

Teresa Brennan (1952-2003): A Retrospective

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Teresa Brennan's works reviewed in this essay include: *History After Lacan*, Routledge, 1993; *Exhausting Modernity*, Routledge, 2000; *Globalization And Its Terrors*, Routledge, 2003; and *The Transmission of Affect*, Cornell University Press, 2004.

Anti-capitalist critique lends credence to pessimism in this era. Local anti-capitalisms (the Zapatista movement, Brazil's landless worker movement, et al.) seem powerless to halt the triumphant march of capital. Parties calling themselves "Communist," "Socialist," and "Green" are elected to national governments, to no avail—for the policies they enact conform to the neoliberal consensus enforced by global financial elites. Revolt against the Washington Consensus on the scale enacted by Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez merely brings to the world a kinder, gentler form of ...capitalism.

The failure of social movements to halt the destructive march of capital should also be seen as a theoretical failure. Anti-capitalists need to identify the root origins of capital's success in order to avoid the ineffectual tangles with the symptoms of capital's domination that have (so far) meant the replacement of capitalism with more capitalism. One of the most adventurous attempts to identify such root origins can be read in the writings of the late Teresa Brennan.

Brennan, who died in early 2003, wrote about two main theoretical concepts: the "foundational fantasy" and the tendency of capitalism to speed up the production process. Her writing extended to five books. As regards socialist ecology, the most important of these were *Exhausting Modernity* (2000) and *Globalization And Its Terrors* (2003). The focus of these two volumes is an attempt to link the development of capitalism to psychoanalytic concepts largely borrowed from Melanie Klein and her followers. Brennan's writing is bold and full of insights, though very much in the tradition of humanities-department critical theory. Much of Brennan's writing would not appear out of place in journals such as *Critical Inquiry* or *Social Text*, though she brings to such writing a spirit of revolutionary inquiry that would be most unlike that of the career-builders who routinely publish in such places.

The concept she uses most distinctly, the "foundational fantasy," is psychoanalytic. The "foundational fantasy" is derived from the theories of Melanie Klein and refers to the infant's rage at being dependent upon the mother. The foundational fantasy, as Brennan notes at the beginning of *Exhausting Modernity*, is at the root of all human attempts to dominate the world. "The foundational fantasy is the means whereby the human being comes to conceive itself as the source of all intelligence and all agency. It conceives of the other (other people, the world around it) as objects that are there to serve it, to wait upon its needs without making it wait, to gratify it instantly!" Histories such as Merchant's *The Death of Nature* and Leiss's *The Domination of Nature* tell a narrative of the increasing "domination of nature"; Brennan would link the "domination of nature" to the foundational fantasy itself.

Much of Brennan's opus consists of a defense of that link. In Klein, and thus also in Brennan, the foundational fantasy is an expression of the infant's desire to return to the comfort of the (absent) mother. The infant's anxieties at separation from the mother, from the womb and then

from the comforting breast, are mentally transformed into a fantasy of control. Neurosis begins in the infant's hallucination of the absent breast. The hallucination of the breast, imagines Brennan, becomes a form of envy. And envy, the creative force revised through *envidia* (to look askance at, in Latin) desires to possess, dominate, and control the other.

Thus, to Brennan, the foundational fantasy, the infant's objectification of the mother for the purpose of hallucinating control, is the psychological foundation of all (grown-up) human desires to consume, dominate, destroy, and otherwise control the world. This is what makes the foundational fantasy "foundational"—and, for Brennan, it "founds the psyche."

The core of Brennan's *Exhausting Modernity* is an explication of the link between the foundational fantasy and capitalism. For Brennan, "all entities in the natural world are connected energetically," and so there is an "interactive energetic economy" that connects humanity with nature. Within this energetic economy, a complex dynamic informs the creation of the psyche. A simple explanation of this would go as follows: the infant's anxiety about being separated from the mother produces the foundational fantasy. This fantasy can harden, through repression and through inertia, into the ego. For Brennan, capitalism caters to this ego in two ways:

1. Capitalist society is based upon the subject-object division, separating people from each other and from nature while creating a world that is "more and more a world of objects" (or what Theodor Adorno called "the preponderance of the object"). Capitalism makes capital into society's subject. The workers of the world and nature are made into objects of the "economic aggression" of capital.
2. The commodification of nature makes it into an object of gratification, which (due to the speed-up of capitalist time) is used to cater to consumers as an object of immediate gratification. The promise of instant gratification offered by "the vending machine that provides instantly upon the insertion of a coin, the fast-food establishment that promises no delay, the internet connection that promises immediate access" are, for Brennan, all evidence that "the promise of service appeals to a desire for domination and control."

The resultant society that comes out of this ego formation is a society dominated by capital. And capital, as the dominant human product of the spell of the foundational fantasy, consumes, dominates, destroys, and otherwise controls nature and labor. Consumer society consumes capital's products. So capitalism and consumerism are implicated in Brennan's works as extensions of the foundational fantasy.

Brennan's creative twist upon the critique of capitalism is to offer an object-relations psychology of capital and of consumerism, a "Civilization and its Discontents" for our time. Brennan draws a straight line between the fantasy of domination inherent in the foundational fantasy, the budding anxiety of the child toward separation from the mother, and the fantasy of domination that capital exerts over labor and nature, from which it is alienated. Of course, capital cannot quite fully dominate nature or labor according to its whims: the result of its predatory restructuring is the social and ecological dislocation Brennan describes in great detail in *Globalization And Its Terrors*.

Capitalism, for Brennan, stands historically as the development of what she (following Lacan) calls the "ego's era," the period of history stretching from the 17th century to the present day, which is pretty much the capitalist era. Brennan's advocacy of the transcendence of egoism

extends throughout her work: her posthumously-published *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) argues that “understanding the influences to which we are subject in terms of passions and emotions, as well as living attention, means lifting off the burden of the ego’s belief that it is self-contained in terms of the affects it experiences.” Brennan’s idea of the “ego’s era” comes into her writing much earlier, in her 1993 text, *History After Lacan*. But what distinguishes this early book is neither history nor Lacan but an objection to capitalism as a whole. What Brennan really doesn’t approve of in capitalism is its imposition of the “rapid time of modernity” upon the natural rhythms of labor and of nature.

In *Globalization And Its Terrors*, Brennan is explicit about the overall trends of increasing work-time, stress, financial indebtedness, and financial insecurity that burden the residents of the richer nations under capitalism. Since competition is primarily victorious to the extent to that it speeds up production, capitalism must operate at faster and faster rates, exploiting labor and nature past the point at which these two entities can reproduce their conditions of existence. In the earlier *History After Lacan*, Brennan argued that the state is reduced to the role of a collaborator in this process.

As a general principle, and contrary to the roles of subject and exploiter which nourish capital, Brennan recommends a general “alignment with nature,” both in terms of transcending the ego and in terms of the natural rhythm of life as it is being violated by the speeding-up of the capitalist process. Brennan’s “solution” to the dilemma of capitalism’s destructiveness is the sketchiest part of her theory. It involves “the idea of setting political limits on gain” within an economy composed of small businesses—like the utopia of “community-based economics” proposed by the various Green Parties. (To her credit, Brennan also endorses “subsistence economies” as described by Vandana Shiva (and others) in opposition to capitalist exploitation in India (and elsewhere). Brennan divorces her “solution” from the nostrums of “state socialists” while imagining a significant role for small businesses in her utopia, and while employing a vigorous critique of capitalism borrowing heavily from Marx. Her outline of this “solution,” however, sidesteps a central aspect of Marx’s critique of capitalism:

Critics of socialism point out that, as an economic system, it discouraged entrepreneurship and technological creativity. But we should not conclude that the only alternative to uncreative socialism is a process of global exploitation. One can be just as creative, in fact more so, in a local enterprise than one can in a management-constrained multinational. The market, as we noted at the outset, is not the same thing as capitalism. The principal form of market economy that predated capitalism, and might succeed it, had a different relation to space and time. It depended on the regeneration of natural resources close to home. Because of this dependence, it could not exhaust those resources entirely. It had to wait.

There is a confusion of two distinct topics here. First of all, “creativity” is an imperative of the capitalist system, because ceaseless innovation is a byproduct of capitalist competition. *Globalization and its Terrors* itself is full of criticism of the products of this creativity (e.g. genetic engineering); its purpose in Brennan’s utopia is left undiscussed. The pre-capitalist market cannot be accused of, or praised for, creativity in the same way—returning to it would not necessarily be creative (or for that matter, uncreative). Creativity, then, appears here as a loose end.

Moreover, Brennan’s second topic, real-world exploitation, is not necessarily a byproduct of “bigness,” just as ecological sustainability is not necessarily a byproduct of “smallness.” Marx connected exploitation to the market because, for him, the market was the place where the working class, having to sell its labor power in order to survive, was exploited through acts of exchange. The

element of the market that Marx criticized, then, was not the bigness of the businesses using it, but its imperative nature. As Ellen Meiksins Wood once pointed out: “wherever market imperatives regulate the economy and govern social reproduction there will be no escape from exploitation.” Brennan, otherwise a careful reader of Marx, should have addressed this. Perhaps her conservative, Floridian audience was expecting her to endorse “the market” at some point in her narratives, in agreement with their own ideologies. We can see, then, that in the final analysis she gave approval to a utopia that endorsed “small business” while holding out revolution as a sort of “plan B” in case reform doesn’t work.

By the time of publication in 2003 of *Globalization And Its Terrors*, Brennan was convinced that a reversal of course, bringing a “spiritual authority” to power, was necessary for civilization to go from faster to slower times of production. This “spiritual authority” is to have its basis in a “prime directive,” which goes as follows: “We shall not use up nature and humankind at a rate faster than they can replenish themselves and be replenished.”

Brennan’s “spiritual authority” is something she sees as saving civilization from despair over ecological questions: “the prime directive takes our energies and directs them where they should go; instead of flinging them any which way, it concentrates them in those spheres which lead to reversing course, mitigating the destruction of life.” The problem not solved with Brennan’s solution—its incompleteness—is in her inability to say how her “prime directive” can replace market imperatives through mere piecemeal regulation of capitalist egoism and greed. Her creativity in theory is nevertheless to be commended.