

# Antiacademism as Anticapitalism: The Rise of American Cultural Conservationism

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**It is the opposition to the permanent revolution of capitalism that enacts American conservatism's credibility as an anticapitalist tradition. By contrast, classical American conservatism entrusted industrial capitalism with the revolutionary proclivities it otherwise condemned on social, moral, and religious grounds. The conservationist tradition is, then, conservative in the Marxist sense, despite the misunderstandings such a description inevitably entails. Hence, by opposition, the historical rapprochement and mutual compensation of classical, mercantile American conservatism and the New Left: What classical conservatism repudiated in revolutionary capitalism (the "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions"), the New Left soon made palatable under the guise of "destratification." What the New Left criticized in revolutionary capitalism ("inequalities"), turned out to be a profitable intellectual position posing as 'post-Marxism.' As early as the mid-1980s, the CIA, speaking from its own conservative position, already identified some of the institutional perks of adopting such an intellectual posture.**

## The Geopolitical Metamorphosis of Postmodernity

- In 2011, the CIA released the short research paper "France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals" through the [Freedom of Information Act](#). Produced in 1985, the report recalls the days when "influential intellectual elites listened to and mimicked the thinking and prejudices of *café savants*" (11) and welcomes the increased "bickering between [...] leftist parties" (vi) likely to be caused by the advent of the [New Left](#). The agency's reading of Foucault, Lacan, Barthes, Glucksmann, Althusser and other "thinkers" (1) of the post- or neo-Marxist cultural Left (the quotation marks are the CIA's own) is dismissive, as the authors found that the political disengagement of French intellectuals was unlikely to lead to major resistance to US foreign policy. The CIA's 1985 assessment of the waning phase of poststructuralism in France turned out to be rather accurate, though it failed to predict the poststructuralist tide that was just about to wash across the United States. What the CIA omitted pointing out, perhaps deliberately, was that the normative paradigms of postmodernism (horizontality, hybridization, dehistoricization) provided equally normative paradigms for the neoliberal economic policies that had begun to be implemented from the late 1970s onwards. Simultaneously, and more explicitly, the CIA welcomed the advent of an economically liberal intellectual class in Europe. Arguably, the report's ambiguity on this point hints at the cultural Left's participation in the economic system it so vehemently professed to criticize. I want to argue that the "Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals" provided an interpretation of Neo-Leftist intellectuality that bordered

on the prophetic. Indeed, the economic crisis of 2008 may well prove that the CIA's research paper was even more astute than it seems. As is typical in times of intellectual contrition, gossip has begun to circulate in academic circles. Former White House Chief Strategist Stephen K. Bannon notoriously declared the "deconstruction of the administrative state" a priority of the Trump administration (Bannon), suggesting that the *lingua franca* of poststructuralism has also become that of economic and political deregulation. The compatibility of popular poststructural tropes with authoritarian styles are evident elsewhere, too. According to another prominent narrative, Vladislav Surkov, First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration (1999–2011) and alleged author of several anonymous novels in High Pynchonese, has helped reshape the unabashed avarice of early Putinism into "some sort of postmodern dictatorship that uses the language and institutions of democratic capitalism for authoritarian ends" (Pomerantsev 37). These anecdotes raise several pertinent questions concerning the relation of the philological humanities to current politics. They also call the autonomy of the humanities, or what remains of it, into question. Postmodernism, as a cultural style, promised to curb some of the social inequalities inherent in capitalist societies. Surprisingly, many intellectuals now seem prepared to return to 'pre-postmodern' categories of analysis, for instance by redeploying the discursive category of the 'lie' as an argument of last resort against the purported emergence of a 'post-truth' political culture (de Lagasnerie; Comité invisible 12). This reduction of political discourse to personal intentionality and epistemic legitimacy entails the reappearance of precisely the disciplinary, inquisitorial practices that poststructuralism once set out to undermine. What we need instead is a non-reactionary critique of neoliberalism along with an account of the concrete ideological contents of the New Left within the operations of the neoliberal university. Popular intellectual history has begun to explore the significance of the New Left in contemporary academic culture (for instance, on Derrida and Foucault see Lilla 139–90). This needs to be expanded into a robust critique of neoliberalism's presuppositions and effects in higher education and beyond. In what follows, I will explore the broader institutional significance of the New Left by briefly discussing a trope that has played an important role in neoliberal practices and in poststructuralist thinking: "destratification." My article explores the role destratification plays in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and in contemporary economic theories and politics, proposes a theoretical alternative, and discusses two literary replies to the neoliberal metaphor of 'destratification' by the American writers Wendell Berry and George Oppen. My goal is to produce a convincing explanation for the reappearance of conservative tropes and arguments in much of the contemporary critique of neoliberalism from the radical Left.

## On "Concrete rules of extreme caution"

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- 5 I take Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) to be representative of the thought criticized in the CIA's "Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals." I also take *A Thousand Plateaus* to be a prefiguration of the recent

conservative turn of poststructuralism. The terms at play in *A Thousand Plateaus* are stripped of their concrete referential content to such an extent as to sabotage the purported critical intent of the work. Indeed, even the most anarchist moments in *A Thousand Plateaus* contain conservative elements that point to the importance of self-rule and stratified traditions. Deleuze and Guattari envision a certain amount of political and personal anarchy, which they describe as “destratification” (554), as an escape from the repressive framework of capitalism; yet they also suggest limits to this process, which they ground in a mythical cosmogony. Critics of neoliberalism have pointed out similar procedures under contemporary capitalism: non-productive social orders are broken down to ‘liberate’ productivity and liquidize resources, a process also termed “destratification,” yet capitalism equally relies on self-limitation, such as, in a classic example, the limits to self-interest provided by civil servants putatively devoted to the common good. Roughly, Deleuze and Guattari’s argument can be summed up as follows: having instituted the “Body without Organs” and “Destratification/Deterritorialization” as the twin horizons of liberated political participation, Deleuze and Guattari revert to a cosmogony which declares the “Body without Organs” and “Destratification/Deterritorialization” as the originary states of “The Earth” itself: “This body without organs is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles” (45). This primordial soup, Deleuzian cosmogony has it, was then structured by a process of “stratification” that locked “singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy” (45). Yet Deleuze and Guattari remain elusive as to the concrete historical, local conditions of possibility for the emergence of “strata”:

How could unformed matter, anorganic life, nonhuman becoming, be anything but chaos, pure and simple? Every undertaking of destratification [...] must therefore observe concrete rules of extreme caution: a too sudden destratification may be suicidal, or turn cancerous. (554)

Here, geological matter seems to be subjected to the vicissitudes of common organic life—suicide, cancer. Beyond the essentialization of the emancipatory horizon in *A Thousand Plateaus* as a regressive, yet natural process, the parallelism of “Body without Organs/unstable matters” and “Body with Organs/stratification” ultimately leads to a conservative observation:

You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of signifiante and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it [...]. Mimic the strata. You don’t reach the BwO [Body without Organs], and its plane of consistency, by wildly destratifying. (178)

This is what I want to identify as the conservative basis to poststructuralist thinking. Like many capitalist theories, it resorts to a wholly mythical state of nature to justify both anarchy and stability.

- 8 In a more familiar sociological formulation, the “keeping of small supplies of signifiante,” that is, of meaning, denotes formally and historically capitalism’s

dependency upon anthropological types and cultural forms it is unable to produce, yet relies on in order to function, such as the “small supply” of civil servants who are devoted to the common good rather than to the ideal of privatized, creative-destructive self-interest. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello remark that the critique of the pillaging of those “sediments” or “treasures” that are external to capitalism paradoxically forces the capitalist process to justify itself in terms of the common good: “[W]hen capitalism is obliged to respond positively to the points raised by critique, to try to placate it and maintain the support of its troops, who are in danger of listening to the denunciations, *by the same gesture it incorporates some of the values in whose name it was criticized*” (28, emphasis in original). It is worth noting that the incorporation of critique into the capitalist process, that is, the systematic *commodification* of anticapitalist critique, is historicized in similar ways in Boltanski and Chiapello’s study of the fate of critique under neoliberal rule and in the CIA’s “Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals” research paper. Both point to the demise of what Boltanski and Chiapello call a rigorous *critique sociale*, correlated with the progressive institutionalization of a more voluble *critique artiste* (165–88), as the main operator of political neutralization. In other words, in both accounts viable social criticism gives way to a thoroughly aesthetic critique of metaphorical language. I want to argue that this aesthetic critique in turn contributes to the progressive neoliberalization of all segments of society. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari’s comments on the perils of “wild” destratification falter under the weight of mixed metaphors: While some organisms do indeed “reform each dawn,” this is neither the case for geological formations (“The Earth,” one of the metaphorical “layers” at play in the text), nor for social formations (178). Cornelius Castoriadis notes that such social types as the civil servant and such socioethical forms as mutual aid are precisely “what cannot appear from one day to the next in another culture whose instituted anthropological presuppositions are diametrically opposed.”<sup>[1]</sup> Furthermore, where are the “concrete rules of extreme caution” (Deleuze and Guattari 554) located on Deleuze’s metaphorical continuum that bridges the geological and the organic? Boltanski and Chiapello, Castoriadis, and, more ambiguously, Marx<sup>[2]</sup> argue that rules of self-limitation are the result of sedimented political work: metaphorically, strata are sociality itself, explicitly instituting the value of “small supplies” of “significance” as a means of securing a sustainable, that is, a self-renewing political community (Deleuze and Guattari 178).<sup>[3]</sup> In Deleuze and Guattari’s covert political organon, self-limitation is, then, the only stratum that may not be subjected to destratification: the “concrete rules of extreme caution” and the principle of “stratification” itself are the “small supplies” capitalism cannot produce. Deleuze and Guattari’s “rules of extreme caution” consequently consist of the mere conservation of precisely the socially instituted and socially sanctioned rules of self-conservation they explicitly profess to undermine. The remainder of the text does not give any further instruction as to how, how much, how often, which, when, why, by whom, on whose behalf, on the grounds of which kind of legitimacy, and if at all these “rules of extreme caution” themselves can, should, or must in turn be subjected to “destratification.” There is nothing concrete about *A Thousand Plateaus*’ “concrete rules of extreme caution.” It has abandoned social criticism for metaphor. But that is not to say that its

metaphors are without political implication. *A Thousand Plateaus* can be read as a crypto-conservative work of a type that would come to define the conservatism of the purported 'post-truth' era thirty years later: emptied of all concrete discourse on 'conservation' and its rules, *A Thousand Plateaus* purportedly builds a monument to emancipation, yet does so upon a particularly inflexible, and particularly covert, premise of tradition, conservation, and inherited sociality. It is possible to trace the postmodernist conservatism of the post-truth era back to Derrida, Lyotard, or other postmodern critics of 'truth.' However, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari to show that is not only the dissolution of truth concepts that has led to the post-truth era, but the dissolution of literal language, particularly when it denotes natural phenomena. In what follows, I will suggest that taking the Deleuze-Bannon lineage seriously would enable us to conceive of another antidote to 'post-truth' politics: a political language that is *literal*, rather than truthful, and one linked to conservationism rather than some amorphous conception of conservatism.



High Strip Mining Machinery in Operation near Dunfermline in Fulton County. Fulton County Has Been, and Is, a Center for Strip Mining in the State. By Arthur Greenberg. (public domain, [NAID 552417](#))

## Cultural Conservationism

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There's some dangers to it, yeah. There's danger if you go out on the highway. If you get 125 feet in the air, you might fall and slip. You're dealing with 4,160 volts of electricity all the time. If you don't have a good ground system, you can step right off this floor and you'd be dead. Same way shootin' explosives. Say, they put two thousand pounds of dynamite in a hole, maybe eight, nine inches in diameter, maybe it's seventy feet deep. If you don't get this hole tampered right and this kicks out, instead of goin' vertical it goes horizontal—well hell, I've seen it go seventy-five foot high and the house covered up [...] people [sic]. It still isn't as dangerous as underground. But around the tipples, even in strip mining, the dust is tremendous. These people have to wear inhalators to stay on the job. I do. They can be subjected to black lung. – Bob Sanders, *strip miner*. (Qtd. in Terkel 20)

- 11 To people more directly concerned with environmental degradation than Deleuze and Guattari, destratification has long designated a clearly identifiable industrial technology: surface coal extraction, or strip-mining. Moreover, for a number of local activists such as Berry, opposition to mechanized surface coal extraction is only viable when it is supported by a clear opposition to neoliberal capitalism on the one hand, and to the volubility and restless metaphorical bent of academic commentary on the other hand. Yet why should metaphorical, or deliteralized language be worrisome to anticapitalist conservationists like Berry? It is often seen as a form of resistance. Anthropologist James C. Scott has outlined the value of figurative language, ambiguity, encryption and discursive inconclusiveness, that is, non-literal language, as a form of disguised popular resistance against “the state” (142). Preventively troped language remains illegible to those it is not addressed to, hence granting some degree of safety to its users (see also Graeber 21–37). However, the effectiveness of figurative language is dubious in societies in which the state recruits analysts from the very same institutions that specialize in such language (for the CIA’s recruitment practices at Yale see Saunders, esp. 189–201, and Winks, *passim*). As the CIA’s research paper suggests, the deliteralized, post-referential language of poststructuralism did not hinder its ‘legibility’ by the state. Hence, for proponents of political literalism like Berry, preventive encryption through metaphors is not only fussy, it is also useless. On the other hand, some metaphors get used so often that they no longer seem like metaphors at all. Hans Blumenberg has described how large segments of the conceptual index of the Western philosophical tradition remain predicated upon their metaphorical expression. These “absolute metaphors” (the “Naked Truth,” the “Book of Nature” and so on) are entwined with our conceptual, denotative discourse, and we inevitably stumble upon figurative language whenever we wish to revert to “things themselves” (Blumenberg 1–5). I would like to suggest that the process by which a culture attributes legitimacy to figurative language and ‘absolutizes’ metaphors at the cost of literal referents *can* be observed, and can be observed *well* from the vantage point of academic quarrels. The metaphorization and deliteralization of geological terms in *A Thousand Plateaus* is a case in point. While it is *not* impossible to think of “destratification” beyond its use in Deleuze’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, just as it is *not* impossible to think of the Hadean eon of the Earth (4 billion years ago) as something other than a “Body without Organs,” it may possibly become difficult to

do so: “destratification” is not an absolute metaphor, yet business management manuals have recuperated the word<sup>[4]</sup>, and have succeeded in concealing its more literal implications (in order of increasing literality: from ‘de-layering’ hierarchies in the workplace to laying off employees and strip-mining the land). Hence, for political literalists, the critique of metaphors that pose as literal statements—an admittedly endless and epistemologically precarious task—is part of a much more general struggle for a politically referential language. I see Wendell Berry as just such a political literalist. He is representative of a tradition that has attempted to resist the incorporation of its critiques by capital. It does so by insisting on literal language in poetry and political discourse, and by opposing the capitalist processes that subject the language of critique to metaphorization, incorporation, and commodification. This alternate tradition has long taken aim at the historical core of American letters, as this process of metaphorization is as old as the American literary field itself. Emerson’s terse interpretation of the Gospels in “Lord’s Supper” (1832), for instance, laboriously extracted an exclusively figurative reading of the Eucharist in order to effect his resignation as Minister at Boston’s Second Church. This deliteralization of textual matter enabled Emerson to later declare the dematerialization of poetic language as well, as he notes in one of his most candid self-reflexive moments: “every man would be a poet if his intellectual digestion were perfect” (Emerson 18; see Meehan 97–121). In this line of reasoning, food is to feces what thought is to poetry. Against the primacy of the metaphorical enacted by Emerson, more resolutely politicized writers from Peirce<sup>[5]</sup> to the anarchists of the turn of the nineteenth century contended that the preeminent form of poetic literacy consisted in the ability to understand food as food; the “Body of Christ” has never “fed the poor” (Faure 1909, my translation). I will briefly discuss two examples of American, anticapitalist, literalist poetics to exemplify this process, although the American canon is bristling with literalist poetics, from Gertrude Stein’s variations on “by this I mean this” (Stein 513) to Jack London’s insistence on the human body’s ultimate inability to meet the expectation placed upon it by industrialized labor.<sup>[6]</sup> These two examples, Berry and Oppen, suggest ways of responding to the current crisis that are conservationist rather than conservative. When your own metaphors turn against you, a theory of literal language may help to avoid both the cynicism of ‘post-truth’ politics and the despair of regressive discursive categories such as ‘legitimacy.’ Berry’s essays of the 1970s to 1980s explicitly reject strip-mining as an industrial practice and set out to literalize the concrete, material implications of the metaphor of “destratification.” The relationship that links the erosion of local communities, the depletion of top soil, the promotion of the upper tiers of the “at once highly stratified and highly mobile” (Berry, *Unsettling of America* 159) societies of industrial modernity, and the involvement of the “academic upper crust” (167) that provides the latter with legitimacy, is not merely metaphorical; to understand this relationship as one of plain likeness or proximity is to discount the fact that they are linked causally. Indeed, if the soil, the “great connector of lives” (86) (and why should the “rhizome”<sup>[7]</sup> be a more legitimate image?), is sometimes valid “in the cultural sense, as metaphor” and sometimes valuable as a diagnostic instrument with which the health of “communities” or “cultures” (86) can be gauged, it is always vital as a

condition of possibility of life itself. Berry implicates the academic system that emerged from the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 and the delocalized, exploitative scientific dispositions they have encouraged. Stripped of its practical, local ends, higher education predicated the upward mobility of academically trained members of the community—and the downward mobility of those who are not—upon the same quantitative criteria that brought about ever worsening environmental degradation as well as the disintegration of local communities. The accumulation of “irrelevant or frivolous research”<sup>[9]</sup> is an unavoidable byproduct of any sustained scholarly inquiry, yet the preservation of a “communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, reverence, aspiration” (43)<sup>[9]</sup> once made it possible for this communal order to subject the quasi-industrial production of commentary to a qualitative evaluation. Local cultures, in other words, have the capacity to provide a local framework for the critique of the great cultural schemes imposed upon them by the industrial process. Berry hence rephrases the relationship of literature to the community as a “practical necessity,” (43) namely the necessity of maintaining the conditions of possibility of life itself. Causally as well as etymologically, Berry conjures up an accord of agriculture and culture (from ‘cultura’: care, cultivation, husbandry) whose integrity can be tested and “clarified” (56) through the literary tradition. Berry’s discourse on “clarity” entails a conception of political and cultural knowledge that is neither narrowly epistemic nor strictly doxic; a type of knowledge, in other words, that is neither the language of technocracy nor that of opinion-driven populism. Berry criticizes abusive land practices and a certain type of learned volubility because they destroy local communities, which he understands as the cradle of culture and cultivation. He predicates the survival of local cultures not only on literacy and curiosity, but also on the continued presence of an intelligible literary tradition and of intelligible literary statements:

My standpoint here is defined by the assumption that no statement is complete or comprehensible in itself, that in order for a statement to be complete and comprehensible three conditions are required:

1. It must designate its object precisely.
2. Its speaker must stand by it: must believe it, be accountable for it, be willing to act on it.
3. This relation of speaker, word, and object must be conventional; the community must know what it is. (Berry, *Standing by Words* 25)

17 Here, Berry is roughly in line with the definition John Searle gives of the literal: “First, in literal utterances the speaker means what he says; [...] second, in general the literal meaning of a sentence only determines a set of truth conditions relative to a set of background assumptions which are not part of the semantic content of the sentence” (81). The “background assumptions” in Searle’s definition or the conventional “relation of speaker, word, and object” in Berry’s description point towards communally acknowledged, basic dimensions of historical experience. There is no question here of literal utterances also raising truth claims. These conventional background assumptions may indeed be false; they are nevertheless



assumptions based on which a community may decide to act, or hope to survive. Indeed, it is precisely the communal acknowledgement of the background assumptions in literal utterances, rather than these literal utterances themselves, that is at stake here. The communal acknowledgement of background assumptions and the clarification of a communal experience through literal language is hence a powerful instrument of critique, as it makes possible the recognition and clarification of a shared historical experience. Emersonian Self-Reliance, for instance, had a material historical referent which is not only absent from the “the semantic content” (Searle 81) of Emerson’s canonical calls for autonomy and self-rule, but which has also been erased from much of the scholarship on American Romanticism: the appearance of the combine harvester in the United States around 1830, which put an end to the cooperative, neighborly work that had previously been necessary during harvest. The combine harvester provided Emersonian Self-Reliance with a basal socioeconomic background, that is, made self-reliance a practical necessity, rather than an ethical or national ideal (Jones 44–45). More recently, the appearance of mechanized surface coal extraction at the beginning of the twentieth century and the increasing environmental ravages of strip mining from the 1960s onwards (Montrie 17–23) provided Deleuzian “destratification” and managerial ‘de-layering’ with a clearly identifiable industrial correlative. Berry is important in this context because the practice of a poetic of the literal in communal, agrarian segments of American society may preserve this historical referent from erasure. Oppen begins his late poetic cycle *Of Being Numerous* (1968) with a constative statement which prefigures Berry’s insistence on the necessary intelligibility of the literary tradition:

There are things  
We live among ‘and to see them  
Is to know ourselves.’ (163)<sup>[10]</sup>

Oppen attempts to secure his inclusion in the literary tradition as a neo-Whitmanian poet, rather than as a late Imagist or late Communist (and for Oppen, both are categories of literary history). His turn to Whitman presupposes the existence of an intelligible literary tradition, that is, the existence of “things” we may live and find our place among. This does not quite go without saying, for Oppen’s late poetic works emerged after a 25-year hiatus, during which he lived in Mexico, worked for the Communist Party USA, and did not produce any poetry. It is not easy to make a convincing case for the thesis, often latent in Oppen scholarship, that the mere existence of Oppen’s late post-communist poetry may be understood as an implicit profession of faith in mid-century liberalism. I want to argue the contrary, namely that Oppen’s attempt to achieve a place in literary tradition as a neo-Whitmanian “Occurrence, a part/Of an infinite series” coexists with his critique of the overproduction of chatter that is part of democratic liberalism, its “corporations” and its “unmanageable pantheon” (163):

Unable to begin

At the beginning, the fortunate

Find everything already there. They are shoppers,

Choosers, judges; ... And here the brutal

is without issue, a dead end.

They develop

Arguments in order to speak, they become

unreal, unreal, life loses

solidity, loses extent. (170)

- 20 Oppen, like Berry, purports to find a poetic tradition that is “already there,” yet *Of Being Numerous* does not depend on the development of arguments, that is, on the artificial production of legitimacy through the artificial production of commentary, learned or profane. Indeed, *Of Being Numerous* stages itself as a “shipwreck/Of the singular” (166): the cycle disintegrates as a singular poetic statement and ends with a direct quote from a letter of Whitman to his mother, Oppen thus fulfilling the duties outlined in section 16 and giving “birth to his own father” (172). Oppen’s cultural conservatism hence construes the Whitmanian tradition as one that is sufficiently plain and unequivocal as to be approached and furthered without need for scholarly elucidation or comment. *Of Being Numerous* points out that the mere existence of poetry in political contexts that are inhospitable to that which is neither narrowly epistemic, nor strictly doxic, in effect confirms the political value of poetic discourse: While Berry insists on “clarification” as the most precious and exacting form of cultural work, Oppen stresses that the “substantial language/Of clarity, and of respect” (156) that is conserved by the literary tradition can only be recovered if the need for poetic language in democratic societies is acknowledged.<sup>[11]</sup> We can think of Oppen’s recovery of an unequivocal poetic tradition in the terms used by Berry and Searle. Oppen’s “things we live among,” which we must learn to “see” and “know” (163), fulfill a similar function to Searle’s “background assumptions” (81) and Berry’s conditions for “complete and comprehensible” statements (*Standing by Words* 25): they support individual poetic utterances with a communal order of speech and a historical, communally acknowledged frame of reference. In other words, Oppen’s and Berry’s literalist poetics do not per se preclude metaphorical language, complexity, or ambiguity. Rather, they add an element of reflexivity to poetic practice, attempting to salvage the levels of concrete historical experience that are most vulnerable to commodification and oblivion.

## Conservatism and Conservationism

- 22 While the CIA’s research paper “France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals” cynically welcomed the institutional dominance of the post-Marxist Left, it also applauded the public—rather than institutional—success of their books: “an amazing feat in an era when most philosophical works could achieve publication only through the heavily subsidized university press” (8). The paper concludes with a factual observation: “There is no gainsaying that French youth, who once joined every new intellectual fad, now think of careers in science or business” (10). As the *Executive’s Book of Quotations* has it, quoting saxophonist Paul Desmond: “This is

how the world ends, not with a whim, but a banker” (28). Yet it is not entirely surprising that the state and the institutional proponents of neoliberal capitalism would eventually turn against the university and against those academics who outlined what was soon to become one of neoliberalism’s great ideological schemes. Many of the institutional sediments of the liberal university have become the object of systematic monetization, and the exploitation of academic labor, aided by rampant anti-intellectualism, has resulted in the precarization of the work force, particularly in the humanities: “The increase in nondoctoral faculty is stratified by discipline rather than by institution type: Humanities and the fine arts show the most dramatic decline in doctorally degreed faculty, with a mere 55 percent of junior faculty in the humanities holding the Ph.D” (Bousquet 204; see also Modern Language Association 3). There may be a silver lining to some of these developments. The “corporatist demand for increased productivity” placed upon the university, as attacked by Harvard University Press Executive Editor Lindsay Waters (6) and other notable academic pamphleteers, may eventually present a timely opportunity for institutional self-criticism. The rise of American Cultural Conservationism points to several of the critical potentials—as well as several of the critical pitfalls—of this long overdue transformation. The probable reconfiguration of the intellectual field in the coming years and the clarification of political allegiances in the field depend on the continued possibility of exercising academic professions themselves. This does not only involve defending, as a matter of principle, the economic unprofitability of the university in general and of the humanities in particular. What is of equal importance is the belated recognition that the American literary tradition has produced an early response to the advent of poststructuralism, a response whose potential is becoming ever more apparent as poststructuralism crystallizes into an economic and political pattern. In Marxist terms, we can think of the essential difference between classical American conservatism and cultural conservationism as two opposed perspectives on revolutionary politics. Cultural conservationists seem to have developed Marx and Engel’s insight into the bourgeoisie’s “constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production” (38), that is, into capitalism’s essentially revolutionary nature:

Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. (Marx 38–39)

It is this opposition to the permanent revolution of capitalism that enacts American conservationism’s credibility as an anticapitalist tradition. By contrast, classical American conservatism entrusted industrial capitalism with the revolutionary proclivities it otherwise condemned on social, moral, and religious grounds. The conservationist tradition is, then, conservative in the Marxist sense, despite the misunderstandings such a description inevitably entails. Hence, by opposition, the historical rapprochement and mutual compensation of classical, mercantile

American conservatism and the New Left: what classical conservatism repudiated in revolutionary capitalism (the “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions”), the New Left soon made palatable under the guise of “destratification.” What the New Left criticized in revolutionary capitalism (“inequalities”), turned out to be a profitable intellectual position posing as ‘post-Marxism.’ As early as the mid-1980s, the CIA, speaking from its own conservative position, already identified some of the institutional perks of adopting such an intellectual posture.

## Notes

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[1] My translation (Castoriadis 134).

[2] The question here is whether Marx’s definition of the wages of labour in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* is helpful in this context. Is the mere physiological reconstitution of the worker’s ability to work a good indicator of a minimal limit beyond which daily reform and renewal are not secured anymore? Which life expectancy is implied as an objective by this limit? Is the goal of ‘renewal’ met by mere survival? Jean-Claude Milner has brilliantly discussed these questions in *Clartés de tout* (Milner 115–45).

[3] This is where accelerationists see their chance, and hope to strip away this last layer of instituted rules of self-limitation in order to let the capitalist system collapse into itself.

[4] Boltanski and Chiapello discuss a number of examples from the 1990s (73).

[5] Peirce: “[W]e can consequently mean nothing by wine but what has certain effects, direct or indirect, upon our senses; and to talk of something as having all the sensible characters of wine, yet being in reality blood, is senseless jargon” (131).

[6] I am specifically thinking of the descriptions of toil and exhaustion in *Martin Eden*.

[7] Deleuze and Guattari explain in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “[A]ny point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (7).

[8] Berry cites a study from Cornell that discovered that “employed homemakers have less time for housekeeping tasks than non-employed homemakers” (150).

[9] Here, Berry has clearly assimilated the various definitions of culture proposed by critics of technocratic society in the early 1970s, notably Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* (1971) and *Tools for Conviviality* (1973).

[10] Oppen freely adapts from Brumbaugh 85.

[11] I have written at greater length about George Oppen in a forthcoming essay entitled “Possibilities, Responsibilities: On Poetic Genres and Political Poiesis.” Some repetitions in wording and argumentation are unavoidable.

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