over existing powers and orders. But even Nietzsche didn’t see the effort as purely pointless. Benjamin was especially aware that such opening is very complex and would take form as a process that would be halting, iterative, and reversible no matter how far along things progressed. Although this may seem like a call for permanent revolution there is a difference I think. It’s not about a claim on duration, calling it permanent or not. Rather, it’s about a move into a future based on alternative historical sense. There is also no call for the

72 I have always found Robert Sack, Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), to be a useful and practical exposition of this process of forgetting especially as it is written in space and land.
74 An engaging account of memory, violence and victims that addresses different collective temporalities and histories is Brent J. Steele, Alternative Accountabilities in Global Politics: The Scars of Violence, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).
75 There is a great deal written on Benjamin’s approach to history and his theses. A good place to start is Matthias Fritsch, The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005) and Michael Lowry, Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,” (London: Verso, 2005).
inevitable, enduring final transformation of class society on a global scale. In this light even Leon Trotsky’s version of permanent revolution can be seen as an argument for permanence on a progressive basis in the global realm.\textsuperscript{77} In contrast, I see Benjamin suggesting to us that confronting the histories and claims around them ought to move toward a political time wherein the evaded and thereby lost histories of injustices and expropriations are rescued and retrieved. Such confrontation helps shake history and de-legitimate the unitary, contained form that is associated with the nation-state.

MR V: I find myself feeling skeptical of any real possibilities along the lines you discuss. And not only because of my fundamental fear of what it means to give up on the hope of progress toward a state that might achieve forms of justice on a permanent basis. It’s also because I am concerned that opening up histories and thus political frameworks does not have to end in inclusive, just alternatives. When the pieces fall back to earth so to speak we could end up with new forms of injustice, violence, or racism – I keep coming back in my mind to what I mentioned about Fanon’s insight about how new political settlements can be oppressive like the old ones.\textsuperscript{78} These settlements can apply to what you are talking about not just the nation-state.

LATHAM: But you seem to forget that Fanon thought that there had to be more wide-reaching change in the very frameworks we use to understand politics, agency, and social organization. Benjamin actually hinted at how we could begin to think of moving toward this in his notion of “dialectical reversal.” It’s a complex idea, but a key point is that political irruptions, that do not fit into a historical trajectory per se, could move us suddenly and disruptively toward an awakened consciousness.\textsuperscript{79} He seemed to be calling for us to evade the structured histories in any given period – even the ones we like – in order to create the possibility for rupture that will change our notions of collective life and subjectivity. The parallels are there to the concerns Deleuze and Guattari had with rupture.\textsuperscript{80} Their concept of “lines of flight” points to how we should not only be evading structures of control but also creating new meanings and framings. You also have in Badiou\textsuperscript{81} the idea of event. With his notion of event, things that are

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} See Leon Trotsky, \textit{The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects}, (Seattle, WA, US: Red Letter Press, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{78} Frantz Fanon, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth}, (London: Grove Press, 2005).
\item \textsuperscript{79} There is much more to this concept than I was able to bring up in this context. See Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Arcades Project}, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, MA, US: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 941.
\item \textsuperscript{80} These are evident in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}, (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
\end{itemize}
not considered possible can appear in an historical period like the big revolutions in France or China or the overturning of musical conventions by Stravinsky. We can also go back to Nietzsche’s understanding of the untimely, which called for evading a given time and entering into different forms of time.82

MR V: As you keep pushing out after more and more obscure notions relating to time and history I am again left feeling as though all these seemingly subversive stances, which are satisfying to you, really in the end will never be able to contend with what I think is the problem in the first place: on one side, are the groups with particular material and ideological interests advancing their position in security and neoliberal programs through the openings afforded them by ruptures; on the other side, are the justifiably insecure people seeking permanent progress.

LATHAM: Sure enough, there always remains a sort of blackmail of realism to stymie any articulation of potential alternatives. But any of the theorists I mention are aware of this. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, were clear that states and corporations would attempt to prevent any ruptures and desired evasions of existing networks of power. What I have been emphasizing is that a focus on permanence and temporariness is a particularly useful starting point for challenging the states we have today. The claim over political time is crucial to the authority and existence of the state, so to challenge it is to challenge the order anchored by and in the state. Also, so much injustice is attached to this temporal politics, as experienced by First Peoples, by migrants, and by the poor who are dictated to as to what is temporary and permanent in their lives. I realize time-wise we have to call it quits now. I’d say we’ve only really offered a starting point for considering alternatives. I think, to make some headway in this consideration in a way that offers you some satisfaction, we need to probe deeper into what might be involved in the political developments that concern you around security, rights, and human welfare.

MR V: I have to confess our discussion this afternoon has left me feeling a bit at a loss. You’ve at least convinced me I should be open to reconsidering my fairly straight-line desire for what’s really a return to a very twentieth-century understanding of the state as a site of progress. But this openness has led nowhere for me. I still have a very hard time imagining how to move forward from it. I see that political time is important, but it’s only a part of the wider picture. Your points about alternatives remain very speculative suggestions that are only just stances or attitudes about the political world.

LATHAM: Perhaps we need to shift our orientation more to that other basic register, space. I would like next time to consider the relationship between space and the state and maybe more broadly space and politico-social organization. After all, humming underneath our discussion, I would argue, was an assumption

about territory and political space more generally. At least speaking for myself, I was sort of holding it constant as I tried to get us to puzzle over time. But how can we talk of changing forms of security and social policy without addressing questions of space more directly? Temporariness and permanence in relation to states and other social organizations has a great deal to do with the kind of presence in space that is at stake. If the state is abandoning certain domains of policy then it means its presence in social spheres like education or specific places like borders, transport networks, or towns and villages is put into question. And we have to ask how those changes connect or not to the intensification of security practices. So, what I am asking for is a sort of suspension of the question of alternatives; and to do this to think through more carefully what might be in play regarding the changes we are aware of in our social and political life.

MR V: I am a bit reluctant to go there since we never really arrived at a place today I found satisfying. But at least you seem to recognize this. I guess it might help to push a bit more to analyze the socio-political changes underway. So, I will give you the benefit of the doubt and agree to start on this next time. But I reserve the right to see whether that start takes us anywhere productive from my angle.

I said and gestured OK and stood up to leave, with Mr V getting up right after. We headed toward the waiter to pay and leave.
3 Neoliberalism, hyper-security, and the bounding of political life

After sitting down to another meeting two weeks after the last, I could feel that Mr V was a bit annoyed and growing impatient. His lips were pursed and he was all but avoiding eye contact with me. Our coffees were ordered and I put a slight smile on and began our afternoon’s discussion:

I have been thinking quite a bit about our last meeting and your frustration with how I have tried to direct our discussions in ways that seem to take us from what you see as central: to revitalize and reorganize a progressive state. I guess you see my emphasis on perspectives tied to specific groups like migrants or different orientations such as Anarchism as somewhat of a diversion. Perhaps I didn’t clarify enough that my reasons for this emphasis were not just my sense that these are significant and interesting perspectives; but also my thinking that those perspectives help us analyze the state better, especially with regard to how we might evaluate the stakes of possible alternatives in our current political moment. I would like to keep pushing our analysis further; in particular by taking on more of what I proposed at the end of our last meeting: space and presence. I want to bring in some thoughts I’ve had that bear on this – and which I believe can be useful for thinking about the state in its relationship to territory and authority and maybe even sovereignty. I would especially like to talk about the state’s changing relationship to spaces, places, and bodies in the context of the current neoliberalism and hyper-security – developments we’re both troubled by.

“The desirability of publicness”

MR V: Well, I’ve been reflecting on our last meeting as well. I believe I see a pattern in how you try to direct our discussion. You start off saying you are concerned about the state but then shift the focus to the side or edge of the state, time, migration, Anarchism, and so on. I think this might be the reason I get uneasy with our progress. I’ve also come to another observation about what we spoke of in our last meeting. I was not quite sure what was bothering me about it in relation to my concerns about the undesirable trends in security and social policy. I finally realized what it was. You are trying to theorize the unseating of the state from its central position in political and social life. But isn’t the state...
busy doing this already on its own? We talked about this point when we met last; being concerned as I am about how the state can be a master of temporariness not just permanence. Is this not what is so troubling about neoliberalism and hyper-security; whether it’s welfare retrenchment or increasingly tenuous citizenship status for those who are just a tick away from being labeled terrorists or unlawful combatants?

LATHAM: I see, it’s a bit of the proverbial “be careful what you ask for.” Half-kidding aside, I’d like to really get into exploring in greater detail today the nature of the relationship between state and society, in a way that pushes on the limits of how we normally think of this relationship. And I mean by pushing on limits that we don’t immediately assume our task is to find a direct pathway for the state to re-establish its deep involvement in producing and expanding common welfare and public good.

MR V: I don’t know. Why do you have to set this up as an opposition between exploring that relationship and pathways to return to and redevelop progressive political life?

LATHAM: Just to be clear, what I am asking you to question is whether return is possible. A notion of return assumes that we can remove the conditions that make things like state retrenchment, retreat, or retraction possible. And then we can return to a political condition that is imagined as a twentieth-century Keynesian social democracy or, more accurately, a twenty-first century version of that political formation. I would like us to question the notion that we are able to return; and even question the notion that we should return. I would like to see questioning of this sort occur while also thinking about the meaning and nature of the state’s relationship to society or population, which in the framing of deepening neoliberalism is associated with retraction; but which also, in the context of deepening security, is associated with more intrusion in lives and social spaces like neighborhoods. Perhaps we can label this double process intrusive retraction.

MR V: Dangling a neologism before my eyes is certainly a feeble way to get me to give up on the possibilities of democratically determined, just public authority. Or perhaps new terms are necessary because you failed to convince me, the last time we met, in your challenge to what you called the permanence claims of the state. Getting us to question something like the state is relatively easy compared to the more difficult task of convincing someone the questioning actually leads somewhere.

LATHAM: Well, it might be enough, if I can just get you to see the twentieth-century-based progressive state as one political and organizational starting point among others; and that this starting point is in need of careful rethinking and transformation. I would prefer that you came to that position through recognition that there are other political logics out there for achieving political shifts you would find desirable. But, at a minimum, it would be satisfying if you accepted
The bounding of political life

that, whatever the history, in the twenty-first century this state has some serious limitations, even if we could direct its policies in a decidedly progressive form.

MR V: I take limitations as something that can be overcome under the right conditions and forms of action. And I would not want to say that, by definition, the state is the only way forward. You just have not got me to a point where I feel compelled to see the alternatives you are after as necessary.

LATHAM: My inclination for getting us to this point is to give some thought to two questions. First, where are the processes of both neoliberalism and hyper-security going? I mean how might we imagine or visualize the endgame for these two processes? At what point do we see a transformation of the sort where we can say we are in a very different political context; a context that makes any return to an imagined progressive state seem impossible?

MR V: What is the point of imagining what does not yet exist and may never exist?

LATHAM: It’s not about just imagining but about thinking through the implications of current processes and developments around neoliberalism and hyper-security; and whether we can see particular sorts of patterns and structures coming into formation.

MR V: There are lots of patterns and structures in play, like the retrenchment of social programs and burgeoning homeland security apparatus.

LATHAM: I have less obvious things in mind. Which brings me to the second question: what might be changing in the relationship between, on the one hand, the state’s claims and control over national territory and, on the other, the state’s presence and what it does in that territory? We raised this point last time we met but had no time to explore it. This of course is a distinction that, you will recall, would sound familiar to Africanists and International Relations scholars. Remember the contrast between juridical and empirical sovereignty made by Robert Jackson in the early 1990s? He basically argued that African states had juridical sovereignty over their territories within the international system but very limited control over people and places or what was called empirical sovereignty. It became a sort of conceptual rationale for thinking about failed states. What I would like to consider is how we can apply this distinction between claims and presence – and thereby juridical versus empirical sovereignty – to thinking about any state and society, especially one in a neoliberal and hyper-security endgame located in the global North.

The bounding of political life

Mr V sliced the air with a raised finger and cut me off to jump in with:

All of this is taking me back to that political and intellectual moment in the 1990s when it seemed like it suddenly became fashionable to make claims about the retreat of the state, especially in global and international studies. We had the eclipse of sovereignty; an emerging neomedievalism of complex, overlapping authorities of all types, with governmental and non-governmental organizations operating at various levels from the local to the global. And running up through many of the imaginings about a sort of post-state future in the 90s there was no shortage of writing and debate about privatization that became especially pronounced in the Reagan-Thatcher era. One of the things I took away from that 1990s retreat of the state moment was the observation that even if the state decreases its activities, like welfare provision, it doesn’t mean there is some sort of absence of organizational and administrative action in a given society. You have other actors like corporations or civil society that can remain active, even if the state is not. The reassertion of national security and state agendas after 9/11 seems to have ended that moment. But it didn’t stop the broader trend around privatization. I have never been able, since 9/11, to reconcile the return of the state with the longer-term privatization trend. The bigger, more troubling issue for me has been that attention to privatization can displace attention to the problem of how public goods or publicness can be created, maintained, or – heaven forbid – expanded without the state. Even with privatization and the rush to transfer public qualities to entities like public-private partnerships, it’s plain to see that it’s the state that remains the basis for determining what counts as public or not.

LATHAM: Of course in the global North state absence tends to be equated with privatization, where corporations or charities take up the so-called gaps in organizational life. But in the global South, especially in Africa, limits in presence and governance on the part of states are taken as proof of emptiness, vacuums, disorder, or non-governance. This view ignores the existence of other forms of order, governance, or even authority in various collective and personal networks and spaces that don’t fit the neat categories of formal states or even NGOs. How, say, rural areas and urban neighborhoods are organized.


MR V: Even so, I am sure you will agree that there are lots of social spaces and places in the global North where the question of state presence and absence, as you put it, is crucial to social and political life – most of all in places that historically have been forced to depend on it; perhaps because of the destruction of existing institutions, say, for Native Americans; or because not much else was allowed to develop in inner city ghettos or out of the way rural areas like mining districts.5

LATHAM: Indeed, it would be wrong to just assume that absent, displaced state functions will be replaced with private ones. I want, however, to come back to your concern with publicness as you put it. You offer only part of the equation, since the state is also very much the source and basis for what counts not just for publicness, but also for privateness; as any examination of the bodies of what is sometimes called private law shows – whether it’s about contracts, property, or the family.

MR V: That’s a good reason I continue to maintain the focus should be on the state.

LATHAM: All I’m saying is that it’s easy to fall into the trap of equating state presence and activity mostly with the public sphere. You may think I’m being unfair, given that your attention to publicness is, above all, based on your concern with neoliberalism and the shrinking of public provision. My point is only to emphasize that what might matter most here is not the state per se, but what the state does in society. Or to put it another way, what the state does is very much tied to where, when, and how the state makes itself present or not in various places or spheres of social and political life.

MR V: Fine, but what I am trying to do is emphasize that we can judge and evaluate the specific nature of state action and presence, and whether it maintains or even expands the public realm. Just because the state is central, as Polanyi underscored long ago,6 in making markets possible – and now in facilitating neoliberalism with pro-business policies – it doesn’t mean we need to give up on redeveloping the public realm. That would be like saying because the state ignores human rights or violates them, we shouldn’t try to deepen and strengthen human rights through the state.

LATHAM: But my concern is not just a matter of evaluation – and I didn’t think it was your concern. I’m not seeking to understand why publicness is of value or how it is supported or not by political forces. There is certainly a long tradition in Political Science analyzing why an ideological orientation or set of interests is

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predominant and pushing policy in a certain direction, such as toward the market or privatization of services. There’s also the work of economists and administrative studies specialists – and game theorists – where you see arguments about the efficiency or benefits of existing forms of private versus public organization and governance. And then there is a long line of normative arguments justifying the public over the private. There is no shortage of material across these various lines of thinking that might help develop one’s arguments for or against publicness. We both agree about the desirability of publicness. I mean desirability in a general sense, since not all specific forms might be. I have in mind the idea that security can be taken to be a public good – and even what we have been loosely calling hyper-security can be seen that way from an economistic viewpoint. So we have to discriminate here. In any event, I’ve assumed that what we are after is some further insight into the logics and workings of neoliberalism and hyper-security that we might deem as especially significant; insight that I believe might help us better understand the stakes and status of publicness at the particular historical juncture we face.

MR V: Of course I’m all for gaining insight that would be useful, so it’s not like I am against proceeding as you say in principle. I guess it might as well be now. That said, I can tell you for me what you’ve proposed doesn’t go far enough. I would like to see how any sort of better understanding of “logics and workings,” as you put it, could help us see some ways out of the current political moment that we don’t like. So far, you have at least indirectly shown that you share that aim. I also recognized that we have notable differences in how we think about political life, so it’s not clear we can get very far in pursuit of the alternatives or ways forward I find the most important here. In that pursuit, putting emphasis on questioning the state seems a bit excessive.

LATHAM: I do share that aim and will try not to overlook it. I suggest that a good starting point for this is what could be thought of as a rudimentary aspect; it’s what I already mentioned minutes ago, presence. I mean the presence or absence of the state or other organizations in a locale like a town or a domain like education. There is distribution of presence across the physical and social spaces of societies and places. And it’s very difficult to have any public sphere without organizational life present to create or maintain it; whether it’s some infrastructure like a transport system or a community resource such as a public library system. I suggest exploring some questions about the nature and terms of this presence and absence can give us some interesting ways to think about the current moment and maybe even consider some relevant history.

MR V: Somehow, that seems all too obvious. Of course you need the necessary organization, power, and mechanisms to create and maintain a collective good, like public transit.

Mr V let out a loud chuckle and went on:

I think the operative word these days is “boots on the ground.” Seems to me though, much of what is important about presence is determined in policy and planning; in designating the nature and social purpose of presence or what a government office should do; or even determining if there should be any presence at all.

LATHAM: You have a right to be cynical because I am trying to ask you to abstract away from the more specific political and policy processes so that we can focus on general logics and practices. Certainly, planning matters and I am open to discussing it in general terms. What I am suggesting is that what we can do is try to approach all this in a theoretical way. In doing this I think we will gain some perspective on some of the repertoires of action planners have. That’s another reason why we don’t need to get into the various well-established lines of argument about publicness I just mentioned.

MR V: I’ll go along with this for now; but I don’t think it would be surprising to you if I tell you that I am suspicious of these abstracted sorts of approaches – even if I was more than open to them when you knew me during my grad school days.

“The internal/external divide”

LATHAM: I think it would be useful to start in basic terms with intervention in societies and spaces, since not much of what we have spoken of has any meaning outside of the concept of intervention.

MR V: It’s as good as any starting point, I guess. I can see that intervention is important for establishing just collective social life or enforcing rights; to put limits on private action and protect public domains and resources. But I have a feeling it’s not going to be that simple, is it?

LATHAM: That’s jumping the gun. I would rather begin at the beginning so to speak and first consider for a moment the question of what we think we are talking about as the thing intervened in. Maybe start with this.

MR V: I see no reason to mystify matters. We are talking about intervention into what we call society – and there’s no reason to go Thatcher here. I mean social relations, domains of social life, of course. We know what this is: economic activity, households, the street, schools, and so on. And in accord with this we can say that political boundaries more or less mark off a realm of what might be called national social life.

LATHAM: I was not trying to question the existence of societies. I just think you can’t examine the nature and extent of state action and intervention without having a

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8 Mr V is referring to the quip by Margaret Thatcher, “There is no such thing as society,” see the Margaret Thatcher Foundation reprinting of Woman’s Own September 23, 1987 interview, available at: http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689 (accessed April 19, 2011).
meaningful conception in mind of what the organizational context of intervention looks like. We don’t need a theory of society per se, but we do need to be sure we are on the same page, so to speak, about how we conceive of this. Right off the bat you have put forward the classic bounded national domain idea of society – and this is something I am troubled by and my thinking about this connects directly to intervention, to neoliberalism, and even to what we have been calling hyper-security.

MR V: I certainly hope you are not going fall back inadvertently to the fairly tired discussion of globalization as a denationalizing process we touched on minutes ago; where transnational cultural, economic, and political structures and forces become dominant and weaken if not partially displace the national ones.

LATHAM: No, that is not my intention. I see here a more specific and related issue that speaks to the very possibility of publicness today and the intervention tied to it that you would like to see strengthened. I have in mind the notion that the hard difference between the domestic and international that is usually taken for granted is becoming less hard, so to speak. You can see this, for example, in Hardt and Negri’s book *Multitude.* They were concerned with the notion that, especially, US citizens are vulnerable to being treated like foreign nationals wherever in the world those citizens might be located. Subjecting citizens to extraordinary rendition, or even drone attack, when in a foreign country or extensive surveillance on US territory are the more the most obvious examples that come to mind. Unease over this notion of a melding of the international and domestic, I might add, is increasingly popular among US Libertarian Rightwing groups and individuals. In principle, if these are early signs of a weakening of citizenship rights and protections it suggests that the return to a more robust commonwealth you are after can’t just depend on a new political commitment to the public realm.

MR V: On the face of it, I am not so sure we can treat these examples as evidence of some sort of melding of the international and domestic. I think it fair to say they are exceptional. The current furor over the stop and frisk program, especially in New York City, exists in the context of extremely high incarceration rates for African American males and the long history of Jim Crow. Since its inception, the

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10 A fascinating study, very relevant to this part of the discussion, exploring how practices developed in so-called external, colonial spaces have come to be applied in domestic spaces is Alexander D. Barder, *Empire Within: International Hierarchy and Its Imperial Laboratories of Governance*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge: 2015).


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civil rights movement has had a rights-centered commonwealth in mind. Also, the idea that the distinction between the domestic and international is fading runs headlong into the observation, that’s been fairly widespread since 9/11, that national borders are strengthening and domestic spaces are closing in on themselves. I mean haven’t we been told by academics innumerable times about how borders are serving more and more to regulate and govern national population and territory?13

LATHAM: Yes, we have been told. But that is what might be interesting here. After 9/11, there is a sense that not only is the control of national populations and spaces increasing, but that this control includes interactions outside of national borders. Think of how crimes committed outside a national territory now can count against you inside; it might even lead to revocation of citizenship or residence. At the same time, there is a sense that as neoliberalism continues its march forward, you have diminishing prospects for publicness, at least as we have been speaking about it.

MR V: Not sure what the connection is between these two points, external control of your citizenry and advancing neoliberalism? If anything, you can have more control that is privately provided. I mean a private approach to control through corporate power and private security.

LATHAM: Absolutely.

MR V: And that control doesn’t have much to do with the point you raised about the external and internal realms. There may be some aspects of that important enough to make note of, but not for what I thought we were trying to focus on here.

LATHAM: What I am trying to get at here is that thinking about the logics of intervention and presence on the part of the state, across domestic and international realms, might be a very good way to get at many of the dynamics we’re interested in.

MR V: I frankly still don’t see the value of the international here in getting at them.

LATHAM: Hear me out. I have been interested in the domestic/international divide for a long time and I realize only now that really what has interested me is the question of intervention and the organizational logics around it. When I was a graduate student, I told one of my committee members that I thought the distinction ought to be questioned. He was puzzled and very skeptical. I never explicitly pursued the idea in any scholarship but it did surface more implicitly in my

13 For example see the arguments in William Walters, “Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the border,” Environment and Planning D 20 (5) (2002), pp. 561–580; and, of course, Rob Walker, Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993) showed us with great accomplishment how important this distinction is to the very way we exist as moderns. And more recently Wendy Brown, Walled States, Waning Sovereignty, (Cambridge, MA, US: MIT Press, 2010), has explored the coincidence of weakening domestic control and closure and deepening borders.
dissertation through the concept of the external state. I don’t know how much of
that early work you might recall but what I had in mind was that coming out of
World War Two the US state struggled with building an organizational
infrastructure to allow it to operate robustly in its external realm. The US state
chose to face outward as a powerful, widely present agent that would be involved
in far more than diplomacy, trade, and international organizational life. What I
saw then was a state that was pursuing order everywhere, internationally and
domestically – and applying principles and practices associated with liberalism in
both realms. In my more recent work I keep coming back to the domestic and
international as a problem – whether I’m looking at borders, sovereignty,
transnationality, or intervention.

Cutting me off again Mr V quickly shot out with some agitation:
Of course anyone interested in international intervention will be thinking of the
divide as a problem. And making order domestically is not the same as making it
internationally. The levels of commitment are different, as are the claims that
international actors and peoples have on an intervener like the US state. Let me be
clear right off that I think we have to be careful about jumping to any conclusions
about any wiping away of the significance of the distinction between the two. It’s
just misleading. The international and domestic is still a powerful distinction –
even if we can see all sorts of intersection and interpenetration after a couple
decades of post-cold war globalization. The diminishment of a national public
sphere at the same time that security is intensifying only restates the issues that
bring us together to talk in the first place – increasing neoliberalism and security.

LATHAM: I’m only saying that we can’t address those issues unless we are
willing to look deeper into the organizational logics that might be making these
developments possible. And I’m arguing the domestic/international divide is a
factor here. We talked in our last meeting about political time and now I’m saying
we should discuss political space. And I am really saying space takes us, at least
as a starting point, to the internal/external divide. I agree that the domestic and
international spaces remain quite different. I mean, certainly the terms and
conditions of political agency are different, as we can see in the capacity of states
to make claims over life and govern the future inside versus outside national
territory – even for the US. Picking back up on what I was trying to make clear
before, I think we can say that the same forms of presence and intervention can be
applied in both spaces by the same state – without necessarily implying the

14 The dissertation was published in book form as Robert Latham, The Liberal Moment: Modernity,
Security and the Making of Postwar International Order, (New York: Columbia University Press,
1997).

15 Readers who would like to think about the complications associated with such interpenetrations
and the “disassembling of national territory” associated with what is loosely called globalization
should see the masterful work by Saskia Sassen, Territory, Rights, Authority: From Medieval to
distinction between those spaces is vanishing. This is happening, it seems to me, most noticeably in the realm of security as observers like Hardt and Negri suggest. Perhaps we can also see this in the economic and social policy realm, with the US attempt to advance market-oriented policies and privatization instead of public provision most everywhere; something that scholars like Robert Wade have focused on. One of the central themes of my book *The Liberal Moment* was how the US attempted to minimize its social engagement in its international realm after World War Two. It was driven by the same Republican Party led Congressional paranoia about state socialism that also limited domestic programs at that time – a force that is, unfortunately, very much alive today in the same Republican Party.

*Mr V retorted with both hands held out with palms turned up:*

Well, at least they were consistent – and still are! But even so, it’s natural for any group to act in a way that is consistent with their political philosophy. I might even say the same thing for a state. So I’m not really sure what you are getting at here.

LATHAM: I think it’s significant that across the international/domestic divide practices and logics can be similar and perhaps might even be becoming more similar now. Rendition and drone patrols can occur in both spaces without implying the domestic/international difference is dissolving. And I don’t know if you are familiar with it but the work of Didier Bigo speaks to organizational forms operating across the divide. He has suggested that policing can increasingly be seen as operating in a Mobius strip-like intersection of networks and spaces across the international and domestic realms. Bigo points to the increasingly common techniques, logics, and practices of intervention, violence, security, and extraterritoriality in operation across the realms – linked to changing police mentalities that are populated by assumed threats and fear of strangers unwanted within the homeland along with their links to foreign places and networks.

MR V: Of course this intertwinemement rests on the assumption that the difference exists between the two realms in the first place.

LATHAM: That may be the case. But even so, it doesn’t undo the point that this sort of intertwinement is happening. I should point out here, though, that my concerns are different, though related to Bigo’s. I’m talking about how what’s really basic to all of this and your concern with public provision is the way we understand and evaluate the presence and absence of the state within and across both domestic and international realms. I am speaking here about how we might understand the distribution of state presence.

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MR V: I think a term like that takes us into some very vague and abstract territory.

LATHAM: It’s just a place to start. Why is the state one place and not another? Why is it doing this or that in that place? That’s what I mean by distribution. I don’t think here and now we have to get into delineating and analyzing the dense, specific practices and logics of capital and power operating at varying scales – whether it’s the urban or the global. We can approach this in a more modest, simple way just by considering seriously the nature and logic presence and intervention – or its containment, withdrawal, and absence. And when I say intervention I don’t just mean what is talked about in UN circles regarding, say, Iraq or Haiti – even though this is relevant in terms of what happens, or not, internationally. I’m just trying to emphasize intervention as an essential feature of political life with important normative implications for your concern with publicness and the public weal.

“A range of interventions and forms of presence”

MR V: To my mind intervention is addressed and taken up all over the place, even if the word or label is not used directly. But often it is used. I’m even thinking of how in psychological therapy, it’s typically the way the action taken to improve patients’ lives is labeled.

LATHAM: Though I think it’s fair to say that the thrust of most of these sorts of uses is focused on the content of interventions. I’m advocating that we first start with the simple question of what shapes the presence and absence of the state and its interventions; where and why it’s entered into or withdrawn from lives or spaces; and what the implications are.

MR V: Surely you see that it’s the purpose of intervention that might determine presence. A state is somewhere to do something like economic distribution.

LATHAM: I do see that. But that is exactly the point. Starting off by first asking about presence is what elicits questions about the purpose of presence. It also does something else. By focusing in this way on presence, intervention, and absence, we can think politically across the global North and South.

MR V: I have a hard time imagining that you can find equivalences, say, between failed states in regions like Africa and Asia and the US or even Scandinavian countries. And why bother anyway trying to make that linkage?

LATHAM: I’ll address why we should bother in a moment. Regarding your first point, as you well know, most states in the global South can hardly be called failed. Even if we include those states often associated with failure, the point I am

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trying to make right now is that another way to look at such contexts is to see them situated at the edge or tail of a more generalizable pattern of state insertion and withdrawal, or state presence and absence. In other words, we might think of this as a sort of continuum across lives and spaces within both the global South and North, even around such functions as social welfare. At one extreme in this framing a state in central Asia or Africa that might really be seen to be present and able to intervene only in a capital city; and then perhaps only in key locales of resource extraction across the rest of a national territory. In other words, I see this as one point, to the far side for sure along the same continuum – of presence/absence and intervention/withdrawal – that also includes on the other side states of the global North, where there are quite different contexts and sets of intensities.

MR V: That there are different contexts and intensities means to me you’re talking about two different political formations.

LATHAM: Why not just look at instances of extensive and deep state presence in the global North as the other extreme in the continuum, rather than as a matter of absolute difference? The point of this approach is to make clear that even in the global North state presence can be limited and contained. In either context, a constrained, narrow, delimited state presence can be found across many domains and places. In the global South there might be more rural domains where this is the case, but there are plenty of very urban countries in the global South like Venezuela. So, we might say that a key factor for the continuum is the level of urbanization. In cities the distribution of presence and absence occurs in a context that is thick with very close, overlapping specific sites and zones of intervention. As we might see in a city with its enclaves, police stations, welfare offices, or spatial barriers around commercial zones.19

MR V: But urbanization is generally more developed and ordered in the global North. So you’ll have far more of these zones and far more social order within and between them.

LATHAM: Again, I am talking about a continuum here and what you just said fits that notion.

MR V: But setting up a continuum like that fails to take account of how the distributed pieces of presence and intervention you are talking about can add up to something that is quite different in the global North as opposed to the global South. A range of interventions and forms of presence can be part of making a meaningful

public domain in a country like Norway. But presence and interventions in a country like Zimbabwe is less likely to be part of a meaningful public because it’s not clear one exists there in the first place. As the cliche goes, context matters. So by taking things out of context you commit a sleight of hand to make it all seem equivalent.

LATHAM: Actually, you point about the public domain being meaningful or not is exactly what is at stake in the prospects for augmenting neoliberalism and security as we’ve discussed it – whether it’s the global North or South. I’m saying that when it comes to the commonwealth or national public domain, this political space where public works and social purpose are pursued, well, we can better understand its diminishment if we look more closely at its underbelly. I mean looking at what is left after we bracket out the national commons or public domain. And that, I contend, is the presence or absence of the state in spaces and social life. I am suggesting we do this not to ignore the national commons; instead, I think from this more political materialist starting point we can ask questions about the commons and publicness.

MR V: I suspect the sort of questions you want to ask are not the ones I would.

LATHAM: I am especially keen on us asking what it is in the logics of presence and intervention that might be especially conducive toward augmenting neoliberalism and security.

MR V: I am still concerned that you are pushing things to the limits when it comes to the hardly exceptional states of North America or Europe. Though I understand everything can be an exception in one way or another. But it means you are ignoring the uneventful and routine political life that remains; what we see in fights over healthcare or extending unemployment benefits. This life may be diminishing but it’s far from gone.

LATHAM: I wouldn’t dispute that per se. My point here is that I’d rather approach the routine from a different starting point. One that doesn’t take the robustness of the public domain or even its existence for granted. This is how we might better understand what might be lost. It also might help us see how the routine, as you put it, meets up with the non-routine. What comes to mind here is the example of Israel/Palestine you brought up last time and the work of architectural theorist Eyal Weizman in his book *Hollow Land*.20 Weizman points, like you, to what he sees as the deepening fragmented and rhizomatic organization of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, though he starts with space in mind and you with temporality. He points to practices like Israel’s erecting and dismantling of barriers in seemingly haphazard but constant motion; unfolding alongside the more enduring and infamous Separation Wall. What’s key here is that for Weizman this is a sort of laboratory for developments in spatial practice across the globe. He points to Iraq and suggests the spatial governance of the Occupied Territories may not just be a way station toward some settled two-state solution but the end game in itself. I guess what I am asking here is for us to consider what it might mean in

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political theoretical terms to treat that as a starting point. Not, of course, as a state of nature per se, but as a sort of framing from which we can think ahead, so to speak. The state of nature of course was a device that also allowed for that.

MR V: What you are pushing on here seems an incredible distance from anything I recognize as political theory. Even further, I’d say by offering up this starting point you are really already determining the outcome, in that you have already abandoned the pursuit of the progressive commonwealth that keeps me hoping for a different future. The task then becomes justifying that abandonment.

LATHAM: But if you can’t imagine and probe the political world that might be emerging on the other side of any sort of neoliberal and security transition we might be in now, well, then you are seeking after a commonwealth that is erected on what exactly? What sort of political organization and infrastructure is available for us in the midst of, or after, neoliberalism and hyper-security?

MR V: I admit I have no ready answer for you and what I would give you will sound like the call for a return to what you insist is an imagined golden age of the progressive state. I admit that what has gone on in recent decades does not lend itself to an easy return to progressive political life. But I’m in this discussion above all to think about the possibility of return. I suspect the attempt to create your continuum involving all sorts of states undermines that possibility. I get that you’re trying to say there is no formula for progress, especially one that can apply in many contexts; and that’s one reason I don’t like the continuum since in many social and political contexts in the global South there may not be much of a viable starting point for what I’m concerned with.

LATHAM: Don’t tell the countries in Latin America associated with the pink tide. It is not that I am dismissing your aims out of hand. It’s just that we started this dialogue with the assumption that we should keep the undesirable processes like neoliberalism and hyper-security clearly in view. What would it mean to seek after some newly constituted commonwealth if what we are taking to be a double movement of amplifying forms of security and neoliberalism is part of a more basic transformation in contemporary political life? Of course, such a transformation would be realized differently and unevenly across the globe. My point about a continuum is not to insist on uniformity, but to be able to look at common logics operating in different but related contexts.

MR V: But this so-called basic transformation could just be taken to be what we have to confront in order to move toward that redeveloped commonwealth.

LATHAM: I don’t see things as that straightforward. I think we first have to puzzle over whether there is a sort of nasty endgame to the unwanted political

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processes of neoliberalism and hyper-security. And I mean endgame in a specific sense: not as some ultimate resolution or final stage or decisive settlement, but some sort of qualitatively distinguishable transition into what might be taken to be a new formation we don’t like; something that coheres around specific logics and materialities of political order and organization. Given that we may in the midst of such a transition, I am not even sure we can ask this question in a meaningful way, let alone even pretend to address or answer it. However, I’m of the mind that it’s worth considering in relation to the issues we’re talking about.

MR V: But I hope you can take seriously the positive possibilities of a desired form of progressive political life.

LATHAM: I guess my concern is whether, even if we see some sort of landslide electoral support for progressive leaders, the organizational materialities of neoliberalism and hyper-security will prevent any significant change away from this moment of transition. Neoliberalism and security have of course become central to any critical approach to contemporary capitalist modernity. I am specifically interested in keeping the injurious effects of neoliberalism in mind, as I have no doubt you are. And I’m talking about the things we’ve touched on, such as the constriction of the public sphere, publicness, the welfare state, economic and social rights, and social abandonment more generally. There is a whole other realm of discourse and analysis regarding neoliberalism focused on policies and practices; typically you see an emphasis on marketization and financialization. I think we can keep the focus on the former stuff, the socio-political aspects relating to interventions. And, by the way, for security the injurious effects are no surprise: there’s violence, control, and surveillance.

MR V: If I accept your suggestion that we focus first on the potential negative transformations underway, I think we have to say something useful about the relationship between these two sets of effects. I do think it matters, if you are serious about discussing the sort of moment we are in. There are obvious ways to approach it. We can say: security fills the gaps for a state abandoning public commitments. In the face of pressures and crisis that might emerge as a result you need control, policing, fear creation, imprisonment, or even elimination. But somehow this familiar enforcement-type thinking is unsatisfying. It reminds me of some of the self-assured and simplistic Marxist analyses of power such as Ernst Mandel’s, where the police and army enforce ruling class interests. We came to see that there was no single, unified elite interest except maybe at the most general level of protecting the capitalist system itself.

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22 This is now a vast subject that has taken on often wide-ranging constructs and understandings – see, for example, Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, (eds.), The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective, (Boston, MA, US: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Saad Filho, Alfredo, and Deborah Johnston, Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader, (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

LATHAM: That’s hardly a minor interest and certainly competing elite interests can seek all sorts of enforcement. But either way, the sort of basic instrumentalist thinking you fear is not what I have in mind. We can focus on the relationship itself between neoliberalism and security in ways that are useful and suggestive – and that go beyond straight-line instrumentalism. I have in mind here the work of urbanists like Mike Davis. His analysis of Los Angeles emphasized the increasing combination of large spaces of abandonment with highly secured boundaries and enclaves for elites. Davis’s sort of work is echoed in more popular takes on this in the recent graphic novel by Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, which speaks of sacrifice zones in ways that echo thinking in terms of exceptionality, now most readily associated with the name Agamben.

MR V: Sacrifice Zones? I remember running into that term in Neal Stephenson’s 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. He was fictionalizing those certainly exceptional spaces like former military or test sites that are permanently off limits because of extreme pollution and waste. There surely are some places that fit this abandonment profile in the global North. But what do we do with the fact that in the global North we have polities where the state seems to be everywhere? In the US the number of individuals receiving governmental aid is at an all time high and new health care legislation was passed that certainly increases state intervention in that sector – even if this new policy falls far short of universal coverage and is seen as very dependent on the private sector. I see a key problem with relying on notions like sacrifice zones or even the emptying of socio-political space, the hollowing out of the state, or social abandonment. They direct our attention for the most part to a specific type of space. There is nothing wrong with that focus per se, but it tends to obscure for us how all sorts of limits and containments can be right in the thick of a busy city and may not involve ghettos or those internal boundaries areas inside a city, which I remember Jane Jacobs said can form dead zones. And the same applies to a polity that can have limits, areas of abandonment and barriers in the mist of all sorts of interventions.

LATHAM: We can still have aid and austerity; or new social legislation and neoliberalism. For once, I don’t think we are far apart in our views here and you are pushing on something that is very critical. Let me put it this way: what might be an important stake in neoliberalism – and the notion that private, corporate approaches are the preferred pathways – is the limits and containments you mention. You can have public works, social development, open participatory planning and organization that are hindered while individual aid isn’t; aid that then functions, as you put about security, to fill the gaps, relying even on market

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approaches for its provision. Certainly critics of neoliberalism have made this observation.\textsuperscript{26} This implies more broadly for me that the effect of neoliberalism is not just about ending the welfare state and social care as a public norm, but ending the possibility of building progressive alternatives, including those that might venture beyond the welfare state. What are narrowed, constrained, if not lost, are alternatives, possibilities of organizing social and political life otherwise. This is about closing things off or closure.

MR V: Of course, pointing to these limits and barriers to change and alternatives has a long lineage at least from the nineteenth century on, with Marx, Nietzsche, and poets like Rimbaud to name a few. So, I don’t know what we’re adding here to that radical tradition. I would also remind you of Max Weber’s work on bureaucracy, its limits in relation to democracy, to political wills in legislatures, for example.\textsuperscript{27} More importantly, what does pointing to the closure tell us except that we should work on finding ways to open things? But what better means is there for this than advancing the public realm?

LATHAM: Sure, you are right about that long history; and that says to me we are dealing with something that might be deeper than any policy change or reform could handle. I don’t think we can just start undertaking the sort of advancing of the public realm you are calling for without thinking more about this. Last time we spoke about the essays of Walter Benjamin where he made lost possibilities and evaded histories central. I read a piece recently by Frederic Jameson that claims we are living in a moment that is experiencing a “wholesale liquidation of futurity.”\textsuperscript{28} Where I believe we can get somewhere thinking about this closure is by concentrating on the organizational aspects; by doing so, I believe we can better understand the limits we face, even within the busy, dense city or highly developed nation-state that is foremost on your mind.

MR V: When you say closure do you really have in mind enclosure? I mean enclosure in the traditional sense we always speak about it: dealing with, say, restrictions of access to a commons like land for animals to graze on or even resources like water. Certainly this is a closure we could see in a city since it really just involves creating a barrier limiting access through, say, a physical fence or

\textsuperscript{26} The private provision of welfare services is analyzed in Michael B. Katz, \textit{In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America}, (New York: Basic Books, 1996), especially Chapter 11.


legal restriction; and where control and access is limited to private individuals or corporations.

LATHAM: I certainly recognize that in thinking about neoliberalism and closure it’s quite easy to fix on the notion of enclosure, which is certainly very relevant to neoliberalism. What I would like us to do is shift the focus a few degrees, so that it’s not just on restricting access or keeping people or things out. I would like us to concentrate on what happens inside a bounded space where there is restraining and confining of some social and organizational domain or object. I suggest we can think of this in the way that biological theorists have thought about the autonomy of organisms. Varela used the term organizational closure to emphasize the importance of the internal workings of an entity for its existence and survival; things like the system of organs, fluids, and so on working effectively together.29

MR V: Certainly histories of enclosure have done that, starting with Karl Polanyi’s *Great Transformation*. Focusing for instance on what the aristocracy did in the restricted spaces including creating forms of sharecropping and so on. OK, how does that really move us anywhere from what we know already?

LATHAM: I don’t want to make too much of this. All I am trying to do is start off with a focus on this bounded organizational space. And just because an organizational space is bounded does not mean those with little power can’t have access to it or affect outcomes within it. What I am after in pointing to organizational closure is a way to highlight the process of channeling social life into bounded forms within contained spaces. Cordonning off and channeling can take place on a physical basis in the various sites of organizational presence like federal offices in a neighborhood. It also can exist on a non-physical basis – through, say, the bureaucracy and rules that form a sort of virtual organizational domain, as when we interact with immigration ministries over visas or revenue agencies to pay our taxes.

MR V: OK, there are organizations and they have domains and therefore boundaries. So? What about what they do? What about actual state action and interventions?

LATHAM: To my eye, something relevant to neoliberalism like economic deregulation entails closure, in that it limits the nature and scope of action. You would think it opened things up since its name implies removing regulations. But all it’s doing is really further narrowing what is considered acceptable governance and decision-making away from state agencies so that the logic of market pricing and corporate-state alliances are the basis for economic life in that domain. It also means fewer economic matters are open to negotiation with a wider range of groups such as unions and community activists.30

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30 For a recent analysis of how central negotiation, involving especially unions, was to the welfare state see Asbjørn Wahl, *The Rise and Fall of the Welfare State*, (London: Pluto Press, 2011).
MR V: And tell me please how your emphasis here on closure connects to security?

LATHAM: When you think about the meaning of security it is very much about these sorts of containments, about locking things down, and seeking after some certain form of limited scope or arrangement of space and order.

Mr V let out a laugh of derision and then quickly replied:

This reminds me of something you see often in TV or films, where characters scream out “call security” in an effort to contain and terminate a disruption. But seriously, I am not sure how you can focus on anything when we know these sorts of limits and containments are going on all over the place. I mean, this can be carried too far. There are social bulkheads and boundaries in every area of state and society. I wonder if you are isolating a general attribute of modern life and calling it neoliberal. Only, thereby, to find your claim verified because you find it everywhere. This is hardly a good point of departure for establishing something that we can count as significant. I am happy to see that you are willing to concentrate on state action this afternoon, but I sense that you are doing so once again to set us up to move away from it.

LATHAM: First off, don’t forget that the prevalence of bulkheads as you put it is exactly the point – as we discussed just minutes ago regarding the city. Also, that they are everywhere suggests we tend to take them for granted and maybe we shouldn’t. As for my concentration on the state, yes, it’s real. But, at the risk of alienating you further, I would like to get around to talking about whether the state is so unique compared say to corporations when looked at in terms of presence and absence.31

MR V: Whether or not neoliberalism and security can be everywhere is one thing; it is quite another to try to establish another continuum, when for me what matters are the possibilities of state presence and absence for publicness and justice – which is not really on the agenda for corporations. As we agreed, those possibilities are important for getting to the other side of neoliberalism and intensifying security. I remain convinced the state must be central in this.

“Looking at the interspatial logics of deployment”

LATHAM: Yes, it is central but I suggest we can better understand that centrality by stepping away from the state as we usually conceive of it.

MR V: You are likely setting me up for another move away from the state, aren’t you?

LATHAM: In this case I don’t think I am but you can keep me honest about it. What I am asking is that we turn our viewpoint a little upside down; so we are not

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31 I am using these two terms in a straightforward way. For a far more complex use see Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, (trans.), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD, US: Johns Hopkins, 1976), especially p. 44.
starting by focusing on a big territory-wide national public realm. Instead, we might look at things from the inside; from the political infrastructure and all the fragments of the state that are one place or another across that territory. This is what I have been pushing for over the last ten minutes or so. I think one way to get a handle on this infrastructure of presence is through the logic of dispatch, of deployment. And a deployment is an installation in a local context of agents who are linked organizationally to a point external to that context. The place from which they are deployed is typically some kind of organizational platform located elsewhere. The relation between the locale and the sending platform can be thought of as interspatial since it involves two linked but distinct spaces. It could be the headquarters of a governmental agency or transnational corporation that does the sending. Deployments have received no real explicit theoretical attention as a political theoretical category – and yet they are relatively easy to recognize and historically prevalent; and are part of most any study of an agency, an organization, or bureaucracy.

MR V: The deployment concept seems straightforward enough. Of course, just as with your so-called organizational closure, you can see deployments all over the place; and, granted, you just recognized that fact. But just as before, I am suspicious that they don’t help us analytically very much. I also see how you are sneaking in non-state actors like corporations. Moreover, by trying to focus us on distinct organizational relationships you’re forcing our discussion into the bracketing of national political contexts you mentioned. You know if I didn’t know you better I could accuse you of a sort of skeptical empiricism or nominalism about abstract ideas such as the public realm.

LATHAM: I think if you have to put this in some epistemological or even scientistic way, it might be more accurate to accuse my bracketing as an act of reduction; where the effort to understand neoliberalism and hyper-security at the national level involves looking at the organizational materialism of deployments; reducing things down to that level in crude terms. Reductionism has its pitfalls because it can fail to take the macro-level dynamics seriously enough. Let’s say here we can be aware of this weakness and make sure to remain conscious of the tension between the different dimensions, the macro-level public realm you are especially concerned with and the organizational material realm of deployments I’m talking about.

Mr V interjected with some cynicism:

At this point I’ll take any attention to the macro you offer. But I’m also not clear why you need the qualifier “interspatial”? I suspect it’s a way to turn the macro public realm into just the empty space of intervening deployments.

LATHAM: I am using the word “interspatial” to describe the movement of a social entity across two or more spaces, which may or may not involve crossing the borders of a national territory. Interspatial deployments are central to many of the
ways states, corporations, NGOs, and international organizations enter and are present in space. The deployment comes from some external place and typically can be identified as external to the locale it enters. Think of an army or national police unit sent in somewhere, or an environmental monitoring task force, a charitable aid organization, or a group of international financial institution advisors. Also, federalism is interesting here. We typically look at federalism in terms of a relationship between local units like states and provinces and a national level of government. But we can also look at it in terms of presence and intervention, where say the federal center deploys fragments of itself into local spaces.

MR V: Not sure I buy any equivalence between situational responders like the police and federal level offices operating in some locale or another.

LATHAM: I don’t mean emergency units like Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster response teams are the same as, say, federal Department of Labor administrators, who might operate on a regular basis in a town or region. They certainly differ in the nature and purpose of their presence. Some can be designed as temporary, others permanent; some very limited in their scope; others not. Either way, deployments are hinges joining external and local forces around the exercise of power and the pursuit of political projects within and even across boundaries.

MR V: But why do these deployments have to be bounded and contained as you put it? Why can’t they have the opposite relationship to the places they are present in? I mean their effects can be broad and deep. Can’t publicness be built with deployments that yield large public infrastructure or create public squares and other facilities? If you are serious about linking deployments and neoliberalism, I suppose you have to deal with this counter-claim.

LATHAM: I would argue that the hinges between the organizational site a deployment comes from and the locale it is present in set serious limits to the nature of interspatial social encounters. Interspatial deployments are by definition specialized in relation to any local social world they enter, since they rest on the forward placement of a defined and delimited organization from outside. In other words, they move along relatively narrow bands of intervention or engagement with local order. An organization, individual, or institution could never carry with it the range of culture, politics, and social relations that are encountered in a given locale. There is also their boundedness to consider. This aspect is hardly conducive to publicness and it certainly is not democratic. So, fostering publicness runs against the character of deployments. The most extreme form of this external movement is extra-territorial, where the deployed organization, be it military or consular, carries its own culture, laws, and juridical authority. Extra-territorial status is mirrored today in the near immunity possessed by some humanitarian workers who increasingly employ their own security forces.

MR V: Perhaps taken in isolation this might hold, but if you have a set of deployments and interventions why can’t they be part of a public project, like the
The bounding of political life

creation of a public park, transit system, or national employment insurance? Your bracketing perhaps comes in a little too handy as a way to ignore this sort of macro-oriented social purpose.

LATHAM: Sure, deployments can lead to or be part of wider macro developments. I’m not trying to ignore these. As I said, the idea is not to deny macro realms, but to try to understand what is happening in them like neoliberalism, by focusing on the political organizational logics that compose these realms. Placing private sector oriented charter schools in public school buildings is becoming a common practice and is an unfortunate example of how deployments can transform a public space.32 More generally, I’d say there’s no reason to assume macro realms are good things or can stay good things. Macro realms can be part of empires just as they can be part of welfare- and justice-oriented public domains.

MR V: But don’t you think we need to distinguish between those organizational logics that pull toward empire and neoliberalism and those that pull toward the public good?

LATHAM: What I am trying to emphasize is how within most any sort of public realm there are organizational logics that pull things in a bounded and limited direction, toward organizational closure. And this creates and enhances the conditions for advancing neoliberalism. As I’ve tried to underscore, we can always focus on the specific policies associated with neoliberalism like financialization and anti-labor legislation; but I am asking that we look at the logics, in terms of how narrow and constrained political and social life becomes. I hope in looking at the interspatial logics of deployment we can address your concern about how to move away from neoliberalism. I am trying to locate a way to think about the logic of the state that allows us to think of alternatives – actually by considering the different ways we are present politically in spatial terms.

MR V: I venture that you mean non-state ways? I guess I should not be surprised things would be pushed in this direction.

LATHAM: Well, that should be addressed, if for no other reason than a way to understand the state is to look outside of it. But if you don’t mind, we are getting ahead of ourselves here.

MR V: Maybe, but I would not limit the non-state actors we consider to just corporations. I remember David Harvey in *Condition of Postmodernity* referred to the “flying pickets” used by workers to create a chaotic, highly mobile form of disruption that was not easy for states to contend with.33

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LATHAM: That’s a very interesting example that I should look into.

MR V: Do that. Besides protesting workers, there are people living in the places your deployments are operating in. If the deployments are in principle limited, you are really assuming a sort of specialization “on the ground.” This would have to be defined and enforced by planners and practitioners and recognized by the locals, who are affected by a given deployment, whether it’s coming from a federal state or their own municipality that might set up offices for services in a particular community. You are sort of assuming acquiescence on the part of locals. Otherwise there would be resistance or rebellion against these deployments from outside.

LATHAM: You’ve put two points on the table. Let me start with the specialization point. You are really asking about what I call the scope of the involvement of whatever organization is deployed; about how much of political and social life in a locale is drawn into the sphere of the deployment and how much sway the deployment has over life. So, for our hypothetical federal employment office it’s a matter of how much of work-related matters, say, in a town, are impacted by its presence. And then even if local actors can impact what that office does, they are still operating in a world where that office is present and helping set the terms around work. There is more to say about that by coming back to the concept of organizational closure. Before we do that I want to complicate this a bit and add another dimension in the mix linked to what we spoke of last time we met: the status of a deployment as temporary or permanent. What distinguishes an emergency aid deployment from that federal employment office is the status of the aid effort as temporary.

MR V: I’d say you can also distinguish them based on the fact that the employment office is part of a larger social project of finding jobs for people.

LATHAM: That difference is in part what determines scope; and that’s a good way to bring in your macro aspects. A deployment will have more sway and draw more life into its ambit if it’s part of a more ambitious social project. But status is also tied to different social projects. Status is not just about duration, since how long a deployment lasts is often quite variable. We can see it continuing in what looks like the permanently temporary, as in the Israeli occupation of Palestine. And just like scope, status has implications for the impact and sway of a deployment in some locales. If you have a well-defined, narrow, temporary deployment, it’s going to mean that its organizers and officials will act as though they have limited responsibility for life in some place. But even if deployments have the same scope and status they can vary in terms of their sway over people and places. The narrow and temporary fact-finding missions by a governmental

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agency are of a highly circumscribed nature, which precludes greater influence. In contrast, when a government services office is set up in a given locale, its sway over lives can be considerable, involving jobs, housing, youth, or some other area.

MR V: I’m still not at all comfortable with looking at this from the perspective of deployments instead of projects.

LATHAM: But as I just tried to say, projects matter because they are what determine the nature of the deployment, as in my example of sustained social services versus emergency action.

MR V: Let me get this straight, if some really provisional temporary intervention starts to become permanently temporary, then you will see an expansion in scope? This seems to me to be just some language to talk about expanding responsibility over local life in places like the Occupied Territories. I also have Afghanistan and Nato’s expanding role coming to mind.

LATHAM: You are hitting on something very crucial here: the processes of transformation put in play around deployments. Political forms such as colonial or settler states and annexations can emerge out of deployments that start with limited scope and status. Say you start with some fragment emerging out of a metropole or state capital like a trading post that is not necessarily permanent or seeking sway over local life. But we know from the history of colonialism these fragments can become the starting point for annexation, political incorporation, or state formation. In between, there can emerge a military or settler occupation that then develops into the permanent and broad claims of a colonial regime that imposes an order on a social space. Along the way the external quality of the deployment dissolves as the conqueror’s presence within the territory begins to turn into dominion. Through these deployments the macro you are so concerned with takes shape as a colony.

MR V: But it could also take shape as a democratic state. Either way, to come back to my point about acquiescence versus resistance to deployments, what you’re saying implies that decolonization is an effort to turn a colonial regime into an unwanted, external force: to sort of move the gears in reverse by externalizing it.

LATHAM: That’s a good way to put it.

MR V: That seems to work neatly when it comes to imperial or international situations like occupations or UN reconstruction missions as we saw in Cambodia. But what happens when you are dealing with deployments that are already occurring within a domestic context? A good example is the series of American expeditions to explore and map what they called the wilderness in the West in the nineteenth century; symbolized initially by Louis and Clark. These expeditions became the basis for the creation in the US of permanent national parks, most famously associated with Theodore Roosevelt. I am raising these points because I don’t think there are any neat processes of transformation, as you put it, where you just go from initial deployments to empire, as you seem to imply.
LATHAM: You’re right; in these matters neatness is not likely.

MR V: Also, it occurs to me that the question of reversal might be quite relevant, not just to processes like decolonization, but also to neoliberalism. The retreat of the state can be seen as a sort of reversal, where you might see actions like closing government offices or the privatization of public goods and services, including the selling of public lands or even water systems.

LATHAM: Or allowing for private commercial installations on public lands as is the case in the US. There’s even ways that public land gets privatized through clever legal gimmicks. Your example of a public park system is an interesting one to speculate about. Once it got beyond the expeditions, agents, and surveyors and formed into a park system it was no longer a matter of interspatial deployment. It became the space, the locale, so to speak. But to think through your notion of reversal, I would argue that by selling off land there is an externalization going on; a sort of breaking off of a fragment of the locale and linking it back to a corporate headquarters or some sort of financial network or structure. And so once again deployment becomes relevant in that space.

“What sort of power comes along with evasion?”

MR V: One thing that is troubling me about this approach is that it seems to be missing a way to deal with power, in the sense of exerting force, influence, or control. You point to examples of exploitation and dispossession, conquest, and what not, but there is no dynamic; there are no power relations. There is a certain, how shall I put it, coldness to it all.

LATHAM: Well, we are dealing with limits and containments so it’s no surprise it comes off that way. But, now that you raise it, what I find interesting about this is that even the lightest of deployments can affect life considerably within the locale it enters. I would push here even further and ask why, if deployments are limited, we can associate them with some of the most excessive exercises of power in human history such as conquest and violence. Thinking about this I believe gives us a sense of the dynamics in play.

MR V: I don’t think of the excesses you are pointing to in terms of limits. I do see that there were lots of ways to overwhelm people and places with technology, social organization, and wealth.

35 For a description of relatively recent developments of this sort in the US readers can look at John W. Ragsdale Jr., “National Forest land exchanges and the growth of Vail and other gateway communities,” Urban Lawyer 31 (1) (1999), pp. 1–46. There is also the long history of land grants to railroad developers in the nineteenth century.

LATHAM: Deployments might have sometimes overwhelmed local actors or they themselves might have been out-manned and out-resourced in local contexts by the existing empires or states the deployers encountered. Even though they likely would ultimately still prevail as we saw in the iconic Cortés conquest of the Aztecs. We could argue for hours about the factors involved in each situation. What I want to do is keep the focus on the effects of limits, since we are concerned with neoliberalism and security where containments and limits are especially important. I believe there is something uniquely powerful about the narrowness of deployments that works to their advantage in local contexts and which allows us to connect neoliberalism and security.

MR V: I really don’t see what’s different here. Power is often seen as being a matter of limits or imposing constraints. One actor imposes them on another actor. And I recall the more expanded view of power where it’s not about direct imposition of constraints but more a matter of shaping the world and rules and therefore the various outcomes of politics.

LATHAM: What I have in mind is somewhat different. If you recall last time we met I mentioned the idea that intervening organizations can set up their own extinguishment. This can take place in terms of scope, where an organization imposes clear limits on what they do and where they do it. And, of course, it bears on status, where they can set up limits to what the purpose of presence somewhere is. In this case, time is very likely going to a factor. For example a UN-led aid effort can carefully set limits to what it does on some mission and also declare the mission a temporary action with a fixed endpoint in time. A transnational corporation can limit its involvement with the problems of local governance, and, of course, try to avoid responsibility for the pollution it produces.

MR V: I see you are cooking up another angle on evasion here. Either way, I am somewhat confused. All you seem to be doing is re-describing the character of your deployments as contained or limited. You have your specialized fragment of an organization like a local governmental office that is part of some national agency. And, sure, it may be limited compared to the responsibility of a municipality. On the other hand, you seem to be implying that a deployment could take on more and more responsibility. In your view, that typically leads to colonization. But the long


39 In *The Liberal Moment* I used the phrase auto-extinguishment to describe this process. To see how this extinguishment was applied in the 1990s by the so-called “international community” in the limit to the scope and status of international interventions see Michel Feher, *Powerless by Design: The Age of the International Community*, (Durham, NC, US: Duke University Press, 2000).
history of state formation says that maybe this expansion does not have to lead to some kind imperial domination, but can actually be part of the creation of a public realm. After all, kingdoms formed into states based in part on putting in place castles, soldiers, lords, tax collectors, and so on across a territorial domain.

LATHAM: What I am trying to convey here is that this is all in the nature of interspatial deployments. I didn’t mean extinguishment is the only type of outcome or logic. You can start out with very limited deployments like a very specialized aid intervention to deliver food to storm victims. Or you can see a deployment start out with a wider scope but then with time that scope can shrink. This is typical when you have austerity and budget cuts, where human services programs shrink, or you see reductions in what they do in people’s lives. I don’t think it’s relevant to go back to European state formation histories – we’re too far past that. On the other hand, I don’t want to get caught up focusing only on the process of curtailment per se. I think, either way, what I am trying to emphasize here is that all these processes and forms of presence share something, and that’s their specialization in relation to a local context. What I am after is the question of what sort of power is entailed by that relationship. What sort of power comes along with evasion, erasure, and boundedness? This is the other side of the more typical question about the power that comes along with expansion and extension, where there is a patent effort to control more space and population and shape more and more life somewhere.

MR V: Why bother calling it power?

LATHAM: What if we look at power as not just a matter of control over people and things – or shaping and affecting social and political life – but instead look at it as a matter of channeling and bounding aspects of that life. Maybe the simplest form of this is limiting the scope of something, as I’ve been saying, as in a government agency that has rules that direct it to deal with immediate unemployment relief but not job creation.40 With this sort of limit in place a deployment can bound its range of operation.

I was cut off by Mr V:

Again, where’s the power in this?

LATHAM: This is a sort of negative power.41 The constraints I’m talking about set narrow channels for practices and discourses; and involve setting and operating

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40 In an explicit recognition of how important negative power has become to an agency such as the UNHCR, and how it displaces broader political approaches, a recent anonymous staff member contrasted “situational approaches” to those that focused on the politics of an entire region by engaging “with regional institutions such as OAS, OSCE, OAU, and CIS in order to address asylum practices and forced migration patterns on a regional basis” Saul Takahashi, “The UNHCR note on international protection you won’t see,” International Journal of Refugee Law 9 (1) (1997), pp. 267–273.

within limits and then compelling others who are drawn up in these channels to face and contend with those limits. I can go to that government office for unemployment benefits, but I can’t talk to them about what they are doing about fostering jobs or even finding a job.

MR V: But don’t you think you are sort of stacking the deck toward neoliberalism and hyper-security by placing the spotlight on these limits and containments? You leave little room for established approaches to power that are not so negative. These approaches might give us a starting point for thinking about how to move beyond the current political moment.

LATHAM: I would venture that you have in mind an approach to power that comes out of Leftist critiques and the work of Foucault, where power is a matter of determining operating logics and categories that shape individuals’ outlooks or understandings of the world and how they act in it. Institutions and discourses that constitute social existence are central here and to Foucault’s analysis more broadly. Basically, you could say the more ability to constitute social life, the more power there is. The more individuals take up the roles set by these frameworks the more power is in play. There is much talk about the neoliberal subject who acts appropriately and actively in a neoliberal world.42

MR V: Yes but why does the constituting have to be toward neoliberalism? Why not progressive public life?

LATHAM: I guess the positive, progressive version of this is the power to shape a world where subjects are more likely to be informed, critical democratic citizens, in the spirit of a thinker like Habermas.43

MR V: I don’t want to rehash old debates, but the ability to create that sort of engagement – and the public sphere that goes along with it – would be a great step. From such a vantage point, the things we are discussing could be contested and support for alternatives could emerge.

LATHAM: I am all in favor of these sorts of developments. The problem is, if negative enclosed forms of power are prevalent, it’s hard to imagine how these alternatives can take hold across societies.

MR V: Before I can accept that, I need to better understand what you mean by negative power. It’s vague and not clearly different than the Foucauldian power concept. After all, when you enter into one of your narrow institutions you then face positive power, where rules and actors like bureaucrats determine what you can do.


43 Readers interested in the background to this contrast between the ideas of Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas can turn to the volume Michael Kelly, (ed.), Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate, (Cambridge, MA, US: The MIT Press, 1994).
LATHAM: Foucault was writing about a truly constitutive, social world-making form of power. It was distributed across society; but rather than that distribution implying such power was limited or negative, it suggests it was expansive and amplifying. Negative power, in contrast, is a power where this constitutional role is quite underdetermining. It’s power where people, discourses, and resources are injected into a contained situation. This involves coding them and bringing them into a bounded, temporary space, ranging from the refugee camp to the market. This is not power that can be hegemonic. And this is where the negativity really comes in; it’s the power not to have to take on the responsibility entailed by these powers over and within society. It is the power to enter and withdraw relatively flexibly from situations. The most extreme version of this that is quite temporary is a deployment that operates like a sort of SWAT team, which we’ve discussed already.44

MR V: So, you are falling back on analogies to capital being “footloose,” investing and withdrawing almost at will; or to production that is flexibly configured with quickly assembled factories or sets of subcontractors.

LATHAM: Yes, there is a relationship between negative power and flexibility. In the Fordist world flexibility was actually often thought of as flowing from the strength and depth of an institution – its ability to adapt to changing circumstances without decaying because of that strength and depth.45 But when it comes to deployments, flexibility should be seen in an almost opposite way; as a function of constraint and narrowness. It reflects an ability to move along narrow channels of connection between the sending organization and its deployed fragment. I mean narrow relative to the broader social and political environment of a local, regional, or even national context.

MR V: What we should be talking about is how to get back to that sort of strength and depth rather than dwelling on obscure concepts like negative power.

LATHAM: I’d like to think in more positive terms as well, but we agreed we should do so from a better understanding of the processes of neoliberalism and hyper-security. I suggest, in the current context, flexibility has become a negative thing. A good example of this is the way an institution is flexibly able to set boundaries around the past;46 I mean its own institutional past. Flexibility can allow housing benefits to be cut in the face of austerity and new rules flexibly

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46 Readers might want to consider that deployments can also take all sorts of forms, relating to the past, not addressed in this discourse, including monuments and memorials. See Jessica Auchter, *The Politics of Haunting and Memory in International Relations*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014).
imposed for this entitlement. What happens to the previously existing claims of communities and constituents to these benefits?

MR V: And yet we have deployed organizations that stay indefinitely as in a governmental branch office like the HUD. They may have cuts legislatively imposed on them but they struggle to maintain their mission and purpose. In any event, your negative power concept is pushing out of view the collective, polity, and society level. This is your bracketing in action again. What it doesn’t help us understand is the politics of the headquarters or political center. How does the headquarters from which deployments come fit into your thinking here? OK, you can bracket these as well. You say you are sort of turning things on their head; but if you are, it’s not in the positive sense of that expression, as something that’s somewhat innovative. It’s just a matter of ignoring an important level in order to validate your approach; as you said before, being reductive.

LATHAM: Irrespective of any theoretical labels, I am arguing for this because we started today with the aim of addressing the state in relation to its presence in space, territory, and society. In the context of a system like federalism, the idea is to focus on the presence of federal organizational infrastructure throughout a federation rather than the various bargains that are typically taken to be what federal politics is about. After all, any given public program you might defend or advocate for is only as good as its engagement and implementation in people’s lives and places.

MR V: Or as good as the plans and commitments set out from the headquarters and political center that sends the organization.

LATHAM: What if we went further here and took seriously the idea that a headquarters or bureau is a sort of originary deployment. It is created and becomes present in space and has its material form in buildings and bodies. It is specialized in relation to a broader society and operates with all the limits associated with any deployment in typical, Weberian, bureaucratic fashion.

MR V: This still leaves off the table the political center that creates or legislates an organization into existence. This is what you are avoiding; and it conveniently lets you off the hook on your bracketing move, which I still think is only a way to strengthen your case for a sort of hopelessness about any reinvigoration of publicness in the face of neoliberalism.

LATHAM: Please, I am not suggesting there is no political center. Instead, what I am saying is that the center’s relationship to the wider territory and society is defined very basically by the logic of deployment. There can be other influences like regulation of industry and education. But when it comes to being present in people’s lives this is the form it takes. As I’ve said, the world is full of these

deployments associated with both state and non-state forces, from private sector resource mining sites to employment aid offices. The point, as I have suggested, is to work through its effects and see how we might move on from them.

MR V: But what of the point that a deployment can become a formidable presence in some locale, as one might expect from a social services office. And not only can a deployment be wide in scope, as you put it, but it can also be enduring.

LATHAM: What you are pointing to is a condition where deployments that might start out as contained, external forces somewhere become more deeply embedded in their social contexts; as they might assume more responsibility for shaping social existence in a locale. But even with all this expansion and endurance, even for a governmental deployment like HUD, what I think is important to keep in mind is the way such organizations nonetheless remain external, guided by their own organizational logics and policies. I can think of no better study of the sort of deployment you are describing than Philip Selznick’s brilliant study of the Tennessee Valley Authority, where even the efforts to engage various communities and grass-roots ended up drawing them into the contained administrative logics of the TVA.48 The organizational closure, in this case, took form in channeling demands and ideas around Southern US agriculture into the very constrained administrative space of the TVA. This is negative power.

MR V: Even if I grant you there can be this negative sense of power, I would like to know what it might mean to have a little or a lot of negative power?

LATHAM: Being powerful in this context means being flexible and contained. It means having the ability to remain highly specialized and ready to channel flows of resources, meanings, and bodies in and out of a bounded realm according to its defined logic. A natural disaster gets defined as only a disaster and the deeper problems of lack of public infrastructure and decent housing is effaced. The ideal level of this power is perhaps only approached by transnational corporations in free trade zones around the world or investment houses channeling capital in and out of markets. But even such flexible actors depend on the regulatory and constitutive actions of states within which they operate. Also deployments can be vulnerable to “manipulation” by local forces that are well organized, whether they are state or non-state. For example, a local extractive industry network can convince a federal environmental office to look favorably on various mining activities.

MR V: Isn’t this just good ol’ regulatory capture where private interests shape regulation and intervention in their favor?49 How can deployments be bounded


and yet so vulnerable? And if they are bounded, why not bounded in the name of the public interest, which is what gets distorted with capture; or making sure the bounded condition is less vulnerable to capture.

LATHAM: From one angle it may seem contradictory to posit a form of power where there is vulnerability to outside agents. But the point is that self-contained forms of power abdicate to varying degrees responsibility for organizing and securing their external environment. They, therefore, remain subject to organization by others. Maybe the most obvious examples are found in humanitarian interventions that typically rest for their operation on “negotiated access” or the promise of “peace corridors.” Once deployed, they can have considerable sway over people’s lives because of the relatively abundant resources circulating within their zones of operation. And yet they also can be captured as you suggest, say, by political entrepreneurs who want to collect a rent or by various economic and political networks that want to negotiate special access in those locales. As to the implication for the public realm, I take these factors to be forces working against the public interest, which is trapped between those forces and the limited purpose and scope of deployments. I’d say, in general, the problem starts with the specialized nature of the deployments, which are vulnerable to special interests and by being bounded and tilted against publicness and democratic action.

“The state is a deployment machine”

MR V: I remain unconvinced by your argument that boundaries and specialization takes us down the road to neoliberalism and too much security. I recall you wrote about the need for boundaries to make a public space and keep private interests out of that space.50

LATHAM: That barriers are a significant factor in deployments does not mean they cannot also work to constitute and maintain a public sphere. But the difference is that public spheres are there, in an ideal sense, to be open and let all in, even if they also depend on boundaries that prevent the colonization of the sphere by powerful forces like corporations. What’s different here is that public spheres are not fragments of an organization. As I have already said, the very possibility of there being a deployment along a channel from one point to another depends on the existence of rules, policies, and guidelines that place an organization in a certain place and establish a link back to a sort of sending center or headquarters. Maybe centuries ago, all a deployment had was an agreed to royal mission or charter, as with the explorers and early settlers of the so-called new world. The point is this is quite different than the making of a public space. With deployments you are dealing with what might be thought of as organizational embankments.

MR V: Why introduce yet another vague term like embankment and how does this direction we have gone in help us in our analysis of neoliberalism and security? Hasn’t there been enough of this sort of thinking about institutional boundaries and environments by sociologists?51

LATHAM: I am not claiming any conceptual innovation here and don’t want to make a big deal about the term. I just think there is something useful in the way the image of embankment conveys both negative and positive meanings. It’s negative, as we’ve discussed, in the sense that access is controlled, as the presence and movement of a deployment is set one way or in one direction and not another. In a positive sense, embankment conveys that a channel of action exists, a space maintained for what happens in and around a deployment. In general, embankments create corridors through space and society.

MR V: And where do you see these channels existing?

LATHAM: I see them in the relationship between a deploying center and its outposts or branches, the deployed fragments. You can also see it in the way a deployed fragment takes shape in space, which can be an office or a police blockade; and in the narrowest and most limited instance taking shape as a mobile drone, deployed, interspatially, from a launch pad in Guam to its targets in Pakistan.

MR V: But that’s about security and it’s a bit too easy to make your point in a realm that naturally deals with containments.

LATHAM: So, yes, this speaks to security, which operates very much according to the logic of deployment. But there’s more to it. I sort of hinted at this before. We can also view the economic realm in terms of deployments, especially its neoliberal aspects. Consider privatization. Policymakers extract a set of relations from the municipal political space for a service like garbage collection built around a contract with a unionized staff of public employees. They then replace those relations with a new set that is deployed into political space with rules and guidelines such as using private vendors, taking proposal bids, using non-union labor. The vendor then, of course, deploys itself into municipal life, both in the political space and on the streets. This is quite different from the capture phenomenon you brought up: the influencing or even colonization of an existing organization. This is about organizational extraction and displacement.

MR V: But the implications of this are that society and social space is fully vulnerable to deployments; that public realms and nonmarket life can be deployed into, penetrated, or intervened in anywhere, anytime. Also, are you trying to say there is some sort of organic link between neoliberalism and deployments the way you suggest there is in the realm of security, with its various military forces?

LATHAM: First, I would say, yes, all social space is vulnerable to deployments. And the reason I keep focusing on them is that I believe they give us some analytical purchase on how non-public social organization takes shape, which appears, as you say, anywhere and anytime. I am not sure I would go as far as saying deployments are organic to neoliberalism. Rather I’d say that if we view the state and its presence in social and political life through the lens of deployments, then an organizational affinity appears between the state and the possibilities of neoliberalization. Specialization, boundedness, containment – all of these easily fall into or convert to neoliberal approaches: the management of a road is turned over to a private firm; prisons are privatized.

MR V: A deployment trap, eh? Come on, just because there are deployments doesn’t mean the state is tainted toward neoliberalism. I would add that by seeing the state and capital for that matter in deployment terms, you have already sort of militarized it, since the deployment concept is inherently oriented toward the military and warfare.

LATHAM: My more basic point is that the state is a deployment machine, as is the corporation. And these machines are especially salient given the way social life is treated in modernity as complex, multidimensional social spaces – most typically, of course, in cities. It is hardly surprising that both organizational forms are so dominant now. The state has always been highly mobile throughout history, evident in any history of expansion and intervention. It applies to policing, the enforcement of rules and boundary-making. One way to look at this mobility is simply as a function of the distribution of presence; of tunneling through space, interspatially; where you end up with channels of movement from one fragment of an organization to another like a network of police blockades.

MR V: But these channels and mobilities don’t have to be inherently biased toward neoliberalism. As we discussed before, you can have quite extensive state presence. It does not have to be about abandonment or privatization. All of those nineteenth-century forms of presence you mentioned in outposts eventually lead to the US state and ultimately to the New Deal.

LATHAM: But what I am after is how in the midst of that mushrooming of state presence – that can be directed to public life – there is also the kernel of the neoliberal turn. I’m trying to stress that even publicly-oriented deployments are built on limits, channels, and containments. This is perhaps another aspect of vulnerability. In the everyday, it takes form in popular complaints about bureaucracy. But more broadly, it’s about a loss of options for marshaling and mobilizing institutions. Pressure can be placed on them if you have resources;

52 Very recently observers have been pointing to the mobility of the state in migration and trade checkpoints and processing capacities from ports and internal highways to bus stations. See for example, Alison Mountz, “Specters at the port of entry: Understanding state mobilities through an ontology of exclusion,” *Mobilities* 6 (3) (2011), pp. 317–334. See also Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 87–92.
capturing them, as you say. But, as I see it, that kind of pressure is operating within containment and boundedness.

MR V: But how far can you take this? Are you suggesting we are dealing with increasing channeling of political and social life? If I take you seriously, you’re basically saying we’re supposed to view society as though it’s shot through with these organizational pathways; pathways that easily transform into market relations or private provision. I guess this is why you were so keen to start by bracketing out the political center.

LATHAM: That’s a useful way to think of this. Like a sort of political image, maybe in the spirit of the classic study *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch. He explored images like street layouts and landmarks that populated and structured the urban world. Lynch did not claim to encompass all of urban life in his images. In a similar way, the logics I am asking you to consider are not encompassing. And like Lynch’s elements of the city image, they structure the possibilities of agency.

MR V: You mean in a positive way we might like? Or is this more of your negative, restrictive thinking again?

LATHAM: Yes, I was thinking here in negative terms. When it comes to security, you might turn to images of barriers and checks on agency, perhaps most vividly illustrated in the use of kettling and police violence to limit protests. But there are also less overtly physical containments, as one might see in the social barriers set up around communities and individuals identified as threats or traitors. On the other hand, as we said, when we think of the market a more distributed image comes to mind; one that entails a distribution of presence that is widely diffused across social spaces and locales. Sort of like a dense spider web. But I would re-emphasize that, even though there is a widely distributed presence, there is also containment in play. We can see this in the faith of neoliberals in a channeled flow of life into the market.\(^53\) And as social and political life flows into the market institutions of contract, vendors, and price bids, there is a limiting of options and possibilities for organizing that life otherwise.

MR V: But what I don’t have is a sense of is how all of these logics aggregate into some form of order and society-wide domination. I mean some prevailing political way of being that we could see in the way the social purpose of institutions is determined and in some identifiable set of rulers who have the power to benefit from such an order.

LATHAM: That sort of power rests on controlling channels, machines, and flows. What you are really asking after is whether we can say some sort of prevailing

\(^{53}\) This of course relates to the concept of the subsumption of life by capitalism dating back to Marx. For a review and discussion of the concept see Ugo Rossi, “On the varying ontologies of capitalism: embeddedness, dispossession, subsumption,” *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (3) (2013), pp. 348–365.
neoliberal and security order is falling into place, wherein an alliance of state and corporate actors dominate. This is done by shaping the character and purpose of deployments in the ways we have discussed and by ensuring social life channels into and through private deployments. For instance, US healthcare and retirement is mostly channeled into private providers and various pools and exchanges. The alternative, in this case, is a public provision of these benefits, where the terms are collectively negotiated by unions or communities.

MR V: Now you’re talking. So, we just need more of that. We need people willing to intervene, to challenge our elites to make this happen; so there’s a sort of different channeling into the public realm away from the narrowness you keep coming back to.

LATHAM: Hannah Arendt wrote in positive ways about the political power of insertion in the world, from human birth to creative production and political action. But that is an ideal that runs up against overwhelming insertions and effects of negative power. My point is that this sort of power runs throughout society, in the various forms of organizational presence and intervention, just as we’ve spoke of. It certainly suggests to me that no matter how much individuals might deploy themselves and attempt to create new channels on their own in groups like unions that might set up pickets in front of factories, they will be outflanked by the deployments of the state and capital.

MR V: I suspect you’re trying to drag us back to your point that the state is a rather hopeless starting point for moving beyond the unfortunate developments we have been talking about. Why not just consider a state organized around publicness, deployed expressly for it?

LATHAM: If I’ve been dragging us one way, you’ve been dragging us in your way all afternoon. What I am getting at is that it’s not enough to focus on any given public service being provided, or on the character of publicness being produced by public infrastructure. We need to focus on how publicness is constituted and provided. I think it needs to be done in a way that is not a deployment. Really, we should ask: What is on the other side of the deployment order? The problem is the state is shot through with so much of the deployment logic. And it’s a logic that fits so well with capital and facilitates neoliberalism.

MR V: But you’re talking as though this is inevitable. And that really runs against what we have set out to do here.

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LATHAM: All of this should not be surprising given the history of a state like the US, where its development was closely tied to a process of increasing control over space. You can see this in the history of US state formation especially in the West, with all the military outposts, the missions, and the Indian offices. In the end I’m asking that we see the state-society nexus as something like a space of grids, where vectors of intervention crisscross like multiple swords penetrating a magic box. It means that, where things stand now, the state and capital are masters of the distribution of presence and will typically organizationally outflank ordinary communities. In this way we might see how Deleuze’s distinction between Foucault’s enclosed, disciplinary institutions and spaces versus the post-enclosure, mobile individual is an overstatement. I think he underestimated the possibilities of organizations operating with great effect through logics of open mobility, whether we are talking about police lockdowns and security corridors or special economic zones. I mean to say, greater attention needs to be paid to the circulation of power and organization in such a way that the distinction between nomadic and settled forms becomes uncomfortable and even confusing. I suspect, though, he welcomed the confusion.

MR V: In the end I wonder if what is most distressing about this deployment focus is the way it may not really matter who is the sender or the deployer, the state or the capital, a government agency or a corporation. I suspect this just reflects your attempt to bracket all that.

LATHAM: I really want to make clear, for me, there is something much more at stake than bracketing. It’s that our so-called political centers, our politics are really emptying or leveling out. Claude Lefort wrote about the center in democracy being empty, which I always took to imply that the center must be kept open for democratic reasons. But as a result, it is vulnerable to being filled by whatever alliance, party, or set of social forces is ruling. We know that the center is filled with neoliberal and security agendas. So recourse to the center may not be all it’s cracked up to be.

MR V: I see that I have to get going, but I don’t want to end on what is for me very much a negative note. I’m also a bit concerned that we never did get beyond discussing the structures and limits you say we are stuck with. There is a sort of hopelessness to what you are pointing to. You say states and corporations can always out deploy, but why are we stuck with deployments? Do you think we can be present in space and with one another in ways that are different than deployments? These would have to be ways that also have power and are related to publicness. I am certain that the story of contemporary political presence does

57 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the societies of control.” October 59 (1) (1992), pp. 3–7. Though it should be noted we can read Deleuze as recognizing the lack of any neat distinctions here.
not begin and end with an unfortunate march toward a world of deployment. I might also put one more thought out here before running. Is it really the case that deployments have to be such limiting forms? What about sort of busting through those limits? Are you really so sure a deployment has to be so limiting?

LATHAM: No, really I am not. You have given us a very good set of issues to take up next time we meet. Let’s focus on ways forward as you put it. I absolutely feel I owe you that. But I do have to warn you that in my thinking such potential paths do not necessarily lead to the justice-filled, robust, progressive political state.

MR V: But they don’t necessarily not lead there. Since you have reduced me to a broken record, I might as well insist again next time that we start and stay wholly focused on alternatives, even those anchored in the state.

LATHAM: I promise.

_We both got up at the same time and nodded goodbye. I could see a certain coldness in the way Mr V barely met my eyes on the way out and as he sped off into the crowded street._
After receiving a message from him in the morning about potentially being late, I began to wonder if Mr V was going to show up at all to what I understood to be our final time together. We had agreed to give this meeting as much time as needed and we went on for over two and half hours. I waited for about twenty minutes before catching him coming through the door in haste and was relieved to learn his lateness was due to a sudden schedule change. He began our day’s discussion:

You know I will hold you to your promise from last time. I mean about avoiding dragging us down into another analytical rabbit hole of contradictions and limits. I guess I feel a bit tricked here, in that I think you have created a sort of conceptual cage with this focus on the material aspects – the presence and so on – of state institutions, or any other for that matter. You are sort of reproducing in your arguments the very channeling you’re saying is going on in the contemporary political world. And so I have been thinking on and off about our last discussion and turning over in my head the question of what it means to break away from these limits.

“Lapsing into a defeatism”

LATHAM: What are you thinking of here?

MR V: I keep coming back to two directions. One is the notion of taking control of deployments from below, so that the state and capital are not the only deployers. I raised this last time with Harvey’s example of the flying pickets. I know you are skeptical. You argued these actions will typically be overrun by the organizations and presence of the deployments we don’t like. I guess it’s a matter of not being able to beat them at their own game. But we have to distinguish between relying on one’s own organizations and figuring out how to take command of the state, of corporations or even NGOs – to ensure they are being used in progressive, just ways.

LATHAM: A good example of what you’re talking about is the attempt to ensure that policing and police presence on community streets is organized ethically,
around the utmost effort to avoid violence, coercion, and racism.\(^1\) And why not try to organize policing around an ethic where practices we raised often last time like kettling of street protesters are not allowed?

MR V: It gets complicated because it’s natural to seek a balance between what police need to do to ensure peaceful streets and what ends up being abuse on their part.

LATHAM: What you’re saying underscores for me that the problem with taking control or appropriating deployments is that you are still stuck working within the logic of deployments; with all the containment involved in inserting pieces of an organization or persons somewhere. In the policing example, even if you get police to act as non-violently and non-coercively as possible, you are really, in the end, still just modifying existing organizations like the police or maybe even prisons. We can make them work better, more justly, but in the end it’s a matter of being stuck with reforming what exists. This is why communities and thinkers have been motivated in the US and elsewhere to find alternatives to the police and penal system altogether, relying for example on community-based courts and patrols.\(^2\) Foucault made clear to all of us how the best intentions to reform ended up producing other forms of power and abuse.\(^3\) Also, you are assuming that five years after the sort of reform you’re after, there won’t be a new political party in power mobilizing opinion once again around some new tough on crime program.

MR V: OK, so even if I accept your point, that even well-purposed deployments can be twisted into any undesirable direction, there’s still the question: why not create new deployments that are organized in ways that limit the potential for this twisting into undesirable directions? I mean the construction of new public schools, hospitals, aid agencies, and the like. It needs to be led by communities, non-governmental organizations like unions, and democratically-oriented representatives; and there needs to be careful regulation put in place to prevent shut down or any steering of these organizations in undesirable directions, such as privatization.

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\(^3\) Probably the best known place he does this is Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Random House, 1977).
LATHAM: As I tried to emphasize in our last meeting, the problem is with deployment as an organizational form in political space. How can communities control something where there is a sending center governing a fragment? While the problem of control is to be expected in international humanitarian intervention deployed from afar, it also appears in local contexts. I mentioned charter schools setting up in public school buildings. Even when it’s the relationship between the municipal board of education and an individual neighborhood school, the sort of containments emerge that we saw emerging around the Tennessee Valley Authority. You have rules coming from the center; access on a very limited basis for communities; also capture by corporations. Even if there is no privatization afoot, bureaucratic domination and remoteness remain. What you get are weak and impotent forms of participation in constant struggle with the negative power I put forward last time. My concern is that although they may be driven by a commitment to public social purpose, deployments are too limited, and too biased toward organizational closure to foster the sort of democratic public life you are after. By definition they remain tethered to a platform, a sender, and they enter and remain in a space with their external status. To me they are a force of containment in the political and social world. The image to keep in mind is something like the lifelines astronauts are tethered to and depend on in outer space.

MR V: My gut reaction says you might be lapsing into a defeatism here that can be read as inadvertent support for the conservative notion that government action will typically end up getting things wrong. This has been the belief of thinkers from Hayek all the way through to John Gray.

LATHAM: Except that what I am arguing is not against organized collective action and intervention per se, but against the form that is organized as an interspatial deployment; especially one based on a state that holds itself to be a permanent political entity – just to pick up on what we discussed two meetings ago. So, nothing I have said lends itself in some automatic way to the market-oriented, individualistic commitments that underlie those conservative or neoliberal bodies of thought.

MR V: It’s just that you shouldn’t be too surprised, based on the last two meetings we had, that I think you hold a prejudice against the state overall. But in fairness I do remember that in our second meeting you more or less said that it’s not the state itself that’s the main issue. It’s the permanence-claiming state: a state that locks in the basic aspects of political life. Last time you added the deployment angle. So, from what I see, you want me to conclude that when it comes to the state we’re hemmed in by both time and space.


Toward a progressive politics of evasion

LATHAM: But in the spirit of pushing to think about how we might not be so hemmed in let’s come back to the promise you are holding me to. I mean to make sure to discuss ways to deal with these limits and think about alternative ways forward. Just before you mentioned you had two directions for evading the limits we discussed last time. I have, so far, only heard one.

MR V: That’s right. The second direction you may take to be somewhat out of character for me compared to the first one. I mean it’s likely not what you would expect from me given how much I’ve been pushing the value of a progressive social democratic state. Still, I was turning over in my head potential ways to interact politically that don’t rely on deployments. We have all sorts of collective action going on within communities, union halls, and, transnationally, in social movement networks – all of them dealing with lots of issues from global austerity and women’s rights to environmentalism. Let me add that the same sort of networking can involve cities and regions, state governments, and even groups of national states that come together in the UN. So it’s not an either/or regarding state and non-state actors. These interactions are not about deployments per se, even if deployments might be involved in a network, perhaps in the form of local offices of a national union.

LATHAM: Yes I’m aware of the difference and thought quite a bit about it. With networks you have groups or individuals, in place somewhere, sending information – or even maybe objects, as when you are talking about trade networks. There is no organizational installation in the way we’ve talked about it for deployments. But as you recognize, network members might be part of an already existing deployment, as when officials in different emergency health aid organizations communicate across national boundaries. And while networks can very much involve states, they also can involve corporations, which use networks to link their many organizational fragments on a worldwide basis.6

MR V: But I don’t think you can say networks involve the same sort of constraints as deployments, even if states and corporations use them extensively. I mean the same closure is not there as far I as can see. I guess that is why there has been so much made about their horizontal nature as we certainly see with the internet; where lots of people can participate. What I like about networks, is that they can be seen as a force shaping a state and its organs, hopefully pushing it in the right direction. Consider how an attempt to expand public housing involves a mix of activists, community forums, churches, and state officials; where officials are the targets of pressure and influence.

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LATHAM: Recall that in our very first meeting we had a somewhat heated discussion, where you were not so keen on this notion of relative openness and horizontalness when thinking about it from a security perspective.

MR V: We were talking about sabotage; this is political activism. But let’s keep the focus on alternatives here.

LATHAM: Sure, but keep in mind that it may not be so easy to set neat limits to acceptable and non-acceptable activism. That was part of the gist of our first discussion I recall. Let me add something here. Networks might not be the only alternative to deployments in terms of how we operate in political and social space. Another way can be thought of as congregating. I mean coming together in the same space. This can involve individuals, organizations, representatives, experts, and so on. It can be gathering to protest in Tahrir Square in Cairo, or as Occupy Wall Street, or gathering to attempt to fashion a trade agreement like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Your public housing advocates likely convoke in all sorts of meetings.

MR V: Yes, I like this. I can see the political activist type of congregating as a sort of counter to deployments, in that it certainly produces a presence shaping political life in a city or any place it appears; and a public one at that. As you pointed out last time, this presence is one of the key factors that can make a deployment powerful.

LATHAM: Yes, but there is something that bothers me about both these non-deployment spatial organizational forms. I know there has been lots of hope placed on both forms as the organizational basis to challenge at least neoliberal corporatism, if not also hyper-security. And why not when even in recent history we have seen governments topple when enough people take to the streets and congregate – relying in part on various networks of activists and communities? But the recent outcomes in Egypt and the limited effect of Occupy somehow makes me think that Žižek has been right to emphasize that the real test of transformation comes as he says “the morning after” the revolt and fleeing of a government.

MR V: Žižek must be inspired by Lenin’s revolutionary realism, no doubt.

LATHAM: Yes, he is. And we can also take from Lenin the realist insight inspired in turn by Marx, that if many of the organizations and their deployments that structure life are left intact then it is likely they will continue their work – the police and military, the international financial institutions, the global bank offices,

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the gutted schools. The question of change versus complete smashing of the system has been with us for well over a century and it continues to shape arguments on the Left. I hope you will agree that it may not be a good idea to get caught up in this debate.

MR V: I do, but the point of the transformation I’m after is to alter the nature of these organizations.

LATHAM: Sufficient force has to be there for that to occur. And that can be limited with congregation because it faces the problems about duration we spoke of in our first two meetings. Congregation assumes people or organizations come from somewhere to be in the same space. This means they also would leave and return to the place they came from. It’s not the same as an installed deployment or even a residential community or workplace. Otherwise, a congregation would start looking like a deployment – or even a well-disciplined, hierarchical political party along the lines of the Bolsheviks. So there is a real limit to congregation, in that while it can put great political pressure it likely needs to transform into something else in order to alter and organize the social and political.

MR V: You’re throwing that pesky issue of permanence and temporariness at me again! Either way, some of the Occupy camps seemed very much to want a presence that would not expire.

LATHAM: Don’t forget the possibility building alternatives does not occur as an abstraction but in the mist of all the deployments, neoliberalism, and hyper-security we spoke of last time we met. So, while I don’t think we should by any stretch reject networks and congregations that contest power, we also shouldn’t rely only on them. There should be something else beyond communicating in networks and outright mass political challenge in the square.

MR V: Well, sure, it’s called progressive politics. We push to create the polity that helps all. And various steps have to be taken along the way to foster transformation, even if, for some, such efforts will reduce down to no more than the dirty word “reform.” In this sense I very much agree that, however relevant they may be, networks are just not enough to be the basis for alternatives. They rely on all sorts of social and political life or infrastructure that would exist already or need to be put in place – even in a newly set up protest site. But they add a lot to and even can become part of the organizing, expanding, negotiating, exchanging, learning, and expressing that needs to occur for progressive political change.

“Evading deployments”

LATHAM: I’m not really sure, but we may be agreeing here about how networks and congregations can become part of the spaces we live in and the lives we lead. But in the context of the contemporary state and capitalism neither networks nor congregations are likely to be determining forces for substantial transformation.

MR V: I think this is fair way to put it. But somehow I suspect that we are on or at least near the same page for different reasons. For me, you know well by now, social democracy anchored in the state is the primary way forward. Other organizational forms are at best supplementary. For you, well, I’m not sure really. So let’s just talk about where you believe the things we’ve discussed might take us for better or worse.

LATHAM: I do have some thoughts that pick up on some themes we talked about two meetings ago. I’ll first point out that one option for contending with deployments we did not discuss is evading them. I mean escaping interventions and their embankments and organizational closures by avoiding them. One way to do that is to undermine or destroy them, deployment by deployment, institution by institution. It can be motivated by Anarchism, community-focused socialism, or even Libertarianism.

MR V: You mean in the US context the libertarian desire to root out federal institutions like so many weeds in a garden? Or maybe you mean trying to close down a Walmart store or two? Come on. When the state is at stake this really requires smashing the system, doesn’t it? You have to take the whole state down to do this otherwise you’ll find some pretty heavy consequences in reply to your resistance and evasion like police forces using military weaponry. So, I don’t see this as really much of an option. However, I do see an option that is related to this. But it’s for neoliberals not us and it’s what we spoke of last time. Working from an organizational center from which deployments come, like Washington, you aim to empty or weaken that center and what it deploys into the world. You can change the rules on welfare; lay off public sector workers; or cut down activities. But this is working from within the state, from the center, relying on a political party or two.

LATHAM: There is another way to approach this evasion. It’s more complex than this first one. Rather than evade by extracting deployments you can evade their influences, the way they shape social and political life, to turn away from their negative power.

MR V: I am not sure where you are going with this, but I am skeptical since, as you argue, we can’t avoid the presence of deployments in our political world we’re sort of stuck with their influence. But all of this assumes I have accepted where the discussion went last meeting. I may recognize that even deployments that start from a well-intentioned, social democratic starting point can be wholly vulnerable to neoliberalism and an over-emphasis on security. But I still maintain that this is a matter of tendencies; tendencies that can be thwarted by effective

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11 See Chapter 2.
political strategies, by getting into the political center and fighting with the forces pushing toward neoliberalism and security.

LATHAM: There’s a little contradiction in what you are saying. You say the political world is full of forces of neoliberalism and hyper-security, but then you hold out the prospect that we can still restore a meaningful social democracy.

MR V: I would think that recognizing severe problems and trends is not the same as ruling out possibilities for reversing these trends.

LATHAM: But would you just keep doing the same thing we have witnessed for decades; and most recently with the hope that came along with Obama. The problem with your “capture the center idea” is that it’s not just about the center but the relationship between it and the vast array of locales and contexts that must be intervened in; and that takes us back to deployments. If you will bear with me, I would like to push a bit more on the second approach to evading deployments I mentioned. I think it helps us contend with the forces we have talked about so far today – and really what we spoke of right from the start of our coming together weeks ago. I think it’s a way that is, at least in principle, consistent with enough of your concerns with justice to make it worth your while thinking about. But it’s not geared to the question of how to resurrect the social democratic state as we have experienced it in the twentieth century. That said, there could be ways in some future hands that aspects of what I want to discuss might cohere into something that is consistent with the historical trajectory of social democracy as well as Anarchism. Or, much better, democratic socialism, where there is a clearer commitment to socialism and stronger stand against neoliberalism.12

MR V: You can imagine that in my position it already takes quite an effort to combine the words social democracy and Anarchism; since in my world for better or worse Anarchism is not that far down the list of threats that starts with Islamic terrorism. In any event, I think I get your point. I can see that you are trying to acknowledge some bridge between our perspectives.

LATHAM: Thanks. But that was the easy part, since I am not sure what might be the best way to get started.

With a fairly long pause between us all of a sudden Mr V leaned forward to speak:

Typically one would say you have to eliminate or at least transform what is and then establish different ways of organizing social and political life. This is the time-tested way to proceed, at least since the nineteenth century, no? But what

12 The difference between these two terms is not straightforward given how they have been used differently historically and in North America as opposed to Europe. A good place to start to better understand the differences is Ashley Lavelle, *The Death of Social Democracy: Political Consequences in the 21st Century*, (London: Ashgate, 2008).
would be eliminated and what would be transformed? Maybe the best thing would be to begin with some agreement on some basic conditions at stake in thinking about alternatives against the background of neoliberalism and hyper-security. I’d say key for me is the absence or impotency of collective institutions to provide for common welfare. This is the emptying of collective social and political life as in the closed healthcare facility or school.

LATHAM: Fine. I’d add to that a security aspect: the role of walls and security restrictions to human mobility, the zoning and patrolling of spaces of abandonment, and so on. And I’d also add another type of condition: the access of global corporations, especially financial ones, to our political and social life, our public institutions, the linking of everything to the circuits of global finance through debt, consultancies; and the presence of multinationals acting as private providers of public services. Also, again on the security side, there is the access to us through national and global surveillance, through drones, both the spying and lethal ones; and then there’s the access to bodies in the heavy-handed police responses to political protest.

MR V: Sure, we covered this access last time. Your conditions seem to be focused on what deployments do; mine toward the policies and political life of a political center. While you’re critical of access, what I’m emphasizing is really all about access in a desirable sense, to public life and resources; and in turn the access of public institutions to people’s lives and communities for their benefit.

LATHAM: Rather than see them at odds, I would prefer to see them actually as both about the domination of life. In your case you have a desirable form of access to shape life for publicness. In what I put forward there’s an undesirable form of access to shape life for the forces of neoliberalism and security. What is common between the two sets of conditions is that they are about presence as opposed absence; one you find desirable, one I don’t.

MR V: Access is a pretty general quality to share like air. What’s the point?

LATHAM: I’m concerned that your type of desirable access, for the public benefit, is no easy task and may fool us into a false hope.

MR V: It’s not easy, for sure; but that is what makes the sustained struggle so necessary.

LATHAM: My problem is that what is of public benefit is open to forces to define in all sorts of ways, at most anytime.

MR V: We went through this point last time, about capture and so on. This is politics.

LATHAM: I recall reading not too long ago about Roger Starr, a New York City housing planner, who came up with the idea of helping the South Bronx in the 1970s by cutting off services and thereby reducing its low income population so it could be gentrified; closing down fire houses, hospitals, and so on. He called it
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“planned shrinkage.” I guess you could say he had access to that world to push it to ruin. And I believe you can see both the positive and negative senses of access operating in the same community, when for example you have shrinkage in the presence of public service and growth in the presence of corporations and hostile, aggressive security policies and forces; what we spoke of quite a bit last meeting.

MR V: What you are talking about with this access dimension sounds something like the concept associated with Habermas, the “colonization of the life world.” His point was to contend with it through substantial democratic action and so on.

LATHAM: Absolutely, the lineage of thinking about this opposition goes way back, like most such ideas, well into the nineteenth century, especially with Marx onward to such luminaries as Herbert Marcuse and on to Toni Negri, Deleuze, and so on. I don’t want to get caught up in the detailed debates around this. I simply want to suggest that, since domination by corporations and a complicit neoliberal state is what is at the bottom of both of the negative conditions we put forward minutes ago, a very simple question emerges; really, it’s an enduring question: Can groups and communities get somewhere by evading this access?

MR V: I see what you mean about this being an enduring question. What comes to my mind is the very long strand of political thinking based on protecting societies, economies, cultures, or even races. In the economic realm it was called protectionism. After decolonization there was the nonaligned movement. There was the nineteenth century utopian socialist dream of escaping from capitalism and setting up independent, justly organized communities. I recall, that Marx and Engels had a lot of issues with the utopians but the one that sticks in my head is the point that the escapism of new societies and so on would never succeed in the broader sea of bourgeois capitalist society. Even if you don’t go as far as pointing to the entire social fabric you still have all the many deployments to be faced by an effort at evasion. Surely you can’t be just saying evade, build,

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16 Generally speaking protectionism refers to policies of a state like tariffs that limit the ability of international firms from selling their goods or services in that country. A useful survey comes from Jagdish N. Bhagwati, Protectionism. Vol. 1, (Cambridge, MA, US: MIT press, 1989).
17 This was a group of global South states that, in part, sought to minimize domination by the Western and Eastern blocs. A thought analysis of the movement is in Akhil Gupta, “The song of the nonaligned world: Transnational identities and the re-inscription of space in late capitalism,” Cultural Anthropology 7 (1) (1992), pp. 63–79.
18 Robert Owen was one of the more prominent leaders in this movement. See Ruth Levitas, “Community, utopia and New Labour,” Local Economy 15 (3) (2000), pp. 188–197.
and then protect your own institutions? That has a long lineage, as you say. And it’s typically been contrasted with the attempt to get control of the state and begin the process of large-scale social transformation. This is what I think is the realistic way forward and what you are saying is my positive version of access. We can imagine plenty of alternatives and use what we have in history but always sitting there is the problem of how to facilitate broader political transformation.

LATHAM: You have put a few difficult issues on the table. I am more than willing to discuss them, but first I think it might pay off to have a better sense of where I am trying to go with this, how shall I put it, liberatory evasion.

MR V: Maybe.

“A progressive politics of evasion”

LATHAM: As I see it, it is very constructive to think of this initially in spatial terms. Time is important as well, but coming off of our discussion in our last meeting I would start with space. When we started today you actually put forward forms like networks and congregations that are alternative in spatial terms. I also argued that it was not that helpful to go down the road of trying to reproduce or capture deployments. That said, I’d argue one can still usefully appropriate an aspect of deployments but still avoid reproducing the deployments as an organizational form.

MR V: You’re not making sense to me. How do you take on an aspect of something without committing to the form?

I nodded and raised my brows in a way that signaled “you got me” and continued:

Fair enough. Let me try to make a case. I have two aspects of deployments in mind. One aspect is the barrier or embankment that bounds a deployment. I claimed last time embankment is essential to a deployment and its organizational closure. The other aspect is the channel that leads from the sending organization site to the projected fragment that is in some locale or another, which I labeled interspatial. Now what if we were to view these elements differently; to sort of re-contextualize them; to resituate them as part of an explicit progressive politics of evasion? We could understand a channel not in the deployment sense as the established link between the relatively contained institutional point A and B, as you might see when a church sends a mission out somewhere, but instead as a sort of passage leading away from deployments and the practices and ideologies associated with them, which are tied to neoliberalism and hyper-security. Such a passage is not based on a distinct point of projection or origin but on the movement away, the evasion.

MR V: And what about your embankment factor?
LATHAM: Yes, sorry, this movement and evasion I am describing requires a shielding of sorts. I mean ways to deflect, to screen, shelter, depart, or even hide from the forces we spoke of. This is the sort of embankment I have in mind.

MR V: I guess you’re offering a different way to look at the problem of circulation you emphasized so much in our first discussion. I’ve got some problems with this. First off, are you setting up too strong a distinction here? You yourself made the point that some deployments are not so predetermined. Early American colonial history after all tells us about the efforts of some settlers to found what they saw as utopic communities.

LATHAM: If anything your example illustrates nicely what I mean. These new communities actually worked very much within the normative and legal framings they brought with them from Europe, hence their racist, colonial, and capitalistic framing. What I am pointing to is a sort of shielded openness where a collective could evade framings, the negative power of the Crown, or the Church. In this case the screen, rather than limiting things, makes possible a far wider range of possible action – exactly because it blocks out the forces that channel and contain.

MR V: And what about the abandonment aspect you emphasized just before, you know, the point about the access of neoliberalism and security that creates abandonment? Passage sounds like it’s more oriented to the first aspect, where there is lots of state and corporate presence, in the sense that there’s actually something to evade.

LATHAM: A very good point. But actually I think it is helpful to recognize that organizational life works in two directions from a deployment perspective: there’s presence but also absence; there’s projection inside, but also extraction out of institutions, resources, and individuals. Although we use words like “emptying” and “hollowing out,” it is obvious that there is never an empty space but rather a different one, where there might be less public services and resources but more state violence. So, passage in this context is a movement away from such circumstances. The conditions that we might see as abandonment we know depend on policies and decisions that put them in place. It’s easy to see that abandonment doesn’t just happen; it’s maintained, say, by policies like redlining where banks refuse to extend credit. So, we can see passage as deflecting from these conditions.

MR V: Could you be more specific here?

LATHAM: Thinking about the planned shrinkage example I brought up, we can understand passage as creating alternative futures for the South Bronx organized around justice and a more developed collective political and social life.

20 I was basing this point on the excellent and very relevant survey and analysis of early colonial projects I encountered by C. Tomlins, “The legal cartography of colonization, the legal polyphony of settlement: English intrusions on the American mainland in the seventeenth century,” Law & Social Inquiry 26 (1) (2001), pp. 315–372.
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MR V: You mean alternatives in impoverished contexts? Sounds a bit naive and like rewarmed starry-eyed activist hope.

LATHAM: Perhaps. But this goes back to my point about having to pay attention to what happens outside the center as well as inside it. I’m trying to stress that organizing may need to happen in such contexts and in a way that is not impeded by abandonment or cutbacks leading to things like school closures. What you said about abandonment points to the positive side of passage. The evasion of this sort is not based only on avoidance, but on fashioning alternative organizational life. I would say that it is not possible to actually deflect without this positive pursuit of alternatives. In this sense a more accurate label for what I am talking about is re-collective passage; in the main sense that passage entails trying to transform collective life and by doing so create a new collective. In other words, this collective comes into being based on what perhaps could be called obstructive transgression to emphasize the double aspects of deflection and evasion, as well as the building of organization that breaks with and goes beyond current circumstances.

MR V: I am curious, how did you come to fix on this term “passage”? I get that it has a spatial character and so addresses deployments. But why passage as opposed to something else that might convey that?

LATHAM: There are two streams motivating this. One is Walter Benjamin’s unfinished massive work called The Arcades Project, where, in parts, he considers the covered passages that cut through Paris and that allowed for possibilities even within the very constrained context of nineteenth century commercial capitalism. The point about a passage is that it is not meant to be a container, a form of protectionism or security-seeking national state. It’s meant to convey covered byways leading away from power structures that open possibilities and mobilities. I see Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of lines of flight as very relevant, since they were focusing on the possibilities of escape from the constraining structures of domination and power or violence. But just to be clear, passage is not just about flight or escape, but about building passages; it’s not just lines or vectors leading away; I’m talking also about what could be hefty, thick organizational walls for shielding. That’s the embankment aspect again.


MR V: Hmm, your case so far for deflectionism is a bit obscure to me. Not sure that I buy it as adding up to anything more than what’s been on the table for those groups seeking escape. Tell me about the second stream you said exists.

LATHAM: It might be somewhat more to your liking. It’s a very common usage and perhaps most plainly expressed in Perry Anderson’s book title, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. With this sense you can have history, civilization, and species pass or transform from one form to another. But with re-collective passage it’s not primarily about transitioning from one total historical formation to another as in feudalism to capitalism, but about collectives of varying magnitudes reshaping their collective life by advocating and establishing a different way to organize their social and political life.

MR V: That’s only a tad more to my liking. I don’t know about the “re-” part. But I wonder about your investment in the use of the term “collective” over, say, others like “mass.” Collective seems even more generalizing than that term.

LATHAM: Funny, that’s exactly why I like it. It’s very general and so can be applied to many contexts and movements. I believe you said you were somewhat familiar with the concept of multitude connected fairly recently to the writing of Hardt and Negri. There are overlaps but they are making much bigger claims about the multitude as a counter-empire, social being comprised by non-elite groups and individuals. Their version takes form for sure in the many specific collectivities I am talking about but I choose not to go as far as they do in seeking to think through a sort of ontological social being.

MR V: I also notice you seem to be steering things away from the rubric “public.” I am, for sure, not very taken with that.

LATHAM: As we’ve spoken of it so far, public refers either to being in public view, known, in communication; or it’s public in the sense of public goods, services, and provisions that are open and available to all. And, just like concepts such as multitude, there are substantial overlaps. The difference is with the terms collective and passage I am putting the emphasis on the organization of social life and being together in that endeavor.

MR V: I’d say the public involves organization and being together as well.

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LATHAM: Yes, that’s true. The difference is one of emphasis. Public designates a status or condition like publicness; or is a social object: the public. Re-collective passage puts the emphasis on the nature of the organizational activity. There’s another important distinction here. There’s an avoiding of access in passage and that runs counter to publicness and its emphasis on open access. At the same time collective connotes a common relationship with things, land, provisions, and material infrastructure, as in collectivism; and that too should be a distinct possibility in passage.

MR V: You’ve also got the “re” in there and that doesn’t seem to connect with this last point.

LATHAM: To re-collect is also to gather anew, to draw together. I mean re-collection can involve assembling scattered histories that have been forgotten. This is also inspired by Walter Benjamin. There can be a gathering and a recalling of resources, whether it’s land, status, or rights; things that have otherwise been scattered in lost history and social exclusions. This is faced most of all by indigenous people. And then in re-collection I see a rallying of a group’s power as oppressed or wronged but seeking to move along a passage.

MR V: Isn’t this all just a bit, how shall I put it, quixotic if not also insensitive given the pressures and limits people face in such circumstances? How do impoverished communities do all this, without relying on the external organizations that are not present? Also, what ideas or models guide these alternatives?

LATHAM: There are models out there that can be drawn on by such communities. This happened in the Dudley Street neighborhood in Boston. The community organized in the late 1970s and 1980s to contend with the classic forms of urban blight seen in the South Bronx. They were able to build on existing models at hand for improving public housing, community ownership of land and provision of services like street cleaning. Certainly they drew the attention of external organizations that saw an opportunity for getting involved in the community. But the community was really careful about controlling the relationships that were established and, when they saw a reason to do so, preventing external involvement in their community efforts.26

MR V: I have another, perhaps deeper, concern. I am not sure really what the language you are advocating actually does to advance the things you or even I am after. Maybe what you are suggesting is not much more than empty, rhetorical labeling. Is this just a standpoint? What we used to call a “reading” or interpretation of circumstances, as you put it. As we’ve said, the idea that groups and communities would seek autonomy and build alternatives is by now an age-old notion.

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26 The Dudley Street case is studied in Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar, Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood, (New York: South End Press, 1994). For the most part the successes in that neighborhood have been sustained to this day. Outside organizations that tried to deploy into and capture the transformation process include ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now). The neighborhood, of course, faces typical community challenges including charter schooling and gentrification.
LATHAM: I certainly don’t think it’s a bad thing to ask this of any idea. Just to put this in perspective, all I’ve tried to do so far is to get us to think about how to begin to approach alternatives in the context of the conditions and forces we’ve spoken of regarding neoliberalism and security. I’ve put an emphasis on space and concepts like channels and the embankments as a starting point because this is where our discussion has taken us; and, more importantly, because the issue of presence is central to much of what’s concerned us.

Mr V jumped right on this point in some agitation:

But everything has a spatial dimension in one form or another, even phenomena like the internet! And again, you are just giving a spatial face and conceptual cover to good ol’ resistance. I get the spatial aspects of deployments. You literally have a sort of deployer like headquarters in place and the deployed unit in another place. Passage or re-collective passage sounds like it’s about borrowing the language of space, with boundaries and byways.

LATHAM: I’m not so sure borrowing language disqualifies the value of a concept. For me, the consequences and value of giving a spatial face and a conceptual label to something should be judged by what it does for helping us think through something or not. What I already see is a potential language to think through how collectivities can evade or escape in the pursuit of alternative social and political life without having necessarily to declare an autonomous zone or independent republic and so on.

“Entering a trajectory of transformation”

MR V: This all still sounds like symbolic spatial thinking.

LATHAM: I don’t see this spatial aspect as merely symbolic. It’s about creating new, progressive organizational spaces; new sites, if you will. And these are not based on a deploying source, but on collective action.

MR V: I still need to be convinced. For now, I’d say collective action is a pretty general term. It could include deployments. And you likely think I keep harping on this, but I’m still concerned that you might be excluding progressive organizational efforts that even take form as deployments. Aren’t we dealing with deployment when an organization grows, sets up a headquarters and then chapters are founded in various locations? Unions do this and I dare say any progressive organizational effort will involve this sort of thing if it has national or even international ambitions.

LATHAM: I think you are hitting exactly on what distinguishes passage from more straightforward civil society organizing that typically leads to a well-developed formal organization, like a national political party, a union, or an NGO. You get the hierarchy and control issues, the business orientation that, say, in the
case of unions has been a longstanding complaint limiting serious progress for workers in the US. 27

MR V: With the sort of openness you seem to be advocating you get vulnerability, weakness and ineffectiveness. I also suspect that you are assuming the attitude many from Marx onward have taken that writers, philosophers, or even activists should not preset a future for a people; that it should be left to them and future history. But you might be carrying this to an extreme of open-endedness. Don’t both these forms of openness severely limit everyone’s possibilities for addressing the larger, macro conditions that lead to neoliberalism and the over-emphasis on security?

LATHAM: I don’t think so. One of the main motivations I had for pushing our discussion last time we met toward deployments was to emphasize that neoliberalism and security take form in the various interventions, abandonments, and violence we associate with them. And to remove them it might take much more than even a well-organized, macro-assembled political front. And as we’ve discussed, collectivities that form in direct confrontation with this power may be able to do nothing more than topple some leaders, as we saw in Tahrir Square. Leftist political parties in Europe have, I’m afraid, not fared so well either across the decades.

MR V: Yes, indeed, and that is why we need a state that is progressive all the way down.

LATHAM: But you’re wishing the final outcome of this progressive state into existence. You don’t get all the way down unless you have communities mobilized down there. And this is what we’ve been after in our discussion: a way to understand how to move forward from within societies and collectivities. And that’s why it makes sense to me that there would be value in re-collective passage; in moving away from the existing relations of power and toward different organizational forms.

MR V: OK, but this is all supposed to be about bottom-up, micro changes?

LATHAM: It’s really important to keep the meso-level very much in mind. It’s far more important than the micro-level, which involves very small groups, individuals, and limited spaces. At the medium- or meso-scale it becomes possible to work toward different ways of doing things that bear on a whole community or dimension of life: things like reframing how the border operates or the basic terms and conditions of work. This is meso not just in terms of the amount of social space and the number of people involved, but meso as in a discrete dimension of

27 At the same time it has not prevented efforts to break out of the bureaucratic lock-in that occurs. On both aspects see Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, “Breaking the iron law of oligarchy: Union revitalization in the American labor movement,” *American Journal of Sociology* 106 (2) (2000), pp. 303–349.
social and political life; where the macro-level corresponds to the society or social space in total.

MR V: Is this really just about, in mundane terms, grass-roots groups or social movements and communities mobilizing to change their circumstances? Or perhaps, in more romantic terms, it’s nothing but what I recall was called prefiguration, since you seem to be pointing to groups trying to put into effect desired ways of organizing and living together that I suspect might stand as models for what the future could and should be?28

LATHAM: Yes, it is relevant to all of what you just mentioned. One advantage of re-collective passage is that it allows one to see commonalities among the more mainstream action in so-called grass-roots community improvement efforts; the new social movement protests around issues like sexual rights; and then the more radical anti-state and anti-capitalist organizing like we saw with the Black Panthers in the 1960s, who, in their organizing, built a range of services for the neighborhoods within which they operated.29

MR V: Are you so sure this commonality is a good thing? Maybe in the name of some overarching label it just leads to failing to distinguish very different forms of politics and organizing?

LATHAM: Somehow when you reduce all the variation of organized political units dominating territories and societies across the world to a label “the state” you’re fine with commonality.

MR V: Well at least we have a range of qualifiers like democratic, authoritarian, and capitalist.

LATHAM: Feel free to qualify passage.

MR V: Thank you, but, either way, I am still not convinced we need a label like passage for things that have been thrown around out there for some time now. And I’m not sure that you are adding anything to what we have to work with already, like the new social movement literature entailing quite well-developed theories.

LATHAM: I’ll take that as a challenge to dig deeper with you into what I see is in play with re-collective passage. As to commonalities, the point is not to claim passage subsumes these various activisms and all the thinking and analysis that’s emerged around them; what I am trying to put my finger on here is a particular organizational formation around evasion and deflection. It could take place within the context of an existing social movement as when a movement enters a certain


29 A recent review of these is in David Hilliard, (ed.), The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs, (Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
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period of action and organization that involves evasion and deflection; or maybe only a certain segment of a movement that goes off in this direction.

MR V: That means a great deal of options and possible confusions as to what organizational types and what formations, as you put it, are in operation.

LATHAM: As we get more into it I hope you will come to view that not as a hindrance, but as a strength.

MR V: I’m not so sure how far I want to get into it but my hesitation has so far not prevented you from proceeding.

LATHAM: Why start now?

We both laughed nervously and I said:

At the risk of alienating you I’ll try to make a stronger case for passage.

MR V: And I will try to resist it.

LATHAM: That’s your prerogative. To start, first, I am glad you brought up the prefiguration concept because it refers to the future, or the notion of moving into the future. It’s often taken, alas in way too simplistic ways, to imply that the future can be created in the present with the development and enactment of alternative organizational models and socio-political practices. While prefiguration is relevant, passage puts the emphasis on how a collective in its deflecting and reorganizing is passing into an alternative future.

MR V: I am not sure if that’s a subtle difference, but I think you mean that with passage there’s more need for the development of alternatives as a collective moves into the future as opposed to prefiguration’s development of alternatives for the future. I’m not sure that’s inconsistent with prefiguration.

LATHAM: No, it doesn’t have to be. You can view what I am suggesting as an elaboration on prefiguration. And it returns to parts of our discussion the time before last; where we spoke of temporariness and permanence. In passage there is no claim to permanence and there is a commitment to revision. To me this is what passage means, entering a trajectory of transformation. So it’s not about anticipating and modeling a certain future utopia but about contending with oppressive forces now. And from contending with that oppression moving on into a future that is not necessarily visible in any overall, macro sense of some brave new world. What can be visible are the new practices and organizational logics at the meso-level that compose the various passages.

MR V: I was wondering when you would bring time into the picture. This brings to mind how Marx saw the bourgeoisie as a class that was associated with revolutions, where order might be thrown open for very short periods of time. Whereas, with proletarian revolutions, revision and criticism could go on and
Either way, are you not putting your passages into the same dilemmas about temporary victories we went over in that discussion two meeting’s ago? They were dilemmas that plague Anarchism I recall. Actually, come to think of it, re-collective passage is starting to sound like a pitch for Anarchism, since you are talking about non-state organizing here, aren’t you?

LATHAM: That’s not my aim right now. I’d note that being centered in non-state organizing does not necessarily mean one is seeking after a world with no states. You wouldn’t accuse social movements or those who study them of this, since typically state action is a main target of contention, would you? At this point I’d say whatever a group’s – or my broader philosophical – orientation, there is no way around the existence of the state as a reality to be condemned or targeted as an object of transformation.

MR V: Which brings me to the question of what you believe we are to do about electoral politics and parties? We’ve spoken about them but how do they fit in or not in terms of passage? Parties are supposed to reach all the way down into communities. Is the idea to just give up, naively, on capturing state power and advancing a progressive agenda by mobilizing the populace around a central political party organization? If communities don’t control the state or portions of it, how can they protect their efforts and gains? I once again detect a whiff of bracketing out the political center; perhaps to avoid a whole set of problems posed by electoral politics. Maybe you think we should just put in place some safeguards somewhere to keep the pursuit of alternatives at your meso-level from being smothered by professional politicians and bureaucrats?

LATHAM: It’s not about bracketing, which was a heuristic move I advocated last time we met in order to bring into greater clarity the spatial organizational dimensions of power anchored in deployments. As to naiveté, I can only say at this point that there will be no way to avoid confrontation with state and corporate power. What form it takes will depend on the choices made about strategies of evasion and deflection. In our first meeting we spoke a good bit about confrontation, especially in relation to evasion. A great deal of what we spoke of that time is relevant to what we are talking about now.

MR V: Except that hacker movements, Anonymous, and the like seem to use evasion to facilitate negative, disruptive attacks; quite a distance from what you’ve been emphasizing with passage.

LATHAM: We also spoke of Occupy and they were certainly not only focused on the negative, as you put it. And I mentioned other examples just minutes ago.

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31 This is evident, for example, in Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, “To map contentious politics,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 1 (1) (1996), pp. 17–34.
“Leave it up to the people”

MR V: I’m also not clear how far you will take what you just said about choices of strategies and tactics. Seems like what you are offering is, well, one of the oldest copouts in the book: leave it up to the people. It allows you to avoid pronouncing on things like the use of violence and the levels of sacrifice that might be required in people’s lives to pursue these re-collective passages. That’s also a form of naiveté. It’s one that’s convenient to maintain so you can advance your argument. We can put this aside for now until I get a fuller picture of things. Right now I would like you to address the question of electoral politics; and how trying to gain state leadership fits or not.

LATHAM: My first instinct is to point to the longstanding Leftist strategy of dual power, associated especially with Nicos Poulantzas. That’s the notion that you build alternatives outside the state in what Gramsci called civil society – and he had worker organized and governed factory councils in mind. While at the same time you attempt to get into political power and keep the door open so to speak for democracy and rights so that your organizing can proceed – while, of course, recognizing that there will be repression and roadblocks by the state and corporations in response to this.32

MR V: Whether or not I agree with Poulantzas’ ultimate Leftist aims, I recognize this as really the only reasonable way forward for social democracy. We need the more independent sources pushing on power and policies like unions and social movement groups fighting austerity, or gas fracking, or violent police activities. Otherwise there is not much hope that the center of political power can progress.

LATHAM: I said “first instinct” for a reason. Actually I believe this approach is realistic, but to a fault. And that’s to the degree that it’s complicit in perpetuating the permanent state for the whole range of reasons considered two meetings before. The very question of electoral politics presupposes the continuation of that state.

MR V: Yes, but the real issue here is not whether electoral politics is to be advocated as the ultimate way forward. It’s rather how one approaches it as a means; as part of the conditions and context that any collective must face in seeking alternatives. If they don’t face them, then there are forces on the Right that would be very happy to fill any electoral political gap through party competition.

LATHAM: I see where you are coming from. And you could go further in specifying what the context faced is. What about the consumption of corporate products, retirement funds or pension investments in the stock market, debt, and home ownership? All of these can become objects in various tactics and strategies

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pushing on power, say in boycotts or refusals to participate or pay back debt. These should be seen as part of the activism in re-collective passage.

MR V: No, it’s not the same because electoral or party politics is not just an evasion or deflection; it more like a rushing into the halls of power – or at least as much as is available to office holders.

LATHAM: Fair enough. I think, since we are talking about re-collective passages emerging in the context of existing conditions and structures of power, an interesting question becomes: how does the emergence of this or that passage change the conditions for electoral politics?

Mr V cut me off before I could finish my sentence:

I’d like something specific here.

LATHAM: OK, a contemporary and hardly radical example operating very much at the meso-level is public and community banking. It’s where different locales, towns or cities, set up banks that, when you think about it, are trying to evade as much as possible the ties to Wall Street financial institutions and deflect away from them by trying to keep local funds within the community and organizational control in their own hands. Once a passage is embarked on, its presence can change party platforms and community members can seek office to help advance things. But I don’t think a community can anticipate these changes or even how far they will take things when they embark. Not only does this seem very hard to do given we’re talking about a collective endeavor, but also this could cut off a whole range of efforts that might be invented along the way.

MR V: And where do the Wall Street-anchored banks and government agencies fit into this picture?

LATHAM: A public or community bank can cooperate with local businesses or even local banks that are not community-based, nor cooperative, nor publicly owned. It’s called co-production. We should not forget neoliberalism was built up this way. Using available institutions and actors to achieve their ends, with political entrepreneurs seeking office to address public services like trash pick-up in the name of the public. The same thing can work in reverse to undo neoliberal outcomes.

MR V: Even assuming you could ever get such cooperation or co-production, what does that imply for your ultimate aim around challenging the permanent state? How re-collective, as you put it, is working with the state? Perhaps you are

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33 A good analysis of a case study in North Dakota, showing problems and promises of community banking is Marc Schneiberg, “Lost in transposition? (A cautionary tale): The Bank of North Dakota and prospects for reform in American banking,” *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 39 (1) (2013), pp. 277–310. Schneiberg also shows how this alternative connects back to politics as hinted at in my reply to Mr V.
coming around to my side of things? It makes sense that you would since, if you were to insist that the only alternative organizations that really count are the ones that embrace an Anarchist orientation, then you are certainly cutting off most of the non-radical movements like your Dudley example, or even these community bank efforts, to say nothing of democratic socialist movements. At the risk of repeating myself, why not just focus on the re-collective choices that are in favor of building or transforming the state?

LATHAM: As I argued two meetings ago, the point is not about the state or no state but about the terms of the state. And the terms should not be permanence. In relation to a concept like re-collectivity the state would not be permanent in the way we take it in contemporary political life. I mean collectivities in passage can choose to be part of a state, but they would not do so on the terms of permanence. If they are going to commit to the process of reforming their collective life then that would not make sense.

MR V: Who is making commitments to these ideals like non-permanence and re-collectivizing? And, even if these commitments exist, how do collectives in passage get to make choices and claims about permanence that matter in the world? As I see it people in communities and movements are just pursuing the concrete aims that they set out to achieve, like housing justice.

LATHAM: Of course, until a given movement is clearly coming into formation, you could criticize any normative argument for not specifying “who will do it” and “how they will do it.” Also, it’s funny, there might be a little role reversal going on here. You are basically saying groups and movements pursuing alternatives are not likely to take up wider, macro issues like the status and future of the state. Or maybe you are coming around to my side, as you put it minutes ago to me!

MR V: Yes, but some theories have agents spelled out as Marxism has with the working class or racial analysis with African Americans; and they have visions of what the desired end points are, like socialism or the end of Jim Crow. Re-collective passage is so open-ended from what I can see that it is not organic to any group or specific situation. I would add that just working with the negative idea of moving beyond permanence hardly offers us a vision of what such a post-permanence state would look like.

LATHAM: I guess re-collective passage as a concept is general like concepts such as social movements or resistance. Perhaps that bothers you because it’s not intrinsically tied to the state. Others might be bothered that it’s not tied to a specific historical agent like the proletariat. But it’s hardly ungrounded; just as social movements are not ungrounded. In the context we’ve been dealing with, passage starts from the conditions like neoliberalism and hyper-security. These are conditions that affect a wide range of groups and communities.

MR V: I fear that the passage concept in the end doesn’t really get us beyond the social movement concept.
LATHAM: The turning away from and the limiting of access of predominant relations; the organizing of other types and sites of relations; and the leaving open of possibilities are the distinct aspects of re-collective passage. This is what evasion, deflection, and re-collection taken together amount to. And they are different than groups massing to protest or form networks and political fronts to pressure officials and representatives to change policy. What I am suggesting is that, while we have examples of passage, it is something that should be explored more, especially as a counter to the materiality of power realized in deployments.34

MR V: Maybe so, but you have still not really addressed the commitment to undoing permanence. You made an argument for it two meetings ago, but there are just so many interests tied to it from property to justice claims. Even if you could convince progressive communities, you would ultimately force them into a pitch battle with non-progressives, who seem to be attached very much to property regimes, to national security, or to ethno-national certainties provided by the state. Progressives already have their hands full with pressing issues like extreme austerity.

LATHAM: Can you leave the passageway open for re-collection while permanence sits there like a dead weight? Do we leave the claims of Native Americans off the table because they might challenge this permanence?

MR V: It’s easy to point to bits and pieces of the state that can and should be undone, like racist laws. But that doesn’t mean you don’t stay committed to the permanent state you hope can be further transformed. That’s not what you’re talking about. You mean a full-on change in status, sort of like a transformation in the very political being of the state. And I would remind you that you never addressed my question about how to translate all this into a positive framework for organizing the state, not just organizing passages – even if it’s a state on the way toward dissolution in some imagined post-state future.

LATHAM: What do you do in the face of a deeply entrenched neoliberalism and hyper-security, dependent on the state as the legitimate shaper of the world fostering both forces as permanent conditions? And that’s still to say nothing of all the other injustices tied to state permanence we spoke of in previous meetings – which you now all but dismiss as bits and pieces. The emergence of alternative logics of organization at the meso-level associated with passage should challenge the state’s permanence anchor. How that state would look after that challenge depends on what is struggled for and put in place.

MR V: A conjecture at best that you could apply to just about any form of challenge or resistance.

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34 A good place to start looking further into the literature on and possibilities of alternatives is Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left*, (Durham, NC, US: Duke University Press, 2013), especially Chapter 5.
Mr V put both hands up in a mocking gesture and continued:

And I’ll remind you once again that neoliberals have been anxious to focus on flexibility and shaping the state into the neoliberal one they want; treating it very much like a non-permanent entity subject to, among other things, the changeable logics of contracting and financialization.

LATHAM: I would say on the contrary, it is a certain taken-for-granted permanence and the command over territory and foreign relations that allow the state to be harnessed in the way you describe.

MR V: I am not following you here.

LATHAM: I mean neoliberals need an authoritative source or core from which they can carry out their policies. It’s even better if they don’t have to negotiate with communities or do complicated coalition-building. A great example of this is the Trans-Pacific Partnership I mentioned a bit ago. It’s being negotiated by state executives directly and outside of public scrutiny.35

MR V: Certainly not the first time this has gone on. It’s more or less standard practice inherited from the days of monarchy.

LATHAM: So why does it continue into the twenty-first century? My point is both the democratic liberal states and monarchical states share the kernel of permanence that takes expression in sovereignty and that allows executives to proceed this way. The same way they would proceed with debt negotiations with banks or decisions to defund public services.

MR V: So where does security come in to the picture?

LATHAM: I recently have been thinking that I made a mistake in my book *The Liberal Moment*. You might remember that I argued that with international liberal order what happens is there is recourse to using violence and security to maintain order so that politics and broader participation in governance can be avoided. I mean you rely on defense alliances or relations between military forces to hold states together. You contend with violators with violence. Well, the same logic can apply to national order.

MR V: OK, we briefly touched on this last time.

LATHAM: Right. You rely on security say in fear of terror, crime, incarceration, and surveillance. The taken-for-grantedness of the state, its permanence, means both the deepening of neoliberalism and security can continue because at the core there is no questioning, no political contestation. And the point is that the recourse to security further reinforces this status. So, the idea would be to unsettle this. And

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some recent brilliant thinking among indigenous scholars and activists has been really pushing in this way. They seem to see their challenge as not about gaining control or sovereignty over this or that land or resource, or obtaining full autonomy. Instead they see it as a matter of challenging the contemporary order of state and capitalism; territoriality; and understandings of human and natural relations.36

MR V: So, the indigenous communities taking this tact are your ideal of re-collective passage? What about those re-collective possibilities you spoke just before: the varieties of movements that could at least start out as non-radical?

LATHAM: I am not saying that every movement has to challenge up front settler states or capitalist modernity as social forms. After all, I’ve stressed how important the meso-scale is and at that scale a passage need not start with an explicit commitment to such wide-reaching transformation.

“What kind of new collectivities are in play here?”

MR V: We are moving in circles here. The meso-level is also about bits and pieces of the state; transform this aspect or that. I see no real challenge to permanence per se.

LATHAM: I don’t agree there is no challenge. By meso-level I do not mean reforms but changes in the way social and political life is organized. 37 It can certainly be changes focused on a particular dimension or segment of economic life, as is the case with community banking. And the connection to permanence takes shape in an indirect way. When movements focus on transformation and alternatives they do so for the most part without making any claims about either temporariness or permanence. Even in the Dudley Street movement the focus was on doing the work of transformation, not making claims around the duration of their actions. It’s not hard to see how different this is from the many deployments in history where there is a planting of a flag of conquest or a coming in with mandates that are set in terms of dates or expiration. The idea is to look for the ways people organize that is different from the state and its temporality. This is very consistent with where we left things in the discussion we had two meetings ago that was focused on temporality.

MR V: And who’s to say the movements won’t seek permanence once they are up and running in full form. I venture that the main Dudley organization is still in operation and thinking of itself as permanent.


37 For readers interested in the tension between reform and revolution or deep transformation, and the advantages of treating change as an ongoing process without a fixed endpoint see Thomas Mathiesen, “Politics of abolition,” Contemporary Crises 10 (1) (1986), pp. 81–94.
LATHAM: Yes, they’re still in operation. However, they are not operating in any way like a state operates regarding permanence and temporariness. The point is not for everything to become temporary, but to step beyond the intense permanence-temporariness binary.

MR V: Even so, I hear a good deal of hopeful thinking here in your argument. While a collective might be able to challenge the effectiveness and scope of state-oriented permanence claims, they don’t challenge the state’s desire to make the claims and put them into effect.

LATHAM: A massive popular mobilization against a governmental regime does not stop the regime’s desire to keep going on in power, does it? The idea is that forms of re-collective passage would increase and scale up. The more these alternatives populate social and political spaces the more chance the order associated with the permanence-claiming state can be challenged.

Mr V let out a clear harrumph and asked:

That’s the classic leap of faith for social change: pray for the reproduction of alternatives across societies. If only we could get critical mass! Can you give me an example of this working?

LATHAM: And yet it does happen as we saw in the political transformations in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. Jeffrey Goldfarb nicely traced how initial meetings in Eastern European theater groups eventually mushroomed into wider mobilizations.

MR V: The rise of a mass mobilization is different than these passages, wouldn’t you say?

LATHAM: Sure it’s different, but the logic of spread and growth is relevant. There are associations and networks to promote and spread community banking and other cooperative enterprises. And although it’s not flowing from mass mobilization per se, there is a fairly extensive movement to develop renewal energy within local communities in Germany that quite explicitly seeks to deflect local energy and financial flows from major corporations and corporate centers of power.

MR V: But my real concern about the difference is that I don’t see how these passages add up to a general transformation? I raised this point not long after we started today, in terms of the critique of utopian socialism. It might be even more

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38 For example, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative can be examined at: http://www.dsnli.org/
40 One example can be found at http://community-wealth.org/ – a project of the Democracy Collaborative.
applicable to these more moderate alternatives like cooperative businesses. We never really discussed this issue and, really, throughout this whole discussion I keep imagining this big gap between your meso-level and the macro-level. I know I keep coming back to it, but it does trouble me. To be frank, another concern that keeps nagging me about this is how it might easily play into a sort of going-off-the-grid mentality. At least in the communication technology realm, Anonymous has been one piece of a wider world trying to hide, I mean evade, in what are, for better or worse, called darknets; maybe using payment systems like Bitcoin.42

LATHAM: I am glad you brought this up again because it’s important to me to clarify something. Re-collective passage is not about breakaway communes that go off into the countryside – although these are still relevant. More central are the movements and groups that evade and deflect within the context of everyday social and political life. As I said, one mode of transformation is changing the logics and practices of social and political organization at the meso-level that are still very much within the context of the wider systems of states and capital, such as the border or community-level finance. In the absence of system-wide revolution, I guess the question is whether and how these changes transform organization at the macro-level; as different ways of doing things become more present, or even get adapted by the state as policy.

MR V: I think it would help if we could discuss an additional example or two.

LATHAM: You mentioned Bitcoin just now. I recall you also mentioned it the first time we met. It stands as a clear example of re-collective passage.43 There is evasion as users avoid national currencies for a dimension of their life online and there is deflection into an alternative currency that stands outside historically established financial systems. Of course, we can also see the ways that this passage intersects with existing financial structures as conventional banks and firms flirt with the idea of accepting bitcoins or even starting their own digital currencies.

MR V: To my mind it is a really poor example of the alternatives you have in mind. First, it is hardly something that challenges existing power in that it’s very capitalistic so to speak, with markets, payments and, like you said, mainstream finance and even states eying it as good business.

42 Mr V is referring to networks and websites that use encryption and facilitate anonymity and where activities and identities are not open to typical internet access (with breaking the encryption an all but impossible task). See Clive Thompson, “The darkest place on the internet isn’t just for criminals,” Wired, October 18, 2013, available at: http://www.wired.com/2013/10/thompson/ (accessed November 12, 2013).

LATHAM: I would certainly put it in the very moderate side of things along the sort of spectrum we have been discussing.

MR V: OK, but there is a bigger problem here. What kind of new collectivities are in play here? I have to admit despite my issues with them, at least with Anonymous there is a fairly clear projection of a sort of normative mission around social justice and transformation. With Bitcoin I would say the predominant political philosophy is a sort of crypto-Libertarianism that is if anything Rightwing the way Ron Paul is Rightwing.

LATHAM: I take that to be in part a fair assessment. But like most anything that ostensibly challenges state power and global financial corporations there is likely a spectrum from Rightwing Liberatarians and Anarcho-Capitalists to more mainstream types who distrust the future of conventional currency. And then it’s not hard to imagine there are Leftists that see it reinforcing anti-state and anti-mainstream capitalism, on to Leftist Anarchists or Anarcho-Communists. Of course, there are those just trying to get rich or hide their identity as much as possible online.

MR V: So, what does this mishmash of politics add up to?

LATHAM: Are you playing off of Engels use of this term to describe the various ideas and approaches of utopian socialists you have mentioned more than once today?

MR V: I wasn’t but, come to think of it, it might be relevant in the sense that there are many schemes for a better world in play across these different standpoints from Left to Right.

LATHAM: I don’t think I’m copping out by claiming it’s too early to tell if, when, and how this wide political spectrum might add up to anything as a challenge to state and corporate power. And now that you raise the different standpoints issue, if I am going to be consistent about re-collective passage, it may be inappropriate to exclude, automatically, a given form of challenge because it’s associated with political-economic orientations like Anarcho-Capitalism. That is, as long as a movement or community is evading and deflecting from neoliberalism and hyper-security, which I see in Bitcoin.


MR V: Even if for many it amounts to a rush toward an even more extreme form of market ideology?

LATHAM: Of course the emergence of neoliberalism as an ideology was to a meaningful extent anchored in Rightwing Libertarianism. The common rhetorical assertions between anti-state Libertarianism, or Anarcho-Capitalism, and neoliberal corporate power are evident in the celebration of the market and demonization of government. But Bitcoin itself does not come with an ideology stamped on it. Just as democracy as a way to select leaders or make decisions doesn’t. Analogously, that Libertarians might embrace democracy shouldn’t suggest that I should be suspicious of democracy.

MR V: You might not like the form they have in mind. Indeed, I am troubled by a politics that does not allow for substantial normative distinctions. Again, I see a politics that really amounts to a politics of the negative: not neoliberalism, not hyper-security. This is what opens it up to all comers so to speak. I see where this makes a lot of sense in terms of evasion; but having a positive vision in place helps avoid this. This is where focusing on what type of state we want is a benefit.

Shaking my head with a smirk I replied:

You mean discrimination and exclusion! As I’ve said, the social democratic state you seek was mostly based on a deep marginalization of Native Americans, the poor, and migrants, among other groups. So, to my mind, the political risks entailed by the unsettled openness of passage are worth taking if it means questions can be raised about the very basis of the existence of the state.

MR V: Don’t you think those Rightists are going to push exclusion and appropriation to levels that will make you shudder?

LATHAM: It is interesting that Ralph Nader has recently been arguing for what he calls a Left-Right Alliance against the corporate state. He says the ideas they share about disdain for large global corporate power and the repressive, surveillance state can be the basis for specific policy changes that would lead to significant transformations. There are miles to go in terms of bridging the fissures between anti-corporate state positions on the Left and Right. Nonetheless, if we both agree that taking existing conditions seriously is important, then that means contending with the persistent Rightwing-orientation of significant segments of society. I don’t have any ready answers to how to do that. But, either way, Bitcoin


stands out to me as a meso-level organizational deflection and it allows for appropriation by non-Rightists, including Native Americans, some of whom have argued for its adoption as a way to enhance their autonomy.48 The same goes for the practices of Anonymous and WikiLeaks. The movement is not just a specific set of individuals and some bits of ideology and ethical outrage, but a set of practices – a logic of confrontation or political hacking around the meso-logic of exposing abuses and wrongs otherwise hidden from the public.

MR V: We’ll see how long any of these things survive before it gets taken over by corporate and state power.

LATHAM: The same thing can be said about any re-collective passage, or for that matter any movement. They are always vulnerable, but not just to being taken over, which I assume you mean, but to being outright attacked. But sometimes they last longer than the Paris Commune.49

“Closure is needed to create passages”

MR V: It is one thing to watch groups evade and deflect neoliberal practices and institutions; but it’s quite another watch them take on state security, where the ramifications can be direct and severe – like being arrested. You should keep in mind that just as popular groups may organize and innovate, so do states and corporations. Expect new programs of security and new strategies and tactics in response to further innovations along the lines you’re describing.

LATHAM: I do and...

Before I could finish Mr V interrupted:

In any event, we’ve touched on Anonymous and anonymity a few times before. I want to come back to it and push you a bit on the place of anonymity in your passages, especially regarding security.

LATHAM: The first time we met we went into it in some detail; so why bring it up again?

MR V: Because reminding us to keep security in mind allowed me to make the connection between anonymity and passage. Of course, anonymity seems to be a


49 With the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War the people of Paris, workers, radicals, and former national guardsmen, declared the Paris Commune, in March 1871. It was an attempt to establish a sort of people’s government around socialist ideals. The national French army had attacked and terminated the Commune by May 1871. See Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune of 1871, (London: Verso, 2012).
factor in some examples like Bitcoin but not in others like Dudley. If I have it right, evasion as you have used it can mean, on the one hand, avoiding detection so that collectives can operate within their passage; and on the other hand, it also seems to be about turning away from the forces tied to neoliberalism and security. This second sense does not require hiding one’s identity. The shielding and obstruction is about building social and political relationships that are meant to be independent of these forces. I want to focus a moment on the first sense. I’m wondering if a group that is taking a more radical approach really needs or wants anonymity?

LATHAM: Not necessarily. Evasion and anonymity are not synonymous. I can try to evade surveillance without being anonymous. The Black Panthers were hardly anonymous. I can make my identity known but also try to restrict surveillance and infiltration.

MR V: So, then, anonymity is not so important.

LATHAM: I would say it is, but only as part of the wider picture in passage; and we have to think about this in wider ways than just security. Anonymity and, more generally, the shielding that makes for passage are not just connected to security but two other factors. One is the relationship of passage to external forces. This involves the knowledge held by outsiders about a collectivity in passage – and security is a piece of this involving surveillance, total access, infiltration, and subversion. But there’s more to it. It can also involve collectivities not wanting outsiders making claims about who they are and what they do.50

Mr V: Yeah, I get it. It’s a familiar point about not wanting one’s agency limited.

LATHAM: A point you should be sympathetic to, given your attachment to progressive agency to build democratic states.

MR V: Indeed.

LATHAM: There’s also the question of how much the histories and identities of those in passage are known and what sort of force it is within an unfolding passage. In our second meeting, we touched on this second internal issue, especially by engaging with Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, and Michel de Certeau. If people bring and hold on to their established histories, their identities, and their claims, then that may restrict the possibilities for building alternatives and new approaches to collective life.

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50 Édouard Glissant suggests there is a need for groups to assert a right for opacity to, among other things, avoid being objects of colonizing knowledge. See his essay “For opacity,” in, (eds.), Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher, Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture (Cambridge, MA, US: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 252–257. Also for consideration here is Ranciere’s notion of police, which is all about orders that assign and enforce roles and identities. See Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, (Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 28.
MR V: But if you don’t have histories and identities that go into making a collective then you don’t have the material to reorganize them into new collective frameworks? You earlier said re-collection is also about collecting disparate histories. Funny, collection is also a predominant term in surveillance.

LATHAM: Yes very funny. The point is not to abandon histories and identities per se, but to be open to transforming and re-setting them through interaction across passage and efforts to create alternatives. I guess that also undermines the predictive capabilities of the NSA.

MR V: All of this, by the way, seems at odds with commitments we usually have to public spheres. The whole passage idea strikes me that way. Even if that doesn’t concern you the open-endedness you point to might also undermine the ability of alternatives to spread throughout a society. A degree of predictability, stability, and transparency in what people do – and who they claim to be – is needed for that.

LATHAM: This returns us again to issues we spoke of in our first meeting around openness and closure, which I still think is a relevant backdrop to what we are talking about today. Just as I at the outset emphasized that closure is needed to create public spaces, well, the same applies to passages: closure is needed to create passages. We can say passages are a bounded public sphere for the collectivities within them. That is very consistent with the idea that’s been around for some time associated especially with Nancy Fraser and Daniel Warner; where you don’t look for one big public but rather multiple public spheres, and even counterpublics, organized around opposition to power and exclusion; a political identity; and a sense of collective needs and interests.51

MR V: More fragmentation? Are we not then talking about a ghettoization if not Balkanization going on here? That certainly can’t help the spread and scale up of alternatives you seem to pin so much of your hope on.

LATHAM: This is also where Warner’s framework for counterpublics proves very useful. Warner also points to the way that the oppositional nature of counterpublics would, of course, come in contact with mainstream communities and public spheres in its opposition and difference with them. We, likewise, can see how taking an oppositional stand will likely mean other groups and movements will take notice. The idea is that just because there is a shielding does not mean there is no interaction. I would say the very pursuit of re-collective passage entails interaction with and notice by those outside of it. You have only to think a second

Toward a progressive politics of evasion

about the global controversy and notoriety of both Anonymous and Bitcoin. Re-collective passage is not about secret societies that evade in order to keep as much of their activities as private as possible.\footnote{Examples include the Freemasons present worldwide and the Order of Skull and Bones at Yale University. Most social science thinking about secret societies flows from the work of George Simmel. See Erickson, Bonnie H., “Secret societies and social structure,” Social Forces 60 (1) (1981), pp. 188–210.}

MR V: Even so, these notions of shielding, of limiting if not preventing, access should be reconciled somehow with the positive aspects of access I mentioned a little while ago. I still find what comes to mind first for me about access is the demand to use or govern resources, spaces, rights, power, and institutions. This is meant to counter exclusions from these things realized in racial or class relations. You speak of limiting the access that repugnant power forces might have to communities. But what about access to public goods and political life? Expanding access and overcoming exclusion has always been central to progressive thinking.

LATHAM: It is not my intention to condemn or ignore efforts to overcome exclusion and expand access to the sort of things you mention.\footnote{One recent article on the access makes a very sophisticated argument and assessment emphasizing mobility. See Noel Cass, Elizabeth Shove, and John Urry, “Social exclusion, mobility and access,” The Sociological Review 53 (3) (2005), pp. 539–555. Also worth considering is Jeremy Rifkin, The Age of Access, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2000). Rifkin shows how much consumption and life is based on paid access to resources like apartments, cars, and experiences as part of what he calls hyper-capitalism, keying off of the notion of the marketization of everything in the life world. He points to the problems with this, such as deeply unequal access and over commercialization.} And limiting access on the part of corporations and the state doesn’t mean we need to reject using the concept in a positive sense. What I am doing with re-collective passage is pointing to a social-spatial strategy for contending with the forces that put exclusion in place and enforce it. But its aim is not just to expand access to what exists, like goods and rights. Rather it’s about altering the very social organizational context within which we might think about what access entails, what it could be and for what sort of collective life.

MR V: Yes, in the way that working class revolution seeks a new world. Isn’t that just another approach to access? I take your point about not assuming an “on and off switch” for access. But in the end, it’s access either way, don’t you think?

LATHAM: I don’t object if access is how you want to view one of the potential stakes of passage, as long as you recognize that it’s not what distinguishes passage as a social organizational form. Think about the squatters’ movement, where, as you know, people take possession of abandoned buildings and live in them.\footnote{A recent analysis is Miguel A. Martínez López, “The squatters’ movement in Europe: A durable struggle for social autonomy in urban politics,” Antipode 45 (4) (2013), pp. 866–887.} Sure, you can see squatting as about access to housing but there’s a range of everyday community activism that, for instance, advocates for more social
housing to be built. What is unique about squatting is that they are putting into practice and advocating a very different relationship to housing; an alternative meso-logic. They are evading regimes of real estate property and deflecting to their very different approach to shelter; and as a result they are putting forward a different collective life.

MR V: OK, but you didn’t really address the one thing I mentioned that’s really a resource – and a rather important one at that: the question of human rights.

LATHAM: Why shouldn’t human rights be used in re-collective passage? They can be a tool and employed strategically to limit deployed powers and advance alternatives. So squatters can and do use the right to housing or the right to the city as a means to advance their movement. But their use occurs as part of a wider attempt to transform capitalism and dwelling in the city.

MR V: I am a bit distrustful of reducing rights to strategic use. After all, don’t advocates of religious practice who like the veil and sharia law use rights strategically against Western secular societies that they would ultimately like to see infused with more religious governance?

“The battle within societies over various forms of collectivity can’t be avoided”

LATHAM: Regarding your concern with being strategic, let me say that I’m not cynical toward human rights; nor am I rejecting them as nothing but bourgeois or liberal ideology or as a cover for neoliberalism and state and corporate power. They certainly emerge out of the liberal tradition. And they can be used by a state institution or corporation to, say, trumpet some token advancement of racial or gender equality. So, rights are part of the existing social order; just as they can be appropriated and used for fashioning and transforming that order.

Mr V: There’s nothing new or controversial in that as I see it. I still remember well how Audre Lorde wrote of the problem of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. But you say you’re not cynical about rights?

55 For the connection between these concepts see Margit Mayer, “The ‘right to the city’ in the context of shifting mottos of urban social movements,” City 13 (2–3) (2009), pp. 362–374.
56 These issues, like many, are more complex than the discussion here allowed. See Banu Gökarîksel and Katharyne Mitchell, “Veiling, secularism, and the neoliberal subject: National narratives and supranational desires in Turkey and France,” Global Networks 5 (2) (2005), pp. 147–165.
57 There is clear resonance here with Ranciere’s conception of democratic politics as a stepping away from the existing police order. See Disagreement, Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
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LATHAM: That’s right, if what is at stake in rights is to transform the context of rights or their scope. This played out a bit with attempts to expand the range and depth of social rights that was famously articulated in T.H. Marshall’s work. At that point rights stop being only the master’s tools. Why can’t a principle also be a meso-logic? A movement can advocate for a human right that changes the way we organize society – like the universal right to public health care. So my answer is yes, if human rights claims take form not as something only asserted and fulfilled, but as something specific, with material implications like organizing public healthcare provision.

MR V: Until the master re-appropriates and maybe even curtails them. In any event, if every group started taking the strategic approach oriented to transforming order, what would be left of human rights? What about principles here, irrespective of transformation – people just looking to see existing rights associated with progressive politics realized and enforced? If there are going to be more and more mass mobilizations and more taking to the streets with organized groups resisting, well, it’s very likely they will come in many political stripes, not just Leftist, but Rightist and Islamist. Maybe we can rely on a certain consensus within the West around progressive values but the rise of the far Right leaves me wondering if we can. Your downplaying of the progressive principles associated with existing human rights worries me.

LATHAM: But what you’re seeking is to evade confrontation and maybe even showdows over these various ideologies. You’re certainly being consistent with the liberal capitalist attempt to find some form of consensual integration of difference. Use of the “war on terror” and “the enemy in our midst” is one way to help enforce this against those who don’t quite fit in.

MR V: I admit that orthodox religious groups or Rightwing antigovernment groups, in very broad terms, can have some similarities to progressive groups with regard to seeking transformation. This is something progressives have not really become reconciled to. There may be a tendency on some progressives’ part to assume everyone else but them is conservative. As to your point about the war on terror and all, I’d turn it back in your direction. If Islamic groups are targeted this way, what’s to stop, in principle, any group seeking transformation from also being targeted? I know you don’t agree, but this is one good reason for trying to restore the social democratic state and the society it requires in order to develop a more inclusive public community. You see it as an evasion of real difference; I see it as a political project.

LATHAM: Except that this state doesn’t help much to get us past forced integration, repression, or the political-cultural conflict that’s troubling you and has brought us together in the first place, at least with regard to the security realm.

MR V: Yes, but when you open things up as you are suggesting you might get stuck with something similar. I’m thinking here of the recent Egyptian revolution where the Muslim Brotherhood, prior to achieving power, could be seen as having been a movement in passage. Once in power they then began to make repressive moves against political forces that didn’t support their desire to push things toward what looked like a religious state.

LATHAM: As soon as these religious groups obtain state power and impose order on others, as in Iran, they would certainly no longer be in passage; any resistance, evasion, or deflection of that power would be justified. In the meantime, the battle within societies over various forms of collectivity can’t be avoided.

MR V: That sounds like we’d be stuck along a continuum, ranging from an acceptable, benign fragmentation among communities and groups to potential civil war with militias. I for one don’t want to wait for the conclusion of any social and political battles to see whether a group intent on imposing a single pious order emerges. I’d prefer that any such movement be stopped well ahead of that. Is there not some way to distinguish one group evading and deflecting from another? To see that one group might be out to achieve domination and a repressive order? On the other hand, I don’t want to imply that there is something wrong with the pursuit of macro, society-wide political power.

LATHAM: I sense you are seeking some way to judge, as well as bring political parties back in here – the acceptable, desired political parties.

MR V: You sense correctly.

LATHAM: And whether or not I agree with that sentiment, I do think that if a form applies to everything it’s not very useful; and if there’s no common ethic to distinguish it, it’s insipid. But that’s not the case with passage. It’s the re-collective aspect that is central and that distinguishes them. To reiterate, re-collection means remaining open to new ways to organize collective life that lie ahead in passage, in the face of new social and political conditions and new articulations of what is possible, new alternative logics, and new participants in passage. This is very different than Islamist movements that are all about closures of future possibilities based on fairly well-established notions about how to organize collective life.

MR V: But if you are arguing for openness you can’t get away from a society where these closed-minded groups are all about, here and there.

LATHAM: The difference and fragmentation that troubles you is a reality that can’t just be legislated away except through polite, compelled integration or, much worse, totalitarianism.

MR V: I’m only trying to say that openness has its downsides. What do you do with a Rightwing movement that is open to deepening conservative, neoliberal, or fascistic collective ideas? Say an anti-immigration group that wants to move toward a closed society restricting all migration through far more militarized, closed borders? That’s meso-level change in organization as well, isn’t it? And
let’s not forget that, as Marx made plain, capitalism is a revolutionary force. As some of our previous discussions touched on, it can be seen as deflective and evasive. You yourself suggested it evades social welfare questions and deflects from them by creating more and more marketized social domains.

LATHAM: OK, but if you think back to our discussion last time we touched on this. Your examples share in common something the examples I mentioned don’t: an emphasis on deepening collective logics that already exist, like borders or privatization. If anything they are about channeling life into exceptionally closed orders, like a negative power; they are about things like the strong border, the wide and deep market, the American-Anglo tradition. This is where Gramsci’s concept of the passive revolution comes in: the idea that changes can be made to an existing order to save it. Fascism does that by allying mass politics to corporate power. The religious Right joins existing powerful religious institutions with state power. Even the most moderate passage like Dudley Street entails an opening toward a future for the community that departs from the one established by the institutions governing and containing their lives. It has some aspect of progressive, open radicality to it, rather than a radical enhancement and closing in on existing structures of power. We should not overlook that we live in a well-entrenched social and political system crafted over centuries. Perhaps the question becomes how to start changing it in radical ways that the system itself may not recognize as radical in order to contend with the vulnerabilities you have come back to a few times already.

MR V: I see it’s getting extremely late for me. But I still think that without a political order anchored in principles the whole approach risks too much in its openness and, yes, vulnerability to things like fascism, passive revolution, and the wrong sort of transformation.

LATHAM: I think re-collective passage is less risky than you suggest, if we hold to the notion that distinguishes passage as a way forward into an open future. Consider the principle of the right of return in the Israel/Palestine context. It has an abstract aspect but also a very concrete set of material implications literally about the return of the Palestinian diaspora to their home lost from the 1940s onward – so it counts in the strategic way I spoke of a minute ago. The movement for the Palestinian people advocating that is a re-collective passage in my view. It is based on an evasion, first, of the violence faced in 1948 and expulsion from Palestinian homes and villages seeking the protection of other countries; and, second, of the deep set of restrictions in place in Israel. And right of return is a deflection toward a form of collectivity in Israel/Palestine that would emerge with return.

MR V: Seeing this realized will be supremely difficult. You’ve already made clear that in order for passage to have influence it will affect people outside of it in the wider society. With the right of return, it’s clear that, for it to even happen, it would involve negotiation with Israelis and even Palestinians living there already. So your example really reinforces my point that without a polity organized around macro principles, say, of inclusion, things are fairly hopeless. As long as Israelis have their own state that’s the case. Who will establish return if most Israelis are not open to it? I can’t help but come back to the basic point that a collective is either going to have to become so powerful that there’s little choice for other powers except ultimately to negotiate; or you capture state power and set up your own state to force the matter one way or another.

LATHAM: You’re either implying I am naive or you’re still trying to push me into an Anarchist corner where the only legitimate way forward is outside the state.62

*With a clear smile Mr V said:*

Maybe it’s a little of both.

LATHAM: Either way, what I said earlier about there being little choice but to engage the state still holds. After all, if re-collective passage is about altering the logics of our political and social organization, then that means engaging the most significant organizational field we have today, the state. And as to your point about being able or not to shape macro principles, this engagement certainly holds out that possibility. In the case of the right of return for Palestinians this principle has become part of a wide set of debates in the United Nations, in scholarly circles and in policy worlds in the region and worldwide, including the US.63

MR V: That doesn’t make it more likely to succeed. In any event, this seems like straight up transnational advocacy and networking.64 I don’t see what is special here regarding any of its re-collective passage aspects.

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62 In *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, (London: Pluto Press, 2005), Richard J.F. Day grapples with this issue and insists Anarchists must turn away from state power in terms of desired alternative building but must, consistent with the argument here, contend with state power in this effort. John Holloway’s *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution for Today*, (London and Ann Arbor, MI, US: Pluto Press, 2005) book that follows from the Autonomists looks to movements like the Zapatistas to change the basic social relations of capitalist society and not get caught up in capturing state power. It should be clear from the discussion how my position is different.


LATHAM: This sort of advocacy may be pedestrian as a type of action in comparison to say the actions of the Zapatistas or the Black Panthers; but the re-collective implications of the establishment of the right of return would certainly not be. I come back to one of the points I made when we started today: that there is a spectrum of movements from moderate to radical that can form re-collective passage. But the idea is not to claim all movements are instances of re-collective passage; certainly not those to change political leaders or to get governments to reduce their CO₂ emission policies, even if they involve large-scale demonstrations. Re-collective passage entails evasions that are complex breaks from the social and political context; and deflections that seek directly to alter collective life, not just policies like limiting pollution levels, even if they have ramifications for that life.

“Making passage and re-collectivity constitutional logics of the state”

MR V: What you’ve just said brings to mind a question as to whether it’s violence that opens up the widest and deepest re-collective possibilities? When you downplay macro principles and commitments to normative orders like social democracy isn’t this where you end up? I recall Fanon was suggesting this, in the sense that violence that could emerge to undo the colonial situation and create postcolonial independence, which seems to follow your deflection notion. I can easily see that applying to Hamas today or the Cuban Revolution in the late 1950s.

LATHAM: I think a sustained insurgency like the Cuban one counts as re-collective passage. There’s not only the evasive approach of guerrilla warfare, but also the open possibilities of how collective life would be organized after victory. For a number of years that was still open.

MR V: Two things: what was up for grabs in Cuba was hardly at the meso-level. It was society-wide, a full revolution not just a dimension of social organization changed here or there. I know we spoke quite a bit earlier about that, but I never really got it straight in my head, since you put so much emphasis on trying to focus on movements working at the meso-level. Second, by the early 60s the possibilities of remaking that future closed as Fidel and company moved into the Soviet sphere.

LATHAM: There is no reason that a full-on revolutionary mobilization to change the organization of a society would not count as a re-collective passage, as long as there is evasion, deflection, and re-collection. It doesn’t matter if a lot of social

65 This assessment refers to the transnational advocacy efforts around the right of return, not the Palestinian movement in general.
and political organizational transformation is at stake. I’ve emphasized the meso-level to emphasize that we don’t have to focus only on macro social revolution as the way forward; and because I wanted to establish a continuum of movements, around the distinct elements of evasion, deflection, and re-collection – all set against a world of deployments. So, at one end of this continuum sits full social revolution. As to the Cuban revolutionaries closing off re-collective possibilities, I would say that means they stepped outside of re-collective passage.

MR V: Oh, so this is something you can get on or off, like a bus?

_I laughed quite a bit and then said:_

Very funny! I guess achieving state power means putting re-collective openness at risk even if it’s a Leftist revolution. Any re-collective passage can come to an end – as I just argued regarding religion-based movements.

MR V: When you achieve state power you must put things in order, so to speak. Otherwise, who’s going to have any structures of power to evade!

_Lifting my eyebrows and smiling I said:_

A clever point, indeed! No, really, the question is: can we devise models of the state that allow for re-collective passage.

MR V: It’s not clear to me what that might even mean, but all this reminds me of Arendt and her _On Revolution_, where she argued that the hope for freedom and political justice lies with the specific spaces of political participation; in things like the worker councils that sprung up in the Russian Revolution or the popular societies that arose in localities during the French Revolution.69 I took this to mean somehow these should become part of political life; maybe not the state per se, but part of the overall polity.

LATHAM: I also see the overlap. There is a distinction to be made, however; and that’s about how, despite this very progressive stance about participation and world-making by members of a polity, Arendt was sort of institutionally conservative. I mean she assumed state and society as they had developed; she didn’t push on new ways to conceive these. And she’s been criticized for treating politics as a sort of lofty thing away from the everyday problems of economic and material life.70 It’s not the time or place to get into it, but Henri Lefebvre pointed to the movements for self-management and governance called _autogestión_, especially among workers or local communities. What I say about re-collective

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passage is quite consistent with his thinking and I believe it offers something that feels more organic than Arendt.\textsuperscript{71}

MR V: Have you considered that there may be no other way forward than the sort of realism Arendt presupposed, given what the state is, to say nothing of capitalism? Just before, you basically made the same point.

LATHAM: Yes, I did. Don’t get me wrong I really like the emphasis Arendt was making. She was sort of blurring the distinction between civil and political society, where organized social groups were political actors, part of the polity, the republic. It reminds me a bit of Gramsci and I’ve always thought she could have really engaged him.\textsuperscript{72}

MR V: Look, there are just a few minutes left so I don’t want to spend it beginning a lengthy and convoluted discussion about hegemony.

LATHAM: Nor do I. But I do want to suggest that we can take something from Gramsci’s notion of the integral or extended state.\textsuperscript{73} There is his famous formula, political society plus civil society equals the state.\textsuperscript{74} He saw the institutional and cultural life of civil society as a part of a wider conception of the state that was more than what we spoke of last time: the organizational materiality, the deployments, the decision centers, and so on. He was hoping that things like worker councils could become significant forces to join with the Communist Party; to become part of the party; a broader party that would become the state.\textsuperscript{75}

MR V: A party state? I think that was tried with not much success.

LATHAM: You are only partly right. He was hoping the broader play of forces would include what he saw as civil society organizations like worker or factory councils. The intended mix is not what we would recognize as a political party. There are similarities to what Arendt was after, except in his case civil society would govern economic relations. The problem is Gramsci just did not go far enough because he relied way too much on the party concept even if in quite


\textsuperscript{72} I am clearly glossing over very complex issues within the literature on civil society. A very useful place to start considering those is Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, \textit{Civil Society and Political Theory}, (Cambridge, MA, US: The MIT Press, 1994).

\textsuperscript{73} Clearly Lefebvre did as well, as he tried to reframe what the state could be. See Henri Lefebvre, \textit{State, Space, World: Selected Essays}, (Ed.), Neil Brenner (Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).


\textsuperscript{75} My thinking here is influenced by Anne Showstack Sassoon, \textit{Gramsci’s Politics}, (Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
different form. That kept him locked in closer to something that still looks like a state to us.76

MR V: So, we are still stuck with either a state that coopts civil society or no state.

LATHAM: No, I think we can just push a bit past where Gramsci left it to try to look to ways that the very concept of the state would be re-collectivized. He wanted a new state for sure: a proletarian state that would look quite different than the bourgeois one. But with the Communist Party hanging there as the central and permanent force he constrained things. Why not see the state rather as a particular moment or state of collectivity; a collectivity that is organized along socialist lines but still understood as a point in passage, with transformation driven by various parts and dimensions of civil society, able to challenge it all along the way, in re-collective passage?77

MR V: Well, at least you are being intellectually honest here in recognizing that once you start talking about how to organize, say, a national society or territory, or try to find relations between popular or local organizations, there is, somewhere, lurking a state.

LATHAM: David Harvey leveled exactly that criticism at the attempts by some Anarchists like Murray Bookchin to devise forms of confederation between local non-state political forms. Once you start looking to put a scaled-up order in place there is a state in formation.78

MR V: I am still dogged by the question of how you guarantee that any sort of civil society or local, popular organizations will be progressive? I can’t help but come back to this point. Gramsci had the party and a proletarian hegemony to rely on. He had an oppressed class to ground this new expanded state. I also suspect once movements are part of the order, your re-collective state, they will no longer be evading; more likely that they’d start seeking ways to secure or sustain their position in power.

LATHAM: I don’t deny these are valid issues. I believe the key to it will be in somehow making passage and re-collectivity constitutional logics of the state; and these would be quite different from the logics of deployments and of centers of power. Don’t forget we started these meetings to think about some ways out from neoliberalism and hyper-security – not to map a blueprint for a new state. For movements to deal with these two forms is already a massive task. I can only suppose that those popular organizations that are Rightist and that qualify as being in re-collective passage and fighting neoliberalism and hyper-security practices will be in short supply. I am not worried that way in the least.

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76 It is for this reason that Richard Day ultimately rejects Gramsci’s political proscriptions in *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

77 It’s fair to say that this is what Henri Lefebvre was after.

MR V: I also fear your opening may lead to more neoliberalism and security because the state and the corporations have the resources and power to get behind the civil society organizations that represent them and advance their agendas.\textsuperscript{79} Even if an effort starts out enthusiastically with progressive intentions, it faces being captured, appropriated, or so weakened by countermoves it gets nowhere.\textsuperscript{80} I also fear that all this may play into neoliberal agendas associated with the hollowing out of the state’s public and social service functions.

LATHAM: This dominance and capture is happening under the current organization of state and corporate power. I am talking about working toward another organization. And it’s not about emptying but rather a filling up with all sorts of people’s organizations, councils, and the like: groups that would require ways to evade and deflect even the newly dominating powers that might be quite progressive. As I recall saying at some point, just because you can criticize NGOs for being complicit in power so they can gain funds or access, it doesn’t justify an across the board rejection of the non-state organizations anchored in civil society. Without these forces, what are we left with? The very state and corporations that have taken us where we are today. To assume that all we need to get past all of this is for the state to become truly socialist and operate in the public interest, containing if not breaking corporate power, is to assume away the forms of power we spoke a lot about last time.

MR V: Once again, you’re holding out the elusive and well-worn hope that we can figure out how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the twentieth century.

LATHAM: I just don’t see how to get past the way that states as we know them are organized along the lines we spoke of already. It’s natural to want to get rid of all the private corporations and complicit state officials and state organs and replace them with public institutions, right-minded officials, and real democracy from below; to keep pushing and criticizing in this direction. This was Poulantzas’ last hope. But as long as the state is organized as essentially a colonial form with a center deploying into its national territory, I don’t see how we can avoid the dilemmas we described even for a socialist welfare state. We need to take the duality Poulantzas pointed to and really push our understanding of how not only society-based organization might become powerful, but also how its interaction with the state might become impactful.

MR V: Your Anarchist leanings, of course, bring you to that claim, as do your assumptions about bracketing the center. This, of course, sets the political stage for all this openness, this re-setting of things and passing from one collective form into another. But how do you envision getting to this very different state you imagine when, from what I can see, there is no political center, no ethical core holding this


\textsuperscript{80} This, in retrospect, is a point relevant to anti-austerity movements in Europe.
effort together; there is nothing to ground a commitment to progressive politics and social justice, public good, and so on? We not only have Gramsci’s Marxist proletarian ethic as a potential center: the liberals offer rights; the republicans offer a love of the republic and commonwealth; nationalists, the nation. It wasn’t for nothing Rousseau insisted in The Social Contract on establishing a civil religion.

LATHAM: This is a very familiar criticism of any thinking that might be linked in some way with what is labeled post-structuralism. And it can be applied to Anarchism, which is all too easily seen from outside as just about empty negation of the state. You can find works that deal with this like Critchley’s Infinitely Demanding book.\(^{81}\) For now, let me just ask, why can’t we have a commitment to re-collectivity? Where groups have the social space to confront emerging and existing social orderings and create alternatives? This could be a formidable political ethic without being a center.\(^{82}\)

MR V: You mean suck up the contradiction of pursuing an order that is profoundly weak and prone to its own demise?

LATHAM: I would say that starting from the assumptions I’ve just laid out, at least, is a way forward to contend with the abuses of neoliberalism and hyper-security; and that is what we set out to do. The concept of passage holds out the prospect of leading away from these damaging processes and into another collective form. It raises the question of what kind of state might emerge that is shot through with these passages; a state that is, effectively, composed of passages. Where passage is not just about transitioning from one type of state to another, or even to no state at all, but is about being a varied and multitudinous form that cuts through and across the state. This also to my mind brings us back to the possibility of post-permanence, or a post-permanent state. It may be another way to read Gramsci’s use of the image of various networks of trenches across the political and social fabric.\(^{83}\) In this sense we don’t need to make hard choices between Anarchism and Statism. Instead we can work with the tension between them, in order to fashion some political passage with and through both.

Upon letting out a loud chuckle, Mr V blurted out:

Well, what I was looking for was just some potentially useful and effective policies and practices.

LATHAM: Yes, I likely have over-played the point that the conditions putting both neoliberalism and hyper-security in place are deeper than a matter of policy

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82 We already have a brilliant start in thinking about what a far more open and expansive hegemony might look like in theoretical terms in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London: Verso, 2001).
choices and party platforms. I just think that addressing those conditions should mean we do more than puzzle over the next progressive political-economic idea; that the very existence of the state itself can rest on a great deal of fundamental injustices even if it veers in a progressive direction.

MR V: At the very least I can say I’ve gained an appreciation for that, even if you have not convinced me that the many tensions and dilemmas we’ve hashed out can be dealt with or even overcome.

Mr V looked at his watch and I replied:

I see we are dreadfully past the time we set to depart but I hope this little adventure has not been a waste of time for you.

MR V: I don’t think so, but it may take some time to figure out what I can really take away from this. Even if I haven’t really got what I wanted out of it, I did gain, or maybe regain, a few things to appreciate and look at differently.

After calling over the waiter and quickly paying at the table, we both stood up and started for the door. I said:

This also leaves me with a great deal to think about. I feel we could revisit much of what we spoke of. I know I will for some time.

MR V: You have the luxury of time. I don’t. But I won’t give up thinking whenever I can get a moment about how to contend with what is happening to our political world. I’m not alone in this, not by a long shot. But the pressures around taking any meaningful steps can’t be underestimated.
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