

## Heidegger's Hippias: A dissenting voice on the "problem of the subject" in cyberspace

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### **Summary**

This is a deliberately contentious paper about the future of the socio-political sphere in the West based on what we know about its past. I argue that the predominant public discourse in Western countries is best characterised as one of selective forgetfulness; a semi-blissful, amnesiacal state of collective dementia that manifests itself in symbolic idealism: informationalism.

Informationalism is merely the latest form of idealism. It is a lot like religion insofar as it causally relates abstract concepts with reality and, consequently, becomes confused between the two. Historically, this has proven to be a dangerous state of affairs, especially when elites become confused between ideas about how a society *should* work, and the way it actually *does* work. Central to the idealism of the information age, at least in intellectual spheres, is the so-called "problem of the subject".

I argue that the "problem of the subject" is a largely synthetic, destabilising, and ultimately fruitless theoretical abstraction which turns on a synthetically derived, generalised intradiscursive space; existentialist nihilism; and the theoretical baubles of ontological metaphysics. These philosophical aberrations are, in turn, historically concomitant with especially destructive political and social configurations. This paper sketches a theoretical framework for identity formation which rejects the problem of the subject, and proposes potential resources, sources, and strategies with which to engage the idealism that underpins this obfuscating problematic in an age of turbulent social uncertainty.

Quite simply, I turn to history as the source of human identity. While informationalism, like religion, is mostly focused on utopian futures, I assert that history, not the future, holds the solutions for substantive problematics concerning individual and social identities. I argue here that history, language, thought, and identity are indissolubly entangled and so should be understood as such: they are the fundamental parts of 'identities in action'. From this perspective, the 'problem of the subject' becomes less a substantive intellectual problematic and more a theoretical red herring.

# **1. “Could you please direct me to my identity? I seem to have lost it ...”**

The platitudinous construct commonly called the Global Information Society is seemingly devoid of information about precisely what it is. Its constituency is, apparently, the mass of decentred, universal “subjects” who inhabit its digital realms. I am not suggesting that the information society does not exist. It does. It always has. And today, as always, access to what is meant by “the information society” is tightly restricted to an already informed and privileged elite (cf. Graham 1999; Innis 1951; Irving 1998; Schiller 1999). Its most popular and, therefore, profitable products are its fantasies (Graham 1999; Walker 1998; Wasko 1999). Fantasies need fictitious characters, and the universal, “problematic subject” is eminently suited to any of the roles in mythology’s organising narratives: hero, villain, victim, and so on. The information society has, as its means of production and exchange, information and communication technologies (ICTs). It has a social illness that manifests itself in what I call informationalism<sup>1</sup>, the hyperbolic ideology of the so-called information age; an abstraction specific to the emergent form of political economy called ‘hypercapitalism’ (Graham 1999).

The information society is more about administration than emancipation. About one person in a thousand owns a computer and half the world has never made a phone call (Irving 1998). Even fewer have access to the internet (National Office for the Information Economy [NOIE] 1998b; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 1999). Of the small percentage of people who do have access to the internet, less than .05 percent of these use it primarily for commercial purposes (OECD, 1998c; NOIE, 1998b). Despite this, the bulk of national and international monetary exchanges are carried on within the realm of the internets. These exchanges constitute more than 100 times the amount of trade carried on within the physical realm of tangible commodity exchanges (Graham 1998 1999; NOIE 1998b; OECD 1998c; Saul 1997; Thurow 1996). In reality, the organisational advantages of new ICTs advance the interests of the ‘one class ... which enjoys world citizenship –the international investor’ (Griffin Cohen, in Barker 1998). There are no surprises there. We should be used to it. Three forms of organised authoritarianism emerged from the first world war and the depression that followed: Fascism, Stalinism, and whatever it is we are living in, which has evolved into global capitalism; the postmodern, post-Fordist, post-Taylorist, or better, ‘the post-everything society’ (Robinson & Richardson 1999).

Despite its blatant asymmetries, the information society, for some, presents a unique opportunity for global economic and political democratisation which has been fervently propagated by technology industries (eg Witts, 1998); by the Australian Federal Government (NOIE, 1998a); by the multilateral organisations who formulate international policy (OECD, 1999); and by critical theorists (Castells, 1997; Kellner, 1998) and neo-liberal thinkers

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<sup>1</sup> This is a term used by Manuel Castells (1996). However, I have a somewhat different understanding of the word’s meaning than does Castells. He sees it as an emergent paradigm in political economy whereas I see it as dogmatic claptrap (Graham forthcoming).

(Fukuyama 1995; Mulgan, 1997; Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998) alike. A typical example of such hopeful hyperbole comes from the NOIE:

We can *all* choose to participate at our own pace, in our own time, in our own homes, in a truly global economy, a global society. *In the global information economy, no one, no market, no information—nothing we may need or want—is beyond reach.* The information economy opens up to us unprecedented convenience, flexibility, and choice about how Australians will live, learn, work, create, buy and sell (NOIE 1998a: 4 emphasis added).

Of course, this is just an example of propaganda, easily recognisable by its dissociative relationship with reality. Dissociative disorder is a multiple personality disorder - an identity disorder - which usually afflicts individuals who have suffered a long history of traumatic abuse (Canadian Mental Health Association [CMHA] 1999). It seems that societies are also prone to the disease. It often expresses itself as a kind of amnesia in the form of repressed memories which later become manifest in violent or self-destructive behaviours (CMHA 1999). The information age and its informationalism, far from being a democratising moment, may be more realistically characterised as the result of long-term, authoritarian abuse of social identity. Consequently, its societies and their constituents have become dissociative. They are currently in a state of repressed amnesia, but this cannot remain the case for much longer. The result of informationalism's prolonged assault on the identities of individuals is increasingly interdependent, though fragmented and destabilised societies, that struggle against a *tsunami* of propaganda: a destructive wall of intellectual, political, and social violence-by-nonsense that circulates around the globe at the speed of light. The social anomalies associated with this massive wave of institutionalised jiggery-pokery is often rationalised in theories about identity that currently permeate sociology (eg Castells 1996 1997 1998; Giddens 1991), and which turn on the ontological, existentialist problematic called 'the problem of the subject' (cf. Castells 1989 1997; Giddens 1991).

### **A brief history of "the problem"**

Of course, "the problem of the subject" is not specific to the information age. Indeed, it found its roots, like most recurring philosophical problems, in ancient Greece:

The power of abstraction reached new levels when Heraclitus concentrated attention on the knowing of things rather than the thing known. As thought constitutes the thinker it controls phenomena. Since thought controls all things the universe was intelligible. The whole was a perpetual flux of change. The cosmos was the dynamics of existence. Being was a perpetual becoming. In attempting to meet the problem of correlating being and becoming or space and time Parmenides declared the two mutually exclusive and that only being was real. His philosophical absolute was "the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth". (Innis 1951: 111)

To state their positions more succinctly: 'Heraclitus maintained that *everything* changes: Parmenides retorted that *nothing* changes' (Russell 1946: 66). Between them, they delineated the dialectical extremes within which the "problem of the subject" has become manifest: in the

extremes of questions about ontology, the nature of “Being”, or existence, or ‘Existenz’ (Adorno 1973: 110-25). Historically, such arguments tend towards internalist hocus pocus:

The popular success of ontology feeds on an illusion: that the state of the *intentio recta* might simply be chosen by a consciousness full of nominalist and subjective sediments, a consciousness which self-reflection alone has made what it is. But Heidegger, of course, saw through this illusion ... beyond subject and object, beyond concept and entity. Being is the supreme concept –for on the lips of him who says “Being” is the word, not Being itself –and yet it is said to be privileged above all conceptuality, by virtue of moments which the thinker thinks along with the word “Being” and which the abstractly obtained significative unity of the concept does not exhaust. (Adorno 1973: 69)

Adorno’s (1973) thoroughgoing critique of Heidegger’s ontological metaphysics plays itself out back and forth through the Heideggerian concept of a universalised identity –an essentialist, universalised being and becoming of consciousness, elided from the constraints of the social world. Adorno’s argument can be summed up thus: there can be no universal theory of “being” in and of itself because what such a theory posits is, precisely, non-identity. It obscures the role of the social and promotes a specific kind of politics –identity politics (cf. also Kennedy 1998):

Devoid of its otherness, of what it renders extraneous, an existence which thus proclaims itself the criterion of thought will validate its decrees in authoritarian style, as in political practice a dictator validates the ideology of the day. The reduction of thought to the thinkers halts the progress of thought; it brings to a standstill would thought would need to be thought, and what subjectivity would need to live in. As the solid ground of truth, subjectivity is reified ... Thinking becomes what the thinker has been from the start. It becomes tautology, a regressive form of consciousness. (Adorno 1973: 128).

Identity politics - the ontological imperative - is inherently authoritarian precisely because it promotes regression, internalism, subjectivism, and, most importantly, *because it negates the role of society*. It is simplistic because it focuses on the thingliness of people: race, gender, ethnicity. It tries to resolve the tension of the social-individual by smashing the problem into two irreconcilable parts. Identity politics’ current popularity in sociological thought, most well-evidenced by its use and popularity in “Third Way” politics, can be traced back to a cohort I have called Heidegger’s Hippies –the failed, half-hearted, would-be “revolutionaries” of the 60s, an incoherent collection of middle-class, neo-liberal malcontents who got caught up in their own hyperbole, and who are now the administrators of a ‘totally administered’ society in which hyperbole has become both *lingua franca* and world currency (Adorno 1964/1973 1973).

### **The end of politics: “*Au revoir*” to the revolution**

In 1968, police cracked open students’ heads at Berkeley and Chicago. In Paris, 10,000 students fought riot police and lost. Martin Luther King was assassinated. The remaining revolutionaries completely lost their nerve and scattered into the rarified, finely nuanced realms of postmodernism, poststructuralism, social constructivism, neo-marxism, feminism, and other

interest group politics –the politics of identity which are premised on “the problem of the subject”. Today, intellectual and political revolutionaries do not exist, at least not very visibly. Instead, political and intellectual spheres, which at any given time are symmetrical around an historically specific axis of shifting social values, are subsumed under an overarching rationality of market logic and neo-liberal utilitarianism. According to the most authoritarian pronouncements, everyone in Western societies is now a client or a producer of one sort or another. Even prisoners in the West are ludicrously described as “clients” of the prison system<sup>2</sup>, as are the recipients of welfare and other government sector services like mental health care. It is as if they had a choice.

The penetration of market logic into every sphere of human life in the West is a combined function of the West’s social organisation, which includes technology; the symbols that Western societies have historically worshipped; and the way these societies, by which I mean the people who constitute them, have described and understood themselves, the social and material worlds they inhabit, and thus their positions within them.

Societies are rarely described as such these days. They are most usually described as “economies”, and thus as a collection of rational, self-interested economic entities or agents, as defined by neo-liberal/neo-classical political economy (Graham 1999). This is because “the economy” has become the latest symbol of worship in the West. Its God, “The Market”, is an unpredictable, vicious, and moody anthropomorph that was concocted as an explanatory tool some three centuries ago, then personified, deified, and dragged through history, violently kicking and screaming its protests which have so far manifested themselves in serial economic failures; gross economic inequities; frequent social unrest; and in several infamous and ongoing cases, increasingly brutal and unprecedented mass slaughter. People are now “subjects” of the market, its bipolar demands, and *its* dissociative disorders. People, governments, and societies are mere appendages of the global market and must accede to its terms.

Informationalism is the paradigmatic, overarching rationality of “Globalisation”, another God in the pantheon of informationalism. Informationalism, a religion, has its own Holy Trinity: the Free Market, ICTs, and Globalisation (Saul 1997). Its benefits are clear to the faithfully devoted. I have dealt with the circular axioms of informationalism elsewhere (Graham 1998 1999), and so they need not detain us here. Suffice it for me to clarify something. Societies have economies; not vice versa.

Back to politics now.

Politics is dead. This is because there is no dialectic at work in the mainstream of Western political terrain. The dialectic has been replaced with interest group compromises, business demands, market logic, and multilateral policy dictates: consensus politics; identity politics: the “Third Way”. Consequently, democracy in the West is sick - perhaps terminally so. Many of its current socio-political characteristics are not historically unique. But we are warned off history

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<sup>2</sup> It was, however, noted by an influential political scientist at a dinner I attended that clients in the prison system had no ‘exit voice’. Thus, he argued, they may possibly not be considered as economic agents.

because it is a pile of dead facts (Mulgan 1997). In the New World Order of ephemeral identity politics, history is bunk (Hitchens 1999).

### **Idealism, identity, and history**

*“You all remember,” said the controller, in his strong deep voice, “you all remember, I suppose, that beautiful and inspired saying of Our Ford’s: History is bunk. History,” he repeated slowly, “is bunk.”* **Aldous Huxley - Brave New World**

For a short time in recent history, the concept of subjectivity was assumed to be fairly unproblematic (Castells 1997; Giddens 1991; Lash 1990; Vygotsky 1986: chapt. 1). Individuals were assumed to be fairly stable in terms of “who” they were and what they were supposed to “be” (Lash 1990: 10). In itself, the “problem of the subject” is a synthetic fiction. That is, the so-called problem arises because of a theoretical distinction rather than an analytical or substantive one. To put it in Lash’s (1990) words: ‘the discovery of an unconscious level of the instincts under the rational ego leaves space open for, either the Freudian colonization of the ego by reason itself, or the Nietzschean irrationalist celebration of the will to power of the instincts’ (1990: 10). If we take Lash’s assertion seriously<sup>3</sup>, we are led to the conclusion that, by the discovery or inclusion of “instinctual thought” as a new domain in the makeup of human identity, a new space is created within which the cultural sphere can operate to produce either ‘irrationalist *or* rationalist developments’ (1990: 10). I view this as a classic example of idealistic confusion: for the idealist, the material world is a function of conceptual thought: the real is a manifestation of the ideal (Hegel, 1910/1966: 97; cf. also Marx, 1976: 102). Taking this line to its most dogmatic, one is led to the belief that the real should *fit* the ideal: the data must match up with the theory, otherwise the data must be flawed. In any case, pre-conceptual thought is not a social consideration. It is not socially accessible.

The definition of “unconscious thought” precisely negates its usefulness for sociology. By theoretically prising open the human individual and inserting a new, theoretically contrived space, theoretical and logical difficulties naturally ensue. These are not easily addressed other than on their own terms: that is, theoretically and logically. The first difficulty is that we must construe a wholly mechanical connection between this “new” intradiscursive space and the socialised individual’s identity. If one is not the other, then they must somehow be “connected”. Consequently, we must then say - or rather theorise - how this analytically exclusive space is filled and incorporated over time into the development of “unstable” individual identities. By maintaining that the “problem of the subject” is largely theoretical, I do not wish to dismiss it. Indeed, there is an abundance of evidence that supports the existence of an unconscious “I” (Jung 1968: 46-54). But, precisely because of what it is (and is not), it defies sociological analysis. However, I argue here that a *sociological* approach that emphasises the role of language, history, and social context in identity formation is essential in understanding how the theoretical confusion about subjectivity has become such a widespread intellectual barrier to understanding the socially constituted nature of persons from the tension that naturally arises between structure and agency (Roseberry 1989). Furthermore, I argue that the unconscious “I”

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<sup>3</sup> Lash recognises that postmodernism problematises the issue and it is not clear whether he, himself, takes this assertion seriously in terms of its substantive implications.

is as much a social, processual, objective phenomenon as conscious thought itself. The problem I identify here is especially significant in the so-called Information Age, an age of publicly valorised, narcissistic self-interest; an age of rampant idealism.

### **Language, thought, society, and identity: The socio-historical, material individual**

To circumvent a long theoretical discussion, I define human identity as a function of language:

*in the network of linguistic interactions in which we move, we maintain an ongoing descriptive recursion which we call the “I”. It enables us to conserve our linguistic operational coherence and our adaptation in the domain of language (Maturana & Varela 1987: 231).*

Here, Maturana and Varela describe the autopoietic - or *self*-producing - role of human language. Language is the specifically human, fundamental social resource with which people describe their own observations of their own ‘sociocognitive’ environments (Graham, 1999). Language is a material social practice, and people describe themselves materially in many ways, but social understandings of these are all mediated in the environment of language (Graham & McKenna in press).

Autopoietic systems are self-producing, cognitive systems ‘defined as unities through the basic circularity of *their* production of *their* components’ (Maturana & Varela 1980: xiv). Maturana and Varela point out that ‘purpose, function or goal are unnecessary and misleading’ concepts when classifying a system as self-producing, the only consideration being whether or not the system’s internal organisation is oriented to the reproduction of its own unity (Maturana & Varela 1980: xix, 85-86).

Identities, when viewed as a set of ongoing, recursive self-descriptions, are defined from a certain perspective: that of the human individual or identity itself. Here, a further distinction needs to be unpacked from Maturana and Varela’s assertion about the recursive “I” of human identity. The human identity is also an *observer* that distinguishes other identities from their environmental background. These distinctions - or cognitions - are also a function of language. Cognition ‘cannot be broached as a single process’ (Varela 1992: 11). Rather, ‘[w]e are forced to discover regions that interweave in complex manners, and, in the case of humans, that extend beyond the strict confines of the body into the socio-linguistic register’ (1992: 11). Thus, if it is *any* sort of a problem, *identity is a problem of epistemology, not ontology*.

The dialectical tension between individual and social identity becomes problematic only if one is separated from the other. The key point here is that people *and* societies produce their

own domain of problems and actions to be “solved”; this cognitive domain does not exist “out there” in an environment that acts as a landing pad for an organism that somehow drops or is parachuted into the world. Instead, living beings and their worlds of meaning stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or co-determination. Thus what we describe as significant environmental regularities are *not external features that have been internalised* ... Environmental regularities are the

result of a conjoint history, a congruence which unfolds from a long history of co-determination. (Varela 1992: 14)

In other words, subjectivity is objectively constituted. Humans have an emergent, continually developing identity, a linguistically mediated cognitive construct - an historical series of knowings, learnings, and doings - that recursively emerge from the relationship between a socially embedded individual and her or his social and physical environments over the history of their life. Thus, the individual participates in the 'sociocognitive metabolism' which is 'the entire network of interactions and processes through which people produce socially significant, socially exchangeable meaning' (Graham 1999).

The sociocognitive metabolism is the *processual* domain in which the dialectical tension between idealism and materialism emerges. Because distinctions, or cognitions, are linguistically mediated for people, ever since Plato wrote, people have been confusing *concepts*, which are a feature of the sociocognitive domain, with *things* – the socio-historically specific, material origins of concepts which are external to people's cognitive domains.

Without engaging this dense subject any further, suffice it to say here that both thought and language are meaning-making resources for human beings. However, *from a sociological perspective, thought and language are analytically inseparable because one cannot be expressed without the other. Thus, each also presumes the existence of the other.*

Herein lies the link between language, identity, and meaning: People are, invariably, socially and materially embedded and constituted. Thus their ontogenesis is embedded and constituted in objective circumstances. Their identities are produced and reproduced in interrelated social environments. Social environments, which are necessarily *material* environments, also stand in objective *interdiscursive* relationships with each other. Within these environments, which are themselves self-producing and reproducing social entities - or autopoietic identities - individuals learn, develop, and construct discursive relationships between themselves and their world using the intertextual, heteroglossic, discursive, and ideological meaning-making resources provided by the social environments that they inhabit (Fairclough 1992; Graham & McKenna in press; Lemke 1995).

In the socio-historic specificity of the so-called "knowledge economy", the imperative to understand thought and language becomes increasingly important because language is ultimately entangled in the empirical process of distinction - knowledge - regardless of whether the distinction is made about something in a physical *or* a descriptive domain. As such, '[l]anguage *is* practical consciousness', and like consciousness, only operates within a social and environmental context as an historically progressive, 'actual, empirically perceptible process of development' (Marx, 1846/1972: 124).

This being the case, the knowledge economy depends entirely on language, thought, and the technological domains within which socially significant thought and language are produced, hoarded, and exchanged. Thus, it logically follows that identity is an intrinsic product, resource, and value within this emerging economy because it, too, develops in the same framework of "epistemological productivity". As such, identity may become an increasingly destabilised concept for sociology as it becomes an increasing source of wealth for the emergent "knowledge economy". To my mind, this is neither a healthy nor productive state of affairs.



## **Cultural production, culture death, and the identity industry**

Individual and social identities, according to my definition, are a function of a historical series of continually emerging self-descriptions which emerge from a person's dynamic relationships of knowledge with multiple social and material environments. The culture industry is, axiomatically, the industry that produces cultural artefacts for general consumption: it manufactures culture – a social system of self-descriptions, values, and beliefs (Graham & McKenna in press). While Murdoch's \$48 billion empire is indisputably big business, it is dwarfed by the Disney corporation:

The total value of the entire South Korea Stock Exchange, the total market value, is now exactly half that of the stock value of the Disney Corporation. This is a level of magnitude between nation state, national economy and corporation, which I find staggering (Walker 1999).

Here, we begin to see the implications of mass-mediated culture. The Information Age is not so much about masses of people engaging in an economy within which information is exchanged. To the contrary, the Information Age is about *increasingly centralised control of the means of cultural production*. This need not imply a homogenous ideology. Centralisation of media infrastructure has marched hand in hand with increased diversity of media products throughout the twentieth century: 'divide and conquer' seems to be the strategy (Tetzlaff 1991).

But hardly anyone besides multinational businesses can engage in the information economy with any effectiveness (Irving 1998). In fact, 99.9 percent of the world's people do not own a computer (Irving 1998). While access to the information economy is restricted, the influence of the culture industries is not. These, too, are a facet of the information age: the culture industries provide centrally manufactured sociocognitive resources from which people draw to describe themselves and their societies, and to which they compare themselves (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno 1944/1998; Lasch 1984).

Media consumption can be viewed from more than one perspective. The linguistic slippage between the terms "product" and "commodity" reveals the paradoxical nature of commodities *tout court*: the word product implies production; the word commodity implies consumption. This is no accident, and it reflects the dual, interdependent nature of production and consumption:

Production is simultaneously consumption as well. It is consumption in a dual form - subjective and objective consumption ... It ... involves consumption of raw material which is absorbed and does not retain its original shape ... Consumption is simultaneously also production, just as in nature the production of a plant involves the consumption of elemental forces and chemical materials. (Marx 1970: 195-196)

The argument Marx develops here is linked to a more universal assertion: the axiomatic necessity of production as a means of survival and self-renewal for people - indeed, for any living thing (1970, pp. 195-199). Each act of consumption produces a need for further production, and vice-versa. Simultaneously, consumptive needs create imperatives for production:

It is only consumption that consummates the process of production, since consumption completes the product as a product by destroying it, by consuming its independent concrete form. ... Production, on the other hand, produces consumption by creating a definite mode of consumption'. (1970: 198).

When seen as such, the process of consumption is *necessarily* constitutive of identity because by consuming a product, the consumer 'returns again to the point of departure' as an 'individual who reproduces himself [*sic*]' through further acts of production and consumption (1970: 199). This perspective is most apparent when one considers Marx's axiomatic, but paradoxical assertion that '[p]roduction not only provides the material to satisfy a need, but it also provides the need for the material' (1970: 197).

Consumption, then, is a form of destruction: what is consumed is destroyed. But this is not obviously the case in the Information Age. When an individual consumes information, the information *itself* is not destroyed, it only becomes "old" and, therefore, non-information for the "informed". Thus, in an information economy, the constant need for "new" information is also the need for "new" identity resources: new resources for new self-descriptions. The globalised culture industries continually produce, and therefore continually destroy, "globalised" cultures. Because language, the coordinating artefact of human societies, is now most widely exchanged in the digital realm of communication technologies, identity may be viewed as both an object of production and consumption. Each new set of manufactured and distributed self-descriptions, for the emotionally charged, identity hungry populus, replaces previous "old" ones. It does not matter that mass culture produces a sort of reactionary or affirming conformism. As ever, conformism 'means nothing more than "sociality"' (Gramsci, 1985: 124). Of course conformism 'does not mean that one cannot form a personality or be original' (1985: 124). But what informationalism does is provide cheap resources for identity and today, people can 'be original and have a personality on the cheap' (1985: 124): a disposable identity.

History, then, has indeed become Huxlean 'bunk', and the 'hedonistic nihilism of Huxley still beckons toward a painless, amusement-sodden and stress-free consensus' (Hitchens 1999). Of course, there is another reason not to look at history. Apart from its putative irrelevance and the "fact", according to the likes of Fukuyama (1995), that history has already ended, the present, when placed in an historical context, is utterly terrifying: A communications revolution; rampant idealism; a global recession; historically unprecedented inequality; nationalist backlashes throughout the world as a result of multinational extortion; the push throughout the developed world for a consensual Third Way between Socialism and Neo-Classic Liberalism; and a dogged refusal to acknowledge the negative effects of these combined conditions engender a blind optimistic faith in speculative economic activity and managerialist values.

I am not only describing the current socio-political milieu, these conditions prevailed throughout the developed world in the 1920s and 30s. The horrors of Fascism and Stalinism emerged from these conditions less than a century ago, and *nobody seems to remember*. History, indeed, is bunk.

## **History, existentialism, and the case of the disappearing identity**

Societies should get worried when Wagner's music becomes popular because it usually means that distorted interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy are not far away. Existentialists create problems about what *is*, especially identity (Heidegger 1947). Existentialism inevitably leads to an authoritarian worldview:

this, my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of twofold voluptuous delight, my "beyond good and evil," without a goal, unless the joy of the circle itself is a goal; without will, unless a ring feels good will towards itself – do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* to all its riddles? A *light* for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? – *This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides! (Nietzsche 1967/1997).

Armed with a volume of Nietzsche, some considerable oratory skills, several Wagner records, and an existentialist University Rector in the form of Martin Heidegger, Hitler managed some truly astounding feats of strategic identity engineering (cf. Bullock, 1991). Upon being appointed to the Freiberg University, Heidegger pronounced the end of thought, history, ideology, and civilisation: 'No dogmas and ideas will any longer be the laws of your being. The Fuhrer himself, and he alone, is the present and future reality for Germany' (in Bullock 1991: 345). Heidegger signed up to an ideology-free politics: Hitler's 'Third Way' (Eatwell 1997).

The idealised identity, the new symbol of mythological worship, Nietzsche's European Superman, was to rule from that day hence. Hitler took control of the means of propaganda: the media; the means of mental production: the education system; the means of violence: the police, army, and prison system; and pandered to the means of material production: industry and agriculture; and proclaimed a New beginning and a New world order. He ordered Germany to look forward into the next thousand years and *forget* the past. Heidegger and existentialism remain influential to this day, and *history remains bunk* (e.g. Giddens<sup>4</sup>, 1991, Chapt. 2).

Giddens's claims that 'humans live in circumstances of ... *existential contradiction*', and that 'subjective death' and 'biological death' are somehow unrelated, is an ultimately repressive abstraction: from that perspective, life is merely a series of subjective deaths, as if death were the ultimate motor of life itself (cf. Adorno 1964/1973).

History is, in fact, the simple and straightforward answer to the "problem of the subject". "The problem" is also a handy device for confusing, entertaining, and selling trash to the masses. By emphasising the problem of the 'ontological self' (Giddens 1991: 49), informationalism and 'consumerism' confines the navel-gazing, 'narcissistic' masses to a permanent present which they self-consciously sacrifice for a Utopian future (cf. Adorno 1973: 303; Hitchens 1999; Lasch 1984: 25-59). Meanwhile transnational businesses go about their work, raping the environment; swindling each other and whole nations; and inflicting populations with declining

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<sup>4</sup> I note here that, although I criticise the existentialist aspects of Giddens's (1991) and Castells's (1989 1996 1997 1998) work, I agree with many of their theses and conclusions.

wages, declining working conditions, and declining social security. Slavery is once again on the increase (Castells, 1998; Graham, 1999; ILO, 1998).

There is no “problem of the subject”, just as there is no “global society”; there is only the mass amnesia of utopian propaganda, the strains of which have historically accompanied revolutions in communication technologies. Each person’s identity is, quite simply, their subjective account of a unique and objective history of interactions within the objective social and material environments they inhabit, create, and inherit. The identity of each person is their most intimate historical information, and they are its material expression: each person is a record of their own history at any given time. Thus, each person is a recognisably material, identifiable entity: an identity. This is their condition. People are not theoretical entities; they are people. As such, they have an *intrinsic* identity with an *intrinsic value*. No amount of theory or propaganda will make it go away.

The widespread multilateral attempts to prop up consumer society and hypercapitalism as a valid and useful means of sustainable growth, indeed, as the path to an inevitable, international democratic Utopia, are already showing their disastrous cracks. The “problem” of subjective death threatens to give way, once again, to unprecedented mass slaughter. The numbed condition of a narcissistic society, rooted in a permanent “now”, a blissful state of Heideggerian *Dasein*, threatens to wake up to a world in which “subjective death” and ontology are the least of all worries.

### **Did you say Fascism?!**

Yes I did, but please don’t get confused between the philosophical pedigree and underpinnings of fascist thought and, historically speaking, the highly-visible regimes headed by Hitler and Mussolini. While fascism manifested itself in these regimes, their stylistic features remain far more memorable than their philosophical and political underpinnings. This has been a fortunate thing for fascism because, as a philosophical and political model for governance, fascism has flourished - continually rebadged, reclothed, and with increasing strength - ever since it was putatively wiped off the political map in 1945 (Eatwell 1997).

It probably seems a bit cold to characterise the most memorable aspects of of Hitler et al’s regimes as “stylistic features”. After all, millions of people were systematically murdered in cold blood by leather-clad, jackbooted people who were “just following orders”. But at least the trains ran on time.

They were, at their very heart, *efficient and productive* regimes that functioned with an historically odd mixture of consensus, rationality, and emotion. Their rationality manifested itself in extremely efficient economies based on a consensual partnerships between international and national big business and government; through government initiatives to bring industry and its workers “closer together”; and through random acts of violent repression. Their emotionality was concocted within the first electronically mass-mediated propaganda programs the world had ever seen.

After gaining notoriety through violent and polemical action, Hitler’s National Socialists finally managed to sell their Third Way policy through a process of Third Way political reconciliation

(Eatwell 1997: 109). By 1933, Hitler had sold his party as ‘one which could appeal both to those concerned primarily with economics and those who sought a more affective national community’ (Eatwell 1997: 109). This is a familiar sound today.

While fascism presented extremely different faces in Germany, Italy, Britain, France, and Spain, its public philosophies were similar, just as they are today. Its central tenets - ‘the quest for community, the desire to rediscover national identity, and the belief that a new socio-economic order is required’ (1997: 109) - are, today, in evidence throughout the most influential political and academic literature concerning globalisation, information technology, postmodernism, and neo-liberal economics in the West. The term ‘Third Way’, the nominal packaging for Mussolini’s, Hitler’s, Blair’s, Clinton’s, and Latham’s<sup>5</sup> (1998) political agendas, has made an unashamed comeback. Why? More importantly: How?

How could societies that have recorded, filmed, and documented the most violent century in history turn to embrace failed policies, failed philosophies, and terminally flawed perceptions of themselves?

The answer is, of course, mass amnesia. Mass amnesia is a function of propaganda and the absence of healthy public debate (Saul 1997). Its by-product is the numbed consciousness and emotionally charged state of an “informationalised” society. Accompanying this collective insanity is an ethos of professionalism, or managerialism, or something else that has its roots deep in authoritarian logic. The marionette-like monologues by those who valorise “change” as a somehow historically unique paradigm for the West at the end of the twentieth century are driven by a technological determinism that rationalises itself - always in terms of its own choosing and definition - by intellectualising “being” in and of itself. It is an advanced case of dissociative narcissism - a self-reflexive, existentialist malaise of blissful forgetfulness.

I blame it all on Heidegger’s Hippies.

### **Heidegger’s Hippies**

There is no more reason to believe that today’s fascists would appear in jackboots and leather chanting anti-semitic slogans than there is to believe that the Catholic Church would begin another inquisition, or that its priests would once again don hair shirts and begin ritual self-flagellation. Social movements, which are necessarily united by (largely) common philosophies, change - irreversibly - with time. Change is not new. We should remember at least that much as a society.

Also, in hindsight, it might look as if large sections of the Italian and German society all of a sudden became fascists and began to commit atrocities at home and abroad. Of course, this was not the case; it happened by accretion. As with any society, its socio-historic conditions provided the environment in which particular forms of social relations became possible. The people in pre-fascist Germany who embraced Nazism (as distinct, but not separate from pure fascism) were, no doubt, just ordinary, everyday people who, in the face of mass mediated,

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<sup>5</sup> An Australian Labor Party (ALP) aspirant.

ideologically restricted and controlled mass communication campaigns became convinced that what was happening was either inevitable or desirable or both. Those who were critical of the movement either left the country or continued to fight the regime invisibly from behind the lines, as it were. But in a globalised, informationalised world, there is *nothing* “outside”.

Fascist Germany seems an insane proposition to those of us looking back, like an irrational blip in the rational progress of human history. Still, the level of its atrocities, statistically speaking, were dwarfed by Stalin’s efforts. Stalin’s Communism had a lot more in common with fascism and Taylorism than it did with anything to do with anything that Marx or Lenin may have inferred or designed. Indeed, like Germany and Italy, Stalin created ideal conditions for industrial Capitalism: centralised control of the economy by a ruling elite; a repressed working class; minimal intellectual and political dissent; and an ideology of efficient industrial production based on Frederick Winslow Taylor’s science of industrial manufacturing (Bullock 1991).

But stylistically, fascist Germany remains unique in recent history. Its intellectual, political, social, and folk-religious trappings manifested themselves in a powerful and ancient symbolism - drawn in part from Ancient Roman, in part from Norse beliefs - that persists to this day. Fascist symbolism is used in the United States Council for International Business (USCIB), and by the more blatantly neo-fascist movements throughout the world. Its symbolism and emotion propounded an inevitable destiny for the German people, a destiny that Heidegger embraced, philosophised, and propagated.

Heidegger, for me, is an exemplary anti-humanist philosopher. His thought exemplifies the philosophically nihilistic futurism of public amnesia that characterised the social and intellectual milieu of prefascist and fascist Germany.

Heidegger: ‘The history of Being is never past but stands ever before’ (Heidegger 1947: 303). Of course to propound a continual ‘new beginning at an alleged zero point’ is the philosophical flexing of a ‘strenuous forgetfulness’ which is intrinsically sympathetic to ‘barbarism’ (Adorno 1973: 71). This is something else we need to remember in the permanent present of hypercapitalism.

One of Heidegger’s favourite themes was an appeal to a sort of folk religion based on an ethic of Being and work (or more precisely Being *at* work): “even here,” at the stove, in that ordinary place where every thing and every condition, each deed and thought is intimate and commonplace, that is, familiar, “even there” in the sphere of the familiar ... it is the case that “the gods are present” (Heidegger 1947: 303). Just as today, when we are informed that it is through work that we are fulfilled as individuals, that work and individuation are synonymous, the “guests” of Auschwitz were greeted by the hopeful, but ultimately ironical legend that graced its gates: “Arbeit macht Frei”; freedom through work.

Hitler and Heidegger understood the importance of community consciousness - *Volksgemeinschaft* - and knew that faith, will, symbol worship, and mass communication could transform people’s consciousness, especially the young. Education became training; training became oriented towards community spirit (*Volksgemeinschaft*), work experience (*Erlebnis*), and the party line (Bullock 1991: 343-45). No longer would knowledge for its own sake play a

part in German education. Education would mean training for work, and thus for “authentic” citizenship.

Then Leni Reifenstahl and Albert Speer designed the genre and techniques for emotive action films. The first of these had a neat, catchy, Neitzschean theme and title: *The Triumph of the Will*. With such cultural artefacts, Reifenstahl, Speer and Goebbels removed the possibility of critical thought from the public consciousness and replaced it with ‘deeply felt’ symbol worship; ‘myth, ritual, and ceremony’ (1991: 343): propaganda. Hitler called its euphemistic policy language “co-ordination” (1991: 345).

Then he “distanced” himself from the union movement by appropriating May Day, making it a public holiday, and renaming it the Day of *National* Labour. Hitler used the first of these holidays to ‘level outdated class distinctions, end snobbery and the class war, and establish mutual respect between the different groups which made up the nation’ (1991: 347); and, of course, he promised a cure for unemployment. The euphemisms gave way to violent recriminations fairly shortly thereafter. The unemployment problem was also eventually solved, temporarily for some, permanently for most.

The rest is history, and history is bunk.

Today, the class war has once again been “defeated”, or rather, redefined on a global scale. The labour movement, where it still exists, is neutered if not essentially outlawed. Labour no longer has the inalienable right to withdraw itself from production without severe legislative recriminations. In academic and political arenas throughout the West, the formerly well-recognised dialectic between the interests of big business and workers that, for many years, defined the role of government, has been silenced by a babble of Heideggerian *Dasein* – existentialism by any other name. Postmodern neo-liberalism, a sophisticated, obscure, essentially nasty, narcissistic, and selfish worldview, has largely replaced critical thought with the ethic of Heideggerian “authenticity”: a disastrous mixture of work-religion, nihilism, and amnesia. Economic class is thought to be largely anachronistic in this democratised, informationalised, and globalised New World Order. It has given way to “identity politics” an intrinsically alienated and “thingly” form of class consciousness (Kennedy 1998).

Today’s social and intellectual engineers are remnants of the defeated social revolution of the 1950s and 60s. Most of them were hippies once. Some will tell you they were in Paris or Berkeley or Chicago in ’68, just to show you how credible and revolutionary they really are, and to show you, via sophisticated subtext, how pointless revolution is, how all interests can be reconciled by “conciliatory processes” or “healthy dialogue”, and other such platitudinous tripe.

Now they are tenured academics; stockbrokers; Presidents, Premiers, and Prime Ministers; think-tank gurus; business magnates; astrologers; herbalists; vegetarians; feminists of one stripe or another; and so on. They are, without a doubt, “postmodern”. They follow orders because they fear for their well-being and their four-wheel drives. They believe in “conciliatory radicalism”, an oxymoron. They believe in global citizenship, which is also either an oxymoron or a tautology. They believe in reconciling global, binary opposites. They believe in a Third Way.

They are Heidegger’s Hippies.

## **In reality**

Half the world's people have never made a phone call. In reality, the Asian "miracle" wasn't. In reality, the world is worse off now than it was thirty years ago. These are facts of life. Which brings me to another sticky point: fact. Ethics, morality, and social justice are (separate) notions that have buckled under the weight of a consciousness-free, totalitarian work ethic. They have disappeared from the public agenda, except for those who wish to point out that we really can't afford to have any, economically speaking. That's a fact.

Symbol worship has replaced questions of reality, ethics, and beauty. The "problem of the subject" is a dumb issue of ontology that has been settled innumerable times throughout history, both in the East and the West, if I may make the crass distinction. Of course, if we do not look back at history, which gives the clearest view of humanity's progress, then we may not realise this. The various relativisms that plague notions of reality have placed the burden of proof on existence itself - a task that Heidegger kick-started in a (seemingly successful) effort to wipe out public thought in 1933.

In reality, 0.1 percent of the world's people own a computer. If this is the constituency of the global information society, it is a very small society indeed.

But computers, of course, are just a small part of the informationalism story. Multinational companies, especially multinational media companies, are generally much more powerful than nation-states these days –except, perhaps, in the United States where the one is almost indistinguishable from the other. Regardless, business tells government what it should and should not do, and it gets paid good money for its flawed and self-interested advice.

In reality, by 1997, the 358 richest people in the world owned more than the poorest 2.3 billion (Bauman, 1998). The inequality is increasing.

These are not controversial statements, which makes them all the more alarming.

"The market" continues to go about its socially and environmentally destructive work, largely unhindered by any coherent opposition, the remnants of which are either being financially assuaged, intellectually confused, or violently silenced. "Harmony and understanding" are the public order of the day in the information age. Community consciousness in the West is a function of propaganda. Identity is a mere commodity –a "thing". The media fix is the public consciousness in action. It is the symbol worship, the ritual, myth, and ceremony of everyday life at the end of the second Christian millenium.

## **The end**

Informationalism is the child-like state of an unconscious society prone to epileptic fits.

In one hand the petulant, egocentric child holds a Gameboy, in the other, a nuclear triggering device. Everyone knows the child is prone to violent paroxysms and severe delusions. The inevitable outcome is too hard to face, so denial becomes the order of the day. In the meantime, the child is pacified with more entertaining toys in the hope that, one day, it will put down the



trigger and concentrate on wholesome, productive, childish play, and that all will eventually be well.

The most remarkable aspect of the late twentieth century is the widespread celebration of a unified world, especially of a unified Europe. Nietzsche's main political concern, a truly European vision overseen by elite *Übermenschen*, is being realised, at least in theory.

Informationalism, like all previous mythologies - by which I mean overarching social rationalities that have their foundation in myth - is a function of hope and death. It signifies a loss of hope in life and the fear of death combined. As always, it is defined and propagated by a ruling elite that believes in the fundamental inequality of human beings. It is based on the logic of sacred public icons. The Third Way, a disastrous political contrivance based on neo-liberal ideals of how society *should* work, is now entrenched in German (and therefore a "united" Europe), US, Italian, and British public policy (among others) in a revived and cynical attempt to 'reconcile the irreconcilable' (Marx 1976: 98).<sup>6</sup>

Politics has historically been about how people can best live together. Today's politics is not about that. If we allow public institutions, public consciousness, and, therefore, society itself to be manipulated by undemocratic organisations, such as media behemoths and multilateral and transnational organisations, then democracy is doomed to an undemocratic death. If democracy is doomed, then the potential for real equality (as opposed to empty gestures of equivalence) is doomed. If this is destroyed, then politics is dead. Healthy politics is a necessarily violent space (Bewes 1997). But we can choose between different sorts of violence. We can have violent dialectical debate, or violent war. We can have a violent clash of ideas or a violent clash with weapons.

Humans speak. They speak about the realities they inhabit. They will not remain silent about them. If they are temporarily silenced - whether by violence, threats, or intellectual confusion - they will eventually make themselves heard. History show us that this is so. Somewhere, someone must make a choice about when, whether, and how the current political space can be opened up to the public before it is prised open, once again, by mass annihilations.

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<sup>6</sup> Here Marx refers to the political economy of John Stuart Mill whom he saw as trying to theoretically reconcile the interests of labour and Capital.

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