

Critical Pedagogy in Hard Times: Utopian Socialist Thought as a Means for  
Rethinking Capitalism within the Classroom

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**Abstract:** Amidst contemporary economic instability, intellectuals and policymakers from diverse ideological backgrounds have called for a restructuring of capitalism's institutional form. Yet this is a long-term project, involving not merely rebuilding the beleaguered financial sector and job creation. It will also involve attitudinal changes with regard to consumption, spending, and debt. In light of this, our society has opened an important intellectual window with regard to how we conceive of the market-driven vicissitudes of capitalism and political science educators have inherited a tremendous pedagogical responsibility in enabling their students to conceptualize such changes. Thoughtful consideration of capitalism's current form, and what may follow it, relies upon our ability get our students to *critically* consider contemporary economic structures.

Yet recent psychological research has documented that, in many instances, what appears to be thoughtful and engaged action actually draws upon long-settled, prior knowledge so routine and scripted that true thinking actually becomes unnecessary. Such "automatic thinking" constitutes an impediment to the contemporary project of devising a more sustainable form of capitalism, and the critical reflection which such a project requires. This paper argues for the importance of exposing students to alien ideas, rooted in these recent insights on the problem of "automatic thinking." Building upon this research and my own classroom experiences, I argue here that utopian socialist thought potentially offers us a way to destabilize and de-center our settled understandings with regard to the proper economic order, an essential starting point to the post-crisis rebuilding.

## **1.1 Introduction: The Onset of “Hard Times” and the Need for Critical Pedagogy**

In early to mid-2007, Americans received their first whiff of the economic “hard times” to come through a series of developments in the sub-prime mortgage markets.<sup>1</sup> While such lending models have always existed, their numbers ballooned in recent years, jumping from 4.5% of new mortgages in 1994 to 20% in 2006 (Bernanke 2008a). These practices were by no means limited to “fringe” outlets operating on the margins of the financial community. Lending giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac had more than \$400 billion wrapped up in the sub-prime markets by 2004, and even corporate mega-giants such as GM and General Electric owned lending houses devoted strictly to the sub-prime market (Muolo and Padilla 2010, x). Roughly 80% of these sub-prime mortgages were adjustable rate mortgages. Nearly without exception, these rates increased sharply in the mid-2000s. This was due to upward adjustments in the Federal Funds rate, and the design of the rates themselves, often structured with initial “teaser” or “interest only” rates which would sharply rise throughout the life of the loan. In addition, shoddy risk assessment, deceptive and predatory lending, declining home-prices, and ill-conceived consumer decisions led to a situation where, by mid-2008, over 25% of sub-prime mortgages were in delinquency (Bernanke 2008b).

As we now know, this boom in sub-prime lending would have serious consequences for the U.S. and global economies. In order to deflect the risk associated with such loans, banks and lending houses bundled the sub-prime products into mortgage-backed securities sold to banks abroad. These complex financial products exposed the entire global financial system to the risk of the sub-prime system, often masked behind an anemic and poorly-regulated credit rating

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<sup>1</sup> Simply put, sub-prime mortgages refer to home loans granted to those that pose a greater credit risk than the borrowers traditionally eligible for such funds.

system. As delinquencies and defaults began to accelerate in the U.S. in the mid-2000s, investors and financial institutions globally would feel the blow-back effects. By 2008, the scale of the secondary effects stemming from the sub-prime housing sector was becoming clear. There would be devastating losses for investors, sharp declines in home values, coupled with stagnation and contraction within the stock market. By one estimate, U.S. household wealth shrunk by roughly \$10 trillion in 2008 (Shinkle 2008). These macro-level shocks resulted in a severe tightening of the access to credit, which affected larger banks such as Citigroup, Wachovia, and Washington Mutual more severely than small regional competitors (Ellis 2008). The larger banks had deeply embedded themselves in sub-prime markets, and as their assets shrank in relation to ballooning high-risk liabilities, we began to speak of a “credit crunch”, then a “credit freeze.” The effects on the credit market led to rising unemployment, as well as unprecedented government bailouts and takeovers of troubled firms. These macro-level economic developments filtered down to the the population in the forms of a precarious financial existence and increased suffering, hardship, and uncertainty. The “great recession”, the most significant economic crisis in the U.S. since its namesake roughly 80 years ago, was upon us.

As with any crisis, there are immediate lessons we might draw. Sub-prime lending is, at best, a mixed blessing. While enabling many more individuals to have access to home ownership and the opportunities which accompany it, the scale and pace at which the lending proceeded, as well as the general recklessness of both lenders and borrowers, created a real financial mess. The rapid contagion with which the sub-prime crisis spread to other sectors of the economy and to other areas of the globe provides a powerful reminder of both the gift and the risk of global economic interdependence. We are, as Kant once said, “inescapably side by side.” Yet the

ongoing economic crisis has produced a broader and less immediate political imperative as well. Things need to change. We cannot reduce the problems we currently encounter to a temporary “blip on the radar screen,” simply awaiting a market correction. Change, that great (and by now, dubious) signpost of contemporary American politics, is the prognosis offered for modern economic ailments from virtually every economic school and every corner of the ideological spectrum.<sup>2</sup> Virtually all agree that “Capitalism—American Style” is in need of some fundamental shoring up or restructuring, and that this unique cluster of institutions, actors, and attitudes may not be a viable vehicle to carry our economic hopes and dreams much further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Contemporary commentators have offered an array of suggestions for reform: establishing robust regulatory agencies and oversight agencies that ensure that complex financial products, such as mortgage-backed securities, are “fit for human consumption” (Bernanke 2008b, Stiglitz 2008); additional regulation for the “shadow banking” industry (Krugman 2008); a partial nationalization of troubled firms within the banking industry (Roubini 2008), a “maximum wage” which would establish a cap on executive salaries (Malone 2009); resolving structural economic imbalances and reforming “largely opaque and highly complex” financial products (Paulson 2010, 439). This list only begins to catalogue the immediate policy suggestions for how we return from the brink of disaster. These recommendations are important.

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<sup>2</sup> A ever-growing spate of scholarly and journalistic work has analyzed the crisis and offered suggestions for how we might reform the American (and by extension, the global) economy. I cannot engage this literature fully here, nor can I offer my own perspective on whose solutions seem most promising. This would be beyond the scope of my expertise and this paper. For the most prominent and insightful works in this regard see Krugman 2008; Shiller 2008; Smick 2008; Sorkin 2009; Cohan 2010; Johnson and Kwak 2010; Kelly 2010; Lowenstein 2010; Paulson 2010; Rivlin 2010;

They flow from astute economic minds and many of these suggestions may become part of the patchwork policy quilt which emerges in response to the crisis.

Yet the economic crisis produces a more profound set of questions than our immediate policy response, questions which bear upon the teaching and learning of political science. What lurks just below the surface of these suggestions are a series of ethically-driven questions regarding the character of contemporary capitalism itself, which we must engage as a society both now and in generations to come. Behind suggestions for regulation and government subsidy lie a more penetrating set of questions regarding the proper role of the state in regulating the economy. Recommendations regarding caps on executive compensation stimulate deeper debates over what *ought* to be the ethical metrics applied when remunerating managerial skill and economic risk. Furthermore such a suggestion ought to foster active reflection upon the ways in which we reconcile corporate hierarchy with our democratic sensibilities, or deal with the increasing fluidity between economic and political power. In all of these discussions, one might likewise consider whether our attitudes towards consumption, economic gratification, debt, and the risks borne by the consumer are practically sustainable or ethically desirable.

The challenges our society faces today are not simply questions of which technocratic “fixes” will get our economy “back on track.” The situation is more complex than this. Rather, the questions we now face involve an assessment of moral responsibility, and a critical and penetrating reflection upon the normative baggage which we have, perhaps unwittingly, embedded within our economic lives. Our intellectual response to the current crisis, if it is to prevent these problems from arising once again, will likely need to be as Solomonic as it will be

Keynesian. In turn, our pedagogical orientation must be critical and reflective, rather than strictly focused upon pragmatic solutions.

With the deeper questions above in mind, I will make a somewhat counter-intuitive argument about the ways that political science pedagogy can help our students understand the contemporary economic crisis. I argue that the starting point should not be the immediate facts, details, and suggested policy responses addressed on the preceding pages or, at least, not strictly this. Such proposals emerge *from* the existing capitalist order, and may be too sufficiently embedded within it to force the critical reflection necessary to create a less volatile and unstable systemic alternative. Furthermore, the uncertainty which characterizes the contemporary crisis pushes us towards an alarmist model of thinking, where we are prone to knee-jerk reactions which shut down sustained, critical reflection. Instead, I suggest that we look at this moment as a unique chance to unsettle our students' preconceived ideas about contemporary capitalism and foster a more expansive exploration of possible alternatives.

In so doing, I will rely upon insights emerging from a strain of psychology known as “cognitive constructivism.” Recent research within this field has documented the prevalence of “automatic thinking” or “mindlessness” as an element of human cognition (Glaser 1984, Piaget 1985, Frewen et al. 2008, Psaltis et al. 2009). In many instances, recent research shows that what first appears to be thoughtful and engaged action actually involves the repetition of long-settled prior ideas. Such statements can be so routine and automatized, “mindless”, that active reflection or the processing of new information may actually become unnecessary. Those operating in this fashion are undergoing more of an automated process than a consciousness-raising intellectual activity. To truly access *new* knowledge and foster a critical sense of oneself and others, recent

research calls upon educators to expose students to those ideas, settings, and perspectives which actively destabilize and de-center their prior understandings (Ruble et al. 1994, Gurin 1999, Gurin et al. 2002, Gurin et al. 2003, Windschitl 2002). Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, whose body of ideas informs much of this research, referred to such situations as “disequilibria,” the state of disjuncture which “force[s] the subject to go beyond his current state and strike out in new directions” (Piaget 1985, 10).

Here, I argue that the contemporary economic crisis creates a moment of disjuncture and disequilibria. Furthermore, this specific moment of rupture can enrich our students’ understanding of the normative and ethical elements packed within a particular form of economic organization.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in addition to “instructing” students with regard to the complex “facts” of the crisis, I suggest a more diffuse approach involving the use of utopian socialist thought. I argue that works of utopian socialist thought, likely alien to most American college students, enable the critical distance necessary to analyze capitalism as “outsiders,” rather than those “within” a capitalist system and presently enduring its painful extremes. In its critical distance, it also opens a space in which far-ranging exploration of alternatives becomes more likely. In particular, I focus on the utopian socialist fiction of Edward Bellamy, and discuss my in-classroom use of the novel *Looking Backward* at various stages within the economic crisis to foster such critical analysis. I close with a discussion on the value of disequilibria in teaching the economic crisis and the responsibilities which economic “hard times” have thrust upon political science educators.

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<sup>3</sup> I should note, the goal is not to foster within students a “rejection” of capitalism. It is only to get them to examine unquestioned assumptions with regard to its acceptability and desirability as a mode of economic, political, and social organization. If a student unquestioningly supportive of capitalism, pauses to critically examine it only to return to supporting it, this would not be a pedagogical “failure.” On the contrary, it would be exactly the sort of reflection this approach attempts to foster. This will become clearer in the explication of Piaget’s theory.



## 2.1 Piaget, Cognitive Constructivism, and the Educational Potential of “Hard Times”

As political science educators, we confront a doubly difficult challenge. On the one hand, we must develop significant expertise in our field, while staying abreast of new developments in our area of study. This alone can be a monumental challenge, particularly in the context of an event like the economic crisis, where complex developments unfold hour by hour. Additionally, however, if we are to communicate these developments effectively and foster intellectual growth among our students, we must understand one of the most complex human mysteries, the question of how we learn and acquire knowledge. The systematic exploration of this question has a rich history across diverse academic disciplines. Attempts to answer this question are obviously far too rich and complex for me to treat them comprehensively here.

Thus, I focus upon one strain of thinking, which I feel yields significant insights in light of the current topic. *Cognitive constructivism*, as initially formulated by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is one attempt to explain the ways in which individuals acquire and adapt knowledge. Piaget’s thinking is complex, multi-layered, controversial, and underwent many shifts throughout his long career.<sup>4</sup> The underlying assumption in cognitive constructivism is that “individuals are actively involved throughout their life in constructing personal meaning from their experiences” (Burden 2000, 469). From this view, “learners actively restructure knowledge in highly individual ways, basing fluid intellectual configurations on existing knowledge, formal instructional experiences, and a host of other influences that mediate understanding” (Windschitl 2002, 140).

For Piaget, a host of innate, social, and contextual features shape an individual’s understanding of concepts and ideas, as well as how he or she will respond to formal instruction

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<sup>4</sup> For studies of Piaget’s life and work, see Pass 2004, Perret-Clermont and Barrelet 2008.

(Piaget 1995 [1975], 838). These variegated experiences manifest themselves in cognitive “**equilibrations**”, our attempts to both apply previously held knowledge as well as change behavior and amend conceptual understandings on the basis of new, more robust knowledge. In seeking knowledge, we begin from a point of “**disequilibrium**”, the state of cognitive disjuncture which “force[s] the subject to go beyond his current state and strike out in new directions” (Piaget 1985, 10).<sup>5</sup> We discard obsolete ideas in favor of newer, more sophisticated understandings (“**accommodation**”). Yet at the same time, we hold fast to those ideals which still help us make sense of the world around us, retaining cognitive legitimacy and authority (“**assimilation**”) (Piaget 1985, Ch. 1). Piaget refers to the subsequent mental and physical processes created through this procedure as “**schemata**.” These categorical organizations of knowledge enable us to both interpret and comprehend the sensory flood of images, ideas, and representations we encounter in our daily lives (Piaget 1995 [1963], 349). Piaget claims that this is the universal process by which cognitive development occurs. Yet this progression happens with a complex social and contextual milieu which explains variations in cognitive development across different individuals.

A number of important insights flow from Piaget’s cognitive model, with significant bearing upon higher education and pedagogical practice generally. The first is that our minds naturally order and balance that which we experience, and actively set about eliminating what we refer to as “cognitive dissonance” through strategies of assimilation or accommodation. In short, we cannot comfortably hold two contradictory ideas or principles simultaneously in the human mind. The very structure of human cognition will eventually push us in the direction of

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<sup>5</sup> Piaget argues that our initial state prior to actively seeking knowledge is one of “profound disequilibria” (1985, 10).

discrediting one idea at the expense of another. In this sense then, “equilibrations” are an essential part of both cognitive development and intellectual maturity, helping us to dispense with prior incomplete understandings. As Windschitl notes, the educational theory which flows from Piaget’s cognitive constructivism is that the “teacher’s task is to help students move from their inaccurate ideas toward conceptions more in consonance with what has been validated by disciplinary communities.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, harmony, balance, consonance and equilibrium play a vital role in how we seek and accumulate knowledge (Piaget 1985, 15). Our minds are constantly seeking to “balance the intellectual books”—seeking to displace or augment shaky, uncertain ideas with those that we hold to be more convincing.

Yet the second insight that flows from Piaget’s model is that a simple dismissal of every element which does not fit within one’s existing schema can actually cripple development and lead to an inability to accommodate or assimilate new ideas and experiences. In this sense then, Piaget noted that “conflict” and “perturbation” are essential to the continued cognitive development of the individual (Piaget 1985, Ch. 1). By now it should be clear that Piaget’s model of cognitive development has a clear analogue which is perhaps more familiar to those of us within political science and political theory—the dialectic. There are clear parallels between Piaget’s notions of cognitive development propelled forward by conflicting cognitive frameworks and the dialectic as employed by Hegel or Marx, which roots the forward motion of history in the clash of competing ideas or socioeconomic relationships. Piaget notes this explicitly when he states that,

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<sup>6</sup>Admittedly, this vision of wide disciplinary agreement seems more attuned to the physical sciences than the social sciences where, as Sir Isaiah Berlin once noted, we encounter “obstinately philosophical questions” which not only fail to yield definitive and uncontroversial answers but also do not offer universally agreed upon evidence or procedures by which to seek answers (1963, 6). I explore this distinction in the pages that follow.

[disequilibrium] is not a situation to be deplored. It does not represent some sort of original sin, the way the contradiction does when certain dialecticians install it at the very heart of intelligence. On the contrary, that states of equilibrium are always transcended is due to something positive: all knowledge brings up new problems just as much as it resolves old ones. (Piaget 1985, 25).

In addition, those aspects which make us call into question our existing modes of knowledge are inherently valuable, even if they do not lead to the displacement or rejection of prior modes of action and thought. Piaget writes, “even if [disequilibrium] only stabilizes that action, enrichment has nevertheless occurred...perturbing elements, and compensatory accommodation to them, engender new knowledge” (Piaget 1985, 25). Thus, by this framework, it is essential that we routinely expose ourselves to those elements which provoke instability with prior held ideas and actions. Conflict and perturbation remain the means by which we transition from a lesser to a more advanced form of knowledge and thought.

Piaget’s work and subsequent re-articulation of his ideas have spawned something of a cottage industry in recent scholarship within educational and developmental psychology. Many researchers initially focused upon the implications of Piaget’s work on cognition and understanding for constructing educational environments conducive to progressive cognitive development (Furth 1970; Schwebel and Raph 1974; Elkind 1976) Such thinking has had a profound effect upon educational practice particularly in Europe, where Piagetian thought has led to greater emphasis on “the importance of taking account of learners’ unique ways of constructing meaning, the relationship between thinking and learning, the nature of developmental stages and the need to match the requirements of any task to the cognitive level of which a learner is capable” (Burden 2000, 469).

Particularly compelling to those within educational psychology are Piaget's ideas regarding the nature of thought and knowledge-acquisition and the implicit dichotomy he sets up between a form of "automatic thinking", relying upon past schemata with little to no accommodation or assimilation, and "mindfulness," a more cognitively rich form of thinking which enables us to amend and alter prior held equilibria (Frewen et al. 2008; Langer 1978; Fiske 1993; Hilton & von Hippel 1996). By extension, educational researchers have turned to the idea of "sociocognitive conflict" as a means to identify the "productive elements in social interaction that lead as a causal mechanism to cognitive developing" (Psaltis et al. 2009, 300). Again turning to practical settings, Windschitl notes that Piagetian and neo-Piagetian ideas have led to the use of "...teaching strategies which involve challenge to, or development of, the initial ideas of the learners and ways of making new ideas accessible to them" as well as "the provision of opportunities to utilize new ideas in a range of contexts" (Windschitl 2002, 140).

Others have used Piaget to argue for the value of diversity in higher education, and as evidence for the value and desirability of policies of affirmative action designed to keep colleges and universities ethnically and racially diverse.<sup>7</sup> Gurin argues that racially and ethnically diverse settings have a much higher probability of exposing students to the types of disequilibrating cognitive settings that Piaget and others have claimed to be essential for knowledge acquisition and engaged thinking (Gurin et al. 2002, 338). Drawing upon the work of Diane Ruble, Gurin argues that the "uncertainty, instability, and possible anxiety" produce cultural and attitudinal difference, which breaks us out of stultifying traditions in which we simply regurgitate previously-held ideas (Gurin et al. 2002, 338). Such situations provide

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<sup>7</sup> See in particular the theoretical and empirical research of Patricia Gurin and her colleagues: Gurin et al. 2002; Gurin 2003; Gurin et al. 2003.

novelty and unfamiliarity due to the transition to a new intellectual environment, opportunities to identify discrepancies between students with distinct pre-college social experiences, [and] diversity as a source of multiple and different perspectives (Gurin et al. 2002, 338).

Gurin and her colleagues extend the argument further to claim that society and even democracy benefit from the types of cognitive advances fostered within diverse post-secondary educational settings, as students understand and experience new social connections, and grow to understand the ways in which their lives are "...necessarily shaped by others" (Gurin et al. 2002, 339).

The Piagetian and neo-Piagetian terrain of disequilibria, exposure to previously alien ideas and experiences as precondition for cultivated thinking in one's political life, offer much promise in thinking about teaching and learning within political science. Furthermore, in relation to the current topic, one's inability to step outside previous modes of thinking could have *critical* implications as we attempt to re-shape capitalist economic relations in the face of the current crisis. If we cannot cultivate a critical orientation in our students, as they face the complexities of the crisis, this failure may hinder our ability as a society to respond to the current deficiencies within the economic system. In particular, "automatic thinking" may constitute a significant obstacle as we rethink capitalist economic attitudes and habits, leading not to fundamental changes in attitudes and institutions, but more of the same.

The insights of cognitive constructivism, both within its abstract formulation and the experimental and empirical applications referenced above, offer a unique perspective upon how we might view the contemporary "hard times." In particular, this strain of thinking enables us to confront the unique challenges of teaching students about consequential and ongoing issues. Within political science, our courses are almost never of dusty, antiquarian interest. They engage concrete contemporary political issues, with important consequences for the lives of our students.

Yet precisely *because* the events which drive these courses are ongoing, we face accompanying challenges. We may feel pressed to present “factual” material at the expense of more abstract explorations. Furthermore, when faced with an ongoing crisis, the immediacy of the event and the tenacious demands of students to have the situation “explained to them” may shut down other potentially rewarding avenues. Conceptual abstraction, critical reflection, and ethically-driven debates may seem, to both the educator and the student, to be frivolous diversions which we should save for another day.<sup>8</sup>

Yet I feel cognitive constructivism pushes us in less immediate pedagogical directions. From this perspective, the crisis we currently endure constitutes a moment of opening, rather than a force which imposes certain constraints upon our teaching. The economic circumstances of the last three years are the very types of unprecedented experiences that break our complacency with the status quo and potentially foster cognitive and intellectual growth. The crisis constitutes a profound moment of disequilibrium, from which we might begin to critically question, interrogate, and re-order our understandings of the capitalist economy. As noted above, many who have applied Piaget to higher education have focused upon fostering “sociocognitive conflict” within these settings. One of the primary focus areas of this research has been the intellectual development that emerges out of new forms of interpersonal social interaction characterized by greater diversity. I agree that greater racial, ethnic, cultural, and sexual diversity can foster the types of disequilibria and intellectual enlargement which Piaget hypothesizes Yet I

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<sup>8</sup> The example that immediately comes to mind for me occurred in a course on International Political Economy in September of 2008. Many of the students had been following developments around the financial firm Lehman Brothers that eventually led to its bankruptcy. We were engrossed in a spirited discussion of the merits of a massive government bailout or partial takeover of the firm, and the likelihood of such action. I attempted to temporarily redirect the discussion to the concept of “moral hazard,” as I felt it would enrich the students' understanding of the issue and the debates. This would occur numerous times throughout the course. Though student evaluations for the course reflected that the students gained much from these interludes, the immediate frustrate at returning to a definitional and conceptual level was clear.

nevertheless feel that this sells the insights of cognitive constructivism somewhat short, focusing only on the social disequilibria and minimizing the contextual.

Cognitive constructivism posits that learning subjects transcend automatic thinking, the repetition of prior knowledge, and gain enlarged intellectual capacities not simply through *social* exposure to diverse *others*. This is but one means by which knowledge acquisition occurs. Rather, Piaget's point is that exposure to diverse *experiences*, whether interpersonal or merely arising out a new set of circumstances, is what generates a desire to move beyond one's existing categories of thought and seek new ways of understanding one's reality. On this basis, the crucial pedagogical insight which one ought to draw is not simply to devise ways by which to expose our students to new voices and identities (though this is no doubt a crucial and enriching part of any contemporary pedagogical mission). Educators must also marshal those events, phenomena, and experiences which are wholly new and alien for the majority of our students.

The current economic crisis is one such example. University students in the United States are unlikely to have ever experienced a large-scale economic crisis.<sup>9</sup> Having never been exposed to the uncertainty caused by an economy which has simply ceased to fulfill its various functions, these students may have never had any reason to question its superiority as a mode of economic organization. We are all likely aware of the types of student responses such an orientation can produce: "Capitalism is the most efficient way to run the economy," or "State planning never works. That's why communism fell and capitalism won." I am not implying students offering such opinions are simply regurgitating information that they heard elsewhere. Nor am I dismissing that our students may have important and thoughtful reasons for holding these views.

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<sup>9</sup>This is of course not including the experiences of certain non-traditional or international students. I am referring here to college-age students who have grown up within the United States.



However, in light of the contemporary experience, such categorical statements may merit further scrutiny. Stylized binary oppositions between “capitalism” and “socialism” become problematic, as no pure form of economic organization exists and to speak in such monolithic terms drastically simplifies the varieties which either system might take. Furthermore, when the economy simply fails to deliver in so many different capacities at once—credit, employment, providing the consumer with information to make economic decisions—we can rightly question its status as the most efficient option available. Lastly, given the massive scale of government involvement as a reaction to the crisis, our students are forced to think about the ways in which significant levels of state control need not be equated with a centrally planned economy.

While these sorts of realizations need not be tantamount to an outright *rejection* of capitalism, they do create problems for existing assumptions and, hopefully, force a more critical and reflective attitude. They send our students scrambling for new ways of making sense of the capitalist economy. In short, they provide students with disequilibrating impetus through which they might enlarge and expand their cognitive and intellectual capacities concerning capitalist economic relations. Enabling students to effectively take hold of this moment of disequilibrium and branch out beyond prior schemata and modes of understanding is the responsibility which economic “hard times” have thrust upon us as educators.

### **3.1 Past (Im)possibilities and Present Potentialities—the Role of Utopian Socialist Thought**

When we move beyond the level of abstraction, utilizing moments such as the economic to critically interrogate the underpinnings of the capitalist economy is a profound pedagogical challenge. At the moment that students are turning to us for guidance and answers, we are denying their impulse towards certainty, propelling them to embrace disequilibrium. Yet there

are good reasons for this. Pragmatic approaches which focus strictly upon immediate policy options risk shutting down this moment of uncertainty. Additionally, pedagogical strategies in which the professor acts as a sounding board for the students' questions about the crisis, seeking simply to "dispense expertise," will likely fail to inspire the type of reflective *internal* questioning by which students actively reshape prior notions or ideas. Rather, the solution lies in creatively structuring texts, exercises, and settings which can *preserve* this moment of flux and enable students to engage with the deeper questions which reside under the surface of the crisis. Admittedly, one could achieve this goal in many different ways. In this section, I focus upon the role of utopian socialist thought as a means to do so.

To clarify at the outset, utopian socialist thought, as I employ it here, refers to a broad set of ideas that originated as a response to the emergence of modern industrial capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This strain of socialism took a different route than the "scientific socialism" which Marx and Engels were developing at the same time. In using the term, I am referring to the socialist tradition associated with the likes of Simon Linguet, Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Robert Owen and the entire tradition of thinkers, literature, and collective communities which followed in their wake. What I am not referring to is the non-utopian insights of late Marx, and those that later sought to implement large-scale state socialist economies in practice.<sup>10</sup> Thus, I am not referring to capitalism's historical opponent in its more familiar form. Utopian socialism's concrete manifestations have only ever been limited to small-scale experiments as the Owenite New Harmony, Indiana or certain elements of the Israeli *kibbutzim*. One would be hard-pressed to call utopian socialism a "challenger" to capitalism, due to the minute scale of its real world

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<sup>10</sup> In such practical settings, the utopian principles which once grounded such regimes are all but absent existing only in "...a recrudescence of futuristic utopian speech on ceremonial occasions" (Manuel and Manuel 1979, 803).

manifestations. Again, the focus is not on cost-benefit pragmatic assessment of real world alternatives. In fact, utopian socialist thought offers such promise in thinking about contemporary capitalism precisely because it avoids such questions. As Manuel and Manuel write, within this strain of utopian thought,

diagnosis of the social ills takes place on the moral and psychological levels, and the demonstration of the cure is on the same plane. Without great interest in or any understanding of the realities of the economic process, this group of utopians focused upon the psychological consequences of the privatization of objects, both persons and things (1979, 557).

Utopianism opens a realm of reflection, moral judgment, and active consideration of the psychosocial impacts which a capitalist society imposes on its members. Students may not ultimately agree with the critical perspective that utopian socialist thought offers of capitalist institutions and attitudes, but the hope is that they pause long enough to *critically engage* elements of capitalist life that they have never actively considered.

Yet the very advantages which make utopian socialist thought a valuable resource also make it challenging terrain for one's students. Such works and ideas are likely unknown to them, embedded in historical debates with which they may have limited to no familiarity. In order to avoid confusion, the professor ought to make clear to the students at the outset why they are reading this work, and the different approaches they can take to the text. This involves not only introductory information on the modern emergence of capitalism, but also exposing students to the historical context of the works which they are reading. It involves teaching students *how* to read such works, which I what I will discuss at the outset. I suggest that there are essentially three ways to for students to approach utopian socialist thought. *First*, one could potentially read utopian socialist thought as a **blueprint** for a new society or form of organization. By this

framework, the text gives us particulars and a concrete vision of a better, or even “perfect”, alternative which overcomes the problematic elements within the existing order. Ideally, though often with varying degrees of clarity, utopian blueprints offer us the concrete steps by which we would transition from one mode of organization to another.

*Secondly*, we could read utopian socialist thought as **an attempt at moral judgment**. Reading utopian socialist thought in this way, we see it less as a “blueprint” and more as an effort to shift our understanding of the contemporary economic form. Through this lens, the author attempts to problematize the current system of economic organization, while showing us that it is only one possible state of affairs, and drawing attention to its contingency and its precarious nature. The author emphasizes to us that things could always be different. The best explanation of how utopian political thought operates in this way comes to us from the late political theorist Judith Shklar.<sup>11</sup> She depicts utopian political thought as

an attack on both the doctrine of original sin, which imposes rigid limits on men’s social potentialities, and on all actual societies which always fall so short of men’s real capacities. The object of these models however, was never to set up the perfect community but simply to bring moral judgment to bear on the social misery to which men have so unnecessarily reduced themselves. For the fault is not in God, fate, or nature but in ourselves—where it will remain. To recognize this, to accept it, to contemplate and to judge: this is the function of utopian political thought (Shklar 1969, 2).

Shklar’s thoughtful discussion of utopian political thought implicitly suggests the liberating possibilities which such works can engender within the classroom. Such works create a space for judgment by forcing us to assess our own role in the prevailing state of affairs, and denying those convenient impulses to attribute blame to circumstances beyond human control.

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<sup>11</sup> Though Shklar’s quote comes from her masterful work on Rousseau, it nevertheless applies to utopian socialist thought as well.

Thus, one of the most valuable elements of reading this strain of socialist thought as a call for moral judgment is its ability to invite reflection upon conceptions of *human nature*. Our understandings of human nature, the potentialities and limitations of mankind, inform our understanding of what is possible with regard to systems of political and economic organization. To be clear, considering economic institutions in light of the human shortcomings is a worthwhile task. History is full of well-intentioned political systems which placed insufficient emphasis on the ability of human beings to adapt and change attitudinally to the demands of the new order. However, appeals to the limitations of human nature can also stultify our ability to think beyond that which actually exists and imaginatively construct normative political conceptions beyond that which exists. If we are engaged in a debate about reforming capitalism's most egregious excesses, and our opponent argues that this system simply flows from what human beings *are*, the space for genuine reflection dramatically shrinks. Appeals to human nature can act as a bludgeon for progressive alternatives, trapping humanity within a status quo characterized by widespread suffering or injustice.

*Third, and lastly*, we can read utopian socialist thought as a **challenge to the reader**. Through this approach, utopian socialist thought is not simply about judging or contemplation. It is about action and human agency. It attempts to jar the reader out of complacency and drive the reader to engage in the existing system and try to change it. It is an attack on the complacency of the reader with the existing system and its shortcomings. This is a more activist reading, frequently found within utopian works which make an effort at mass appeal, such as literature or film. Yet what is important to note here is that the goal is not simply to compel the reader to

individualized moral judgment, though this is likely an aspect of the work, but rather an attempt to drive us towards concerted political action.

Of these three possible modes of reading utopian socialist thought, the most promising for our efforts to teach the economic crisis is as an attempt at moral judgment. Through the depiction of a society so far-removed from our own, utopian socialist thought forces our students to step “outside” of the existing order, and by extension “outside” of the schemata they use to make sense of their economic system. It invites and sustains disequilibria in the sense that the utopian writer “...has the capacity to achieve a measure of distance from the day-to-day controversies of the marketplace and to view the life of his society in light of its manifold possibilities” (Manuel and Manuel 1979, 24). By contrast, reading utopian socialist thought as a blueprint or as a catalyst for action, risk the premature suspension of such disequilibria. Such modes of interpretation ground the discussion in the pragmatic realm of what we can accomplish given the current structure of society. This pushes students away from the more critical and introspective realm where students actively engage the underlying dynamics behind current economic realities, or debate the ethical merits of current economic structures.

Thus, important responsibilities still lay in the hands of the professor assigning such material. It must be made explicit to the student that while reading utopian thought as a “political blueprint” is one possible mode of interpretation, and often the original authorial intent, there exist far richer insights to be gleaned by approaching such work as either a call for moral judgment. In the absence of such careful guidance, such works can actually *reinforce* preexisting schemata in the eyes of the students. Without these important preliminary explanations, reading such odd and fantastical ideas about ideal societies characterized by “perfect” institutions and

citizens may cause students to quickly and instinctively recoil, seeking stability in earlier engrained ideas about human nature, the political potentialities of their own societies, and “natural impulses” of both man and citizen. While such dangers exist, the potential benefit of enabling students’ active and critical reflection upon their previously held schemata is a sufficiently gratifying pedagogical reward.

### **3.2 Utopian Socialist Thought in the Classroom—Practical Considerations**

Thus far, I have laid out a case for the importance of social and contextual “disequilibria” as a means to achieve cognitive and intellectual growth. In addition, I have suggested that the contemporary economic crisis constitutes just such a moment of disequilibria, one which, if utilized effectively, can actually assist students in thinking about systemic transformations which the current situation necessitates. In the preceding section, I have offered an abstract discussion of the ways in which utopian socialist thought, read as a call to moral judgment, offers advantages over alternative modes of “teaching the crisis.” In this final substantive section of the paper, I shall discuss my actual experiences with utopian socialist thought in the classroom, occurring over four semesters and during different stages of the economic crisis. Here, I shall discuss how I integrated this material into the larger course, as well as the insights and benefits it seemed to yield within my students. Lastly, in this section, I will discuss what I consider to be the challenges associated with utilizing this strain of thinking as a means to understand the economic crisis.

From Spring 2009-Spring 2010, I taught four separate sections of an introductory course in political theory at a large state university in the Northeast. Throughout this period, the American economic system groaned and buckled under the stress of the economic crisis and

policymakers desperately tried to prevent the economy's total collapse. With these developments unfolding in American life and deeply affecting my students, I thought it appropriate to focus extensively on political economy in this course. Thus, the entire second half of the course was devoted to competing perspectives on organization of the economy. The course had begun with works by Strauss, Wolin, and Berlin on the purpose of political theory before moving onto an introductory historical survey of Western political thought, beginning with antiquity and leading up through the Enlightenment. The second half of the course opened with foundational works in political economy, beginning with selections from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, followed with a selection of works by Marx and Engels. After an interlude with utopian socialist thought, and the screening of a film on which my students wrote a paper, I closed out the course with the contemporary libertarianism of Nozick, the liberal interventionism of Rawls, as well as perspectives from contemporary critical theory and Post-Marxism. While attempting to situate these works in their immediate context, I also pushed students to recognize their lasting impact—the ways in which these abstract philosophical ideas resonate with our contemporary experience.

Much of the initial focus on political economy, prior to examining utopian socialist thought, involved discussions about the contemporary capitalist economy in which the students live, work, and meet their daily needs. These initial classes served an important function, in that students were forced to reconcile their own economic experience with the philosophical ideal types offered by Marx and Smith. What I pushed them to realize is that no *pure* economic system exists; that virtually any real-world system will incorporate elements of decentralized decision-making by individuals and centralized decision-making by state or corporate authorities. Furthermore, I pushed them to compare theory and practice, targeting potential disjunctures



between the largely hypothetical model offered by prior thinkers and its ultimate realization in practice. Having thought about their own reality, the economic model from which it flows, and the ways in which this model may or may not actually link up with the intentions of its originator, our class could now begin to examine the contentions of utopian socialist thought

As mentioned at the outset, in these courses, I assigned Edward Bellamy's utopian socialist fiction novel, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. In Bellamy's novel, we follow the story of Julian West, an upper-class gentleman living in Boston in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time when his society is struggling with the birth-pangs of industrialized capitalism. While West is intimately aware of the inequality, suffering, and inefficiency associated with economic life in his time, he feels that human beings are incapable of establishing a system which transcends these problems. For him, the world as he knows it in 1887 is the only political, economic and social order of which human beings are capable. Yet, in an extraordinary turn of events, West falls asleep, only to wake up 113 years later. In the care of a kind family named the Leetes, he learns that the Boston of 2000 is a socialist utopia. The state controls all production, commerce, and finance. All individuals serve in a compulsory industrial army for a period of 24 years, collecting a universal share in the gross product of the nation, rather than an individualized wage. Democratic control over one's labor, hour reductions, and a system of non-monetary rewards and adulation have replaced wages as the means to incentivize hard work. An expansive state-funded system of training and education has ensured that talent and tenacity, rather than wealth and status are the means to social betterment. Because of this fundamental restructuring, need, inequality, suffering, even war and criminality have been eradicated in this socialist utopia. While this is a novel about literal *awakening*, it is also a novel about intellectual awakening.

Through his exposure to a future vastly different from his own, West awakens to the fact that his own society, to paraphrase Shklar's earlier comment, had fallen so short of men's real capacities and unnecessarily reduced man to social misery. Beyond the narrative of the novel, this is the realization which Bellamy seeks to instill in his readers. His work implores us to realize that the capitalist society to which he have attached ourselves in only one possible world. Other worlds are possible.

Aside from an initial introductory lecture about the three ways in which we might "read" utopian thought, and Bellamy's purpose in writing the novel, the format of these classes was relatively free-form and discussion-based. Though initially hesitant to introduce the students to complex new material in a way that provides minimal authoritarian direction or guidance, this surprisingly worked quite well within the classroom. We spent several classes working through the text. However, as I suggested before, the purpose was not to assess whether or not Julian West's dream could *replace* the capitalist system as it exists in the U.S. today, or whether such a sweeping set of proposals constituted a potential *solution* to the economic crisis in the United States today. Rather, Bellamy's text served as an excellent foil to both sustain the disequilibria brought about by the economic crisis, and think about the inevitability and desirability of the economic order as it exists in the U.S. today in several respects.

*First*, the story of Julian West is essentially a literary presentation of the disequilibrium the students themselves were experiencing. West was lulled into complacency by an economic system which he thought to be both to be the only possible order, and from which he garnered advantage. Awakening in a new time, he finds himself struggling to adjust to a completely different reality and begins to recognize the cracks in the façade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century economy, a

recognition that was virtually possible while he was imbricated within that order. In the same way, many of these students had taken a stable (if not equitable) economy for granted. An extraordinary chain of events has now forced them to confront its deficiencies and the ways in which they were potentially overly complacent with its stability. Prior schemata and modes of understanding now likely seemed deficient.

Thus, in discussing the novel with my students, I asked at the outset, “Will we look back on the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the same way that West looked back on his time?” This discussion forced students to confront their own *contemporary* experience of contextual disequilibria, yet did so in an analytical way, with a certain measure of distance from their day-to-day experience and the uncertainty which they were suffering in their own lives. The mature and cogent responses which this exercise provoked continually impressed me. Students would admit that while the late 19<sup>th</sup> century’s inadequacies may have been more severe—lack of labor representation, violent strike-breaking, total absence of a social safety net—there are aspects of the contemporary economy which, one day, will seem obsolete to us. Of course, students differed considerably in which aspects they felt would eventually be obsolete, but the point is, it provoked the discussion. Coupling this discussion with the experience of Julian West removed them from the more immediate and non-reflective realm of “what is to be done?” and propelled them into the more imaginative and critical realm of how future generations will critically evaluate our contemporary decisions.

*Secondly*, the narrative of West enabled students to engage in thoughtful reflection regarding the role of the state. In the emergent moments of the economic crisis, I remember a student coming to me to ask whether the proposed government bailouts and partial takeovers

meant “the end of capitalism.” I explained to him that while the capitalist ideal is limited state interference, there are nearly always exceptions to this premise. Only a very rigid interpretation of capitalism would view more expansive government involvement at a time of crisis as “the end” of capitalism. *Looking Backward* provides the educator with a means to demonstrate the wider spectrum of state involvement in the economy, and it does so absent the negative connotations which often accompany “real world examples” of socialism such as the Soviet Union or Cuba. Furthermore, Bellamy’s call for reforms such as universal public education or an expansive network of collective bargaining units foretells later developments in the trajectory of American economic life. Bellamy would certainly see the current status quo with regard to labor or education as a flawed one. Nevertheless, these are planks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist platform that, in some form, subsequently became part of the fabric of American capitalism.

In demonstrating how capitalism, in order to survive, must at times co-opt and incorporate the policy proposals of its challengers, *Looking Backwards* enabled me to loosen students’ tendencies to react to greater state involvement with unreflective shock and alarm. At the very least, they were able to recognize that such changes are not unprecedented and often constitute an attempt to shore up capitalism’s shortcomings rather than its death knell. The fear, often fomented by the most orthodox of neoliberals, is that state involvement in the economy constitutes the certain and unavoidable march towards tyranny. While nearly all of my students considered Bellamy’s proposals for complete state control of the economy to be undesirable, their discussions of when state involvement should occur were thoughtful and sophisticated. In the course of our classes, it became clear that simply arguing that government involvement naturally induced a slide towards oppression would probably not resonate with the class as a

whole. At the very least, one would need to offer further justifications for this view or cite real world examples. Some students grounded their arguments against Bellamy in the philosophical justifications of capitalism given by Smith. Others pointed to the intense debates raging about the American government's response to the crisis as evidence that Bellamy's transition would not and could not be voluntary, as Bellamy had suggested. Rather, initial collectivization and redistribution efforts would almost certainly have to employ a measure of state coercion. While a handful of students found ways to potentially justify a more measured version of Bellamy's suggestions, an overwhelming majority found the likelihood of violence impossible to stomach, rejecting the scheme of centralization he proposed.

The fear I had initially had was that any such debates would generate largely "automatic" responses, to use Piaget's language: students would not engage the substance of the new material and instead resort to prior, internalized ideas regarding the advantages or drawbacks of the American capitalist economy. Yet our discussions, in which students adapted their ideas when challenged and responded to new and unfamiliar arguments, suggest that in this setting, the class was able to at least partially move beyond automatic thinking. Furthermore, I was struck by the concessions and amendments which students were able to make to their own positions in the course of discussion and debate. Only a small handful of students took, and consistently held, positions in a fashion that one could call dogmatic. The introduction of Bellamy's comparatively radical, utopian proposals seemed to soften the ideological divisions in the room, as the stark alternative was no longer the position of one's fellow student. Though ideological difference obviously persisted, the tone of the exchanges seemed less confrontational than I had witnessed even earlier in the very same courses.

*Thirdly*, the classes utilizing Bellamy's text were able to foster an insightful discussion on the nature of incentives and the question of wage inequality in ways that I am not sure would have been possible without a radical utopian proposal to consider. At various stages in the economic crisis, commentators have expressed disdain for gaps between CEO and lower-level pay, or the continuation of executive bonuses despite companies that were barely solvent. The crisis has provoked a sustained look at the structure of wages and benefits in the United States. Particularly on the ideological left, many simply do not like what they see. Yet our discussion in the classroom delved deeper into this question, and travelled beyond the level of the popular debate. Bellamy's more radical proposal forces us to think about the institution of wages itself: Why are we paid a wage? Why are some paid more than others are? Is an alternative form of incentivizing work, one which does not force such a stark level of inequality, possible?

In the course of our discussions, the class frequently returned to questions of wages and incentives. In general, and unsurprisingly, the students felt that wage labor was an institution that was desirable and was probably going to characterize economic life for the near future. Yet students questioned the institutions of wages in ways which I found intriguing. Many cited non-wage elements of their own working lives that problematize notions that they were simply working for a paycheck—the importance of reputation, satisfaction with one's work, commitment to one's fellow employees, non-economic recognition by family, friends, and co-workers. Thus, their rejection of Bellamy's non-wage-based system of incentives and rewards was not indicative of "automatic thinking." I had expected to hear the familiar refrain that "if everyone earns the same, where is the incentive to try harder" and some students did in fact say this. Yet even these students often coupled their rejection with sentiments supportive of and

sympathetic to the viability of non-wage incentives, illuminating the ways in which such structures already exist in their own lives.

Discussion of wages, and the inequality which a wage-based labor system naturally requires, led to a much deeper discussion which tapped into the character of American economic life more generally. In addition to engaging the procedural necessity of wages, students tapped into the *ethos* which drives wages as a structural incentive. I should note, they did so largely without my prodding. Students remarked that many of the contemporary problems associated with the economy were driven by the unrealistic expectations of economic actors. This was a set of expectations which they saw linked to the wage system. For wages to *continue* to be an effective incentive, workers must expect that there is upward mobility. Yet, as we have seen and as my students pointed out, workers often overestimate the degree of upward wage mobility which they as individuals possess. Individuals will even take on debt and financial liability as incentive to work hard and excel. One student, for example, told of how he had bought a brand new car just a few years earlier, despite his limited means to finance it and successfully make his payments. Now, struggling to work full time while going to school, and having already suffered one repossession, he deeply regretted that decision. He admitted he had bought the car for many reasons, but one which he cited resonated with the students and led to further discussion. He thought that a large monthly car payment would “keep him honest”, i.e. keep him a position in which he had to continue working long hours to meet his financial commitments. Our initial foray into the institution of wages, one which I feared would be characterized by hackneyed, unthinking responses had produced critical reflection not only on the institution of wages, but the

larger ethos which drives wages, and for some, *personal* reflection about one's own attitudes towards debt, consumption, and earning potential.

*Fourth, and lastly*, our discussion of Bellamy in the classroom lead to numerous reflections upon the “inevitability” of capitalist structures. At the outset of this section of the course, I would ask students the rather open-ended question, “What do you associate with the word ‘capitalism’?” What was always striking in this exercise were those aspects which students would *not* mention. Frequently, I would hear things like “markets”, “money,” “supply and demand,” “production,” “growth,” and “freedom.” Yet in asking what types of things need to exist in order for capitalism to function, students would often be hard-pressed to flesh out its more concrete features. I had initially thought that perhaps this was indicative of a lack of familiarity. Perhaps students only knew what capitalism was in the vaguest terms, and did not completely understand its internal workings. Yet, as our subsequent discussions seemed to demonstrate, this was not the case. Prior to reading Adam Smith, many of these students already could recite its central premises essentially verbatim. Prior to learning about the way Smith's philosophical ideas played out in practice, students largely already had a sense of what capitalist economic principles looked like in practice—having worked and lived in capitalist society for so long.

As I continued this exercise over several semesters, it became clear that some of the aspects of capitalism which they experienced were so ubiquitous that they encountered them primarily as dimensions of their *lives* rather than specific features performing a *function* within the capitalist economy. The most glaring example I encountered was that of advertising. Through follow-up questions and prodding, I could usually get students past the initial impasse of



attempting to flesh out capitalism's other concrete dimensions—currency, wages, capital, credit, etc. Yet I always found myself struggling to get students to introduce advertising as an important dimension of capitalist economic life. Thankfully, I was working within a large public university that near always had a variety of student-targeted advertising on the wall, enabling me to simply point my finger while asking them to identify the thing at which I was pointing.<sup>12</sup> From there, we would often have quite engaging and enriching discussions about advertising and the ways in which it shapes and drives our economy, and affects our own lives. The problem was not lack of awareness, as it simply impossible to live within American society and not be intimately acquainted with the machinations of advertising. Rather, it was the recognition that advertising is *not* an inherent feature of our lives, and that other realities were possible.

The value of *Looking Backward* in this sense is that it brings those types of destabilizing realizations into sharper relief. The novel shows us that those things which we do not actively reflect upon, that we consider simply “part of the scenery”, perform a function, uphold a purpose, and support a very specific form of economic order. In this sense, Bellamy's novel forces disequilibrium by exposing the contingency of prior modes of understanding the capitalist economy. In fact, Bellamy addresses this very example, advertising, within his novel. Julian West, exploring 21<sup>st</sup> century Boston, is dumbfounded by the lack of advertising, where once billboards and placards had been plastered onto nearly every visible public surface. In the context of the novel, it is no longer necessary. The existence of only one firm, the state, has eliminated competition. The state distributes information about its products within stores according to a very specific and transparent process. However, this is but one example of a

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<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, even this usually required additional prodding as I would explain that while this was in fact a poster, it was also something else.

contemporary reality which we might potentially take for granted which Bellamy draws out into the open. There are numerous others: the behavior of salespeople, the logic of inheritance, our desire for consumer objects, the larger costs behind industrialization, the economic impulse behind specialization, what we ought to consider public goods, or how many years we ought to devote to labor. Again, the value of Bellamy's interjections is to remind students of the ways in which that which we have naturalized and taken for granted is still a product of human agency, something over which we retain control.

Before concluding my discussion of the in-class experience of teaching the economic crisis using utopian socialist thought to teach the economic crisis, I ought to say something about the challenges of this more open-ended form of pedagogy. The pedagogical style which flows from Piaget's insights about disequilibrium and automatic thinking is one content to reside within ambiguity, see intellectual "shades of grey", while enticing students into both internal and interpersonal debate. These types of classroom activities are challenging exercises in which many variables remain beyond the professor's control. Perhaps most importantly, one must remember that critique, as such, is *not* inherently thought-provoking. It too can easily ossify into dogma or simply become a reactive tendency existing only to dismantle prior ideas, without establishing positive alternatives. The professor must take great care in structuring their students' engagement with the material and the text. In particular, one must ensure that actual interpersonal debates and discussion maintain an attitude of scholarly respect, as dogmatism and antagonism will shift the students away from the *content* of the debate to the spectacle of those involved in this contentious debate. Such settings may even have the antithetical effect of sending students, uncomfortable with the tone of argumentation, intellectually scurrying back

into their previously-held, non-reflective schemata. Such exercises require that students are willing to play along; otherwise, the attempt may fall flat and students will likely not push past their initial ideas. The narrative form of *Looking Backward*, as well as the contextual “buzz” provided by the economic crisis, worked quite well for me at this juncture, with this pool of students. The results may vary for others and one must remain adaptive and willing to adjust one’s plans if the exercises do not seem to resonate or provoke critical reflection among one’s students.

#### **4.1 Conclusion**

The contemporary “hard times” have brought unexpected challenges in helping our students to understand their ongoing political responsibilities, and prepare them for those which they will inherit in the decades to come. Revitalizing our national economy, and rethinking our personal attitudes towards consumption, debt, and consumerism *will* constitute challenges that our students will soon face, even in the unlikely event that they have not already begun to do so. It is incumbent upon us to devise ways of preparing them for these types of challenges. Yet every crisis engenders opportunity as well. While the complexity of the economic crisis and its sheer novelty makes our jobs “harder” in one sense, manifold pedagogical possibilities have opened with regard to engaging the assumptions and ethical debates which undergird our uniquely American attitudes towards capitalism. Such moments suspend unquestioned assumptions and rupture our complacency with the status quo. In a realm of human affairs, the economy, in which cynics often caustically dismiss “ideals” as dangerous, moments such as these make us second-guess our dismissal. The current crisis is a moment of disequilibrium, occurring at the societal level.

Yet such moments of rupture are hard to sustain. As Piaget's model shows us, the human mind eventually seeks a return to consonance and harmony. We simply cannot reside in contingency and flux forever. Our moments of disequilibria, though the basis for cognitive and intellectual growth, are episodic and not an enduring state of mind. At some point, we all return to a new set of schemata and new modes of making sense of our ever-changing and complex world. The content of these new schemata in relation to capitalist economic life in the U.S. remains unclear. Our responsibility as educators is not to capitalize upon this moment to compel students towards the economic alternative *we* wish to see. Rather, the goal is to ensure that the future incarnation of capitalism, which all observers seem to agree must emerge out of the crisis, is one about which our students have actively and critically thought, in terms of both its practicability and ethical desirability. Given the depth and severity of the current crisis, and the scope of the challenges associated with rebuilding our beleaguered economy, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the fate of society hinges crucially upon our ability to live up to this goal.

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