Living Tapestry

Seb Franklin (King's College London)

Thatcher's infamous appeal to the two fundamental units whose activities constitute her vision of the social—"individual men and women," and "families"—both necessitates and renders impossible two crucial questions.[1] What does a person have to do to become an individual man or woman, a node in the network of social interrelations? And what are the reproductively-respectable behaviours in which these nodes should engage in order to produce that other basic unit, the family?[2]

One can look in many places to begin finding answers to these questions. Some of these can be found in the materials circulated in advance of this meeting. But I would like to start by looking to Thatcher's own words. Around four and a half years before the *Woman's Own* interview in which she made her comments on the nonexistence of society outside the self-interested activities of individuals and families, Thatcher wrote what can only be described as a fan letter to her favourite philosopher, Friedrich Hayek. In this letter Thatcher celebrates the "remarkable success of the Chilean economy in reducing the share of government expenditure" since 1973 and names the "progression from Allende's Socialism to the free enterprise capitalist economy of the 1980s" a "striking example of economic reform from which we can learn many lessons."[3]

As is well known, on September 11, 1973 the Allende regime was violently dissolved by military coup. Allende was killed on that day after refusing a demand for unconditional surrender. So Thatcher's celebration of the following decade attests to the violent dispossession that subtends those practices of exchange and accumulation whose purest expressions lie in the ideal of free enterprise capitalism. Her comments on the "progression" from Allende to Pinochet makes visible the renewal and intensification of this dispossession as the waning growth structurally bound to deindustrialization begins to become apparent in the industrial core. And, consequently, these passages emphasize the necessity of understanding that *all capitalism is racial capitalism*—including the exemplary techniques and practices of a post-1970s period that has been described as post-Fordist, post-industrial, late, global, and neoliberal.

---

[1] Douglas Keay, interview with Margaret Thatcher, *Woman's Own*, 23rd September 1987.

[2] I take the concept of reproductive respectability as a mechanism of social inclusion under so-called neoliberalism from Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p.7: "I define neoliberalism foremost as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past. It does so by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive respectability, *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death."

[3] Margaret Thatcher to Friedrich Hayek, February 17, 1982, box 101, folder 26, Hoover Institution Archives, Palo Alto, California.

But the closing paragraph of Thatcher's letter is as striking as the preceding celebration: "I am sure you will agree," she writes in this paragraph, that

> in Britain with our democratic institutions and the need for a high degree of consent, some of the measures adopted in Chile are quite unacceptable. Our reform must be in line with our traditions and our Constitution. At times the process may seem painfully slow. But I am certain we shall achieve our reforms in our own way and in our own time. Then they will endure.[4]

Between the preceding paragraph's conflation of military and economic transformations in Chile and this subsequent appeal to sensibilities and expectations of a projected British population one can glimpse the operations of a specific historical logic. If the first example makes visible the proximity between dispossession and the "silent compulsion of economic relations" with which Marx associated 'developed' or mature capitalism. Directly violent practices of dispossession might be the fastest way to implement "free enterprise" in some areas and upon certain populations. But it can't be deployed everywhere. Some populations require different techniques, techniques which may seem painfully slow to those who already see the world at the level of value, as an abstract network of exchanges that operates on and gives form to concrete social formations. These are the populations who have come to expect a "high degree of consent" because of their relative distance from the kinds of visceral dispossession recounted in part eight of *Capital*, in Luxenburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*, in Robinson's *Black Marxism*, in Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, in Coulthard's *Black Skin White Masks*, and in many other places. Some populations can be imagined as steeped in and thus expecting the continuation of traditions of democracy, and other cannot or need not be imagined in this way. It is this expectation and, implicitly, the economic activities that shape and are shaped by it—*both of which she projects onto Britain herself*—that Thatcher sees as the principal impediment to direct, violent implementation in Britain of that which can be celebrated when it happens in Chile. And it is in the differential logic with which these expectations are disseminated, becoming attached to certain populations and not others, that the significance of Thatcher's later, worldview-defining appeal to individual men and women and families becomes apparent.

What produces and reproduces this expectation? What makes possible its differential allocation? Marx provides answers to both of these questions—indeed points towards their inseparability—in his ironic formulation of the realm of commodity exchange in which he sale and purchase of labor power occurs as

[4] Thatcher to Hayek, February 17, 1982.

> a very Eden of the innate rights of man…the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each. Each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the others. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest.[5]

The expectation of democratic procedure is forged in the abstract space of the value-form. And it is only in this space that it can remain coherent. As Marx notes immediately after this passage, as soon as the buyer and seller leave the space of exchange their formal equality ends, the former striding with their head held high, smirking self-importantly, the latter with the air of someone who has "brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect—but a tanning." Wherever the particular instance of this "tanning" falls on the spectrum from direct violence to indirect economic coercion, the conceptual formations that take shape in the abstract image of that moment of exchange—freedom, equality, property, self-possession—persist in the lifeworld of both buyer and seller, calling both towards their next contribution to the accumulation of capital. In other words, the "Eden of the innate rights of man" that exchange subtends is a *cluster of promises* yoked to participation in the sale and purchase of labor power. As purchase of labor power yields decreasing returns in the extraction of surplus value and thus of profit, so too wanes the extent to which the terms of these promises can met. But the expectations of both buyer and seller remain stable, so inscribed are they in fundamental documents of political philosophy, economics, and common sense. And this is why racialization and feminization are essential to capital accumulation and its concomitant social forms, why they must be understood not as superstructural or subsidiary effects of some economic base but as phenomena that are intrinsic to the operations of value: race and gender are the mechanisms through which different levels of expectation vis-à-vis the protections and freedoms that take shape around the value form are attributed to differentiated bodies.

"*There is no such thing as society. There is living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us*

[5] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), p.280.

is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate."[6] "Living tapestry," or the network of individuals and families. "Responsibility," or self-possession. Note how the latter produces the former, or at least the optimal version of it; the beauty of the tapestry arises from the preparedness of individuals and families to be responsible for themselves and then to unfortunate (which is to say respectable) others. The structure and the impulse whose relations comprise Thatcher's social web make it clear that the *who* of that web remains what Denise Ferreira da Silva has revealingly named the "transparent I," the "self-determined subject of universality," the subject of post-Enlightenment European thought and social imagination.[7] Reading Silva with Marx, transparency might be understood as the imputed capacity to channel value through the sale and purchase of labor power and other commodities and/or the second order 'privilege' of providing unwaged reproductive support to those who participate in such sales and purchases. It is the network of sales, purchases, and supporting acts that constitutes the weave of the "living tapestry." For Silva, non-connecton or partial/faulty connection to this network is marked by the attribution of affectability rather than opacity. The "affectable I" emerges with the "scientific construction of non-European minds," and connotes susceptibility to both natural conditions and the power of others. It marks bodies with the impossibility of self-determination and the possibility of direct violence. If transparency primarily connotes self-determination (and self-responsibility), affectability describes the absence of such capacities. This is important because the transparency-affectability complex that for Silva limns the centrality of racialization to modern political-economic imaginations reveals the non-opposition of the two positions, emphasizes the centrality of self-determination to the promises that congeal around value, and explains why movement from the latter to the former appears essential even when the distinction itself is obviously violent. Both are essential to capital, but only one supports full inclusion in the linked categories of individual, family, and human.

[6] Keay, interview with Thatcher. My italics.
[7] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p.88.