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Permanent Crisis and Technosociality in Bruce Sterling's *Distraction*

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Bruce Sterling's science fiction novel *Distraction* (1999) envisions a near-future (mid-twenty-first-century) US in which the economy has collapsed, entire categories of skilled and professional labor have ceased to exist, rampant and endemic joblessness leaves masses of the unemployed to survive on the margins as squatters and scavengers, the infrastructure of entire regions is in ruins (Louisiana is described as "underwater" and the West as "on fire"), and the ongoing crisis has enabled the proliferation of ad hoc governance structures ("State-of-Emergency cliques"), even as democratic institutions survive (just barely) in the eviscerated form of pure spectacle. In this world, where, as one character puts it, "money just doesn't need human beings anymore," a significant portion of the population have opted out of the money economy altogether. Appropriating biotech that can fabricate nutrition from scrub grass and weeds, the novel's nomad proles live off roadside detritus, which they also use to fabricate the phones and laptops central to their wired, moneyless reputation economy. This paper addresses the relation in the novel between economic crisis, the demise of representational politics (what Slavoj Žižek calls the "divorce" of "capitalism and democracy"), and alternative forms of sociality, particularly in the figure of the nomad proles, and of the urban squatters described as practicing a kind of "digital socialism" in what were once the public spaces of government (Senate office buildings, for example). If the reversion to nomadism most emphatically signposts the dissolution of the social body in *Distraction*, Sterling's representation of the nomad communities also insists that disaggregation is not the same thing as disorganization. Quite the contrary, as one character notes of the nomads, "organization is the only thing they've got." We are interested in the ways in which this networked form of belonging both does and does not decode as ethnicity, as well as the ways in which it orients the proles both to structures of authoritarian governance and to the (equally wired) edifice of corporate capital. Along related lines, we ask what kind of resistance to capitalism is imagined in a "digital socialism" where private property and the private sphere are "turned inside out" through rfid (radio frequency identification) tagging and ubiquitous mutual "sousveillance"? To what extent do the disruptive effects of new technologies, as embodied by both the nomad proles and the socialist squatters, represent a genuine political opportunity, and to what extent do they represent a technologically determinist fantasy of capitalist collapse without class struggle, in the spaces of newly mediated social possibility created by permanent crisis?

At the broadest level, this essay asks how proliferating new forms of speculation – sometimes glossed as the financialization of capital – articulate to the prospects for and the limits of transformative social change. By "financialization," we

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mean contemporary forms of capitalist speculation that depend on the redistribution upward of social wealth, as well as on new technologies that allow for the measure and the management of minute temporal distinctions. The rise of financial markets requires enormous reservoirs of capital, attained and secured by means of the state's simultaneous deregulation and subsidizing of corporations, by new forms of primitive accumulation that lay waste to the remaining commons, and by the territorial mobility of capitalist production which destroys the prospect of a living wage for workers in those regions where it was once achieved. These markets depend, as well, on computational and communications technologies that make possible the instantaneous transfer of information and capital, and so, too, the capacity to key market wagers to ever more minute fractions of time. One notable effect of this financialization has been the compression of capitalism's defining boom-and-bust cycles to a matter of a scant few years, so that crisis seems no longer cyclical but a permanent feature of life in late capitalist society.[1] We are interested in how forms of social struggle change in the contemporary context where dysfunction and breakdown are normalized.

In this vein, we read Bruce Sterling's 1998 SF novel *Distraction* as an extended mediation on the social and political effects of permanent crisis, but also on the implications of this virtual network economy for how people might organize to oppose an ever more predatory capitalism. We turn to SF, rather than (for example) engage actually existing forms of networked-based sociality, in an effort to take the measure of a transformation in process: the tendency of SF to extrapolate and project present tendencies offers a particularly valuable heuristic at a historical juncture where the shifting contours of the present render it notably opaque – opaque, in particular, to modes of critical analysis forged in the context of a now disintegrating historical synthesis. Thus we approach *Distraction* as a kind of relay, between a theoretical debate struggling to reorient a Marxist analytic to the present

[1] The etiology of permanent crisis is, of course, a point of debate. Broadly sketched, analysts place different weight on the decline of the industrial base (the extent of this decline, and its bearing on measures of productivity, are themselves disputed), the shift from consumption based on income to consumption based on credit, and the enormous expansion of financial markets – the latter made possible, in turn, by massive concentrations of capital in hedge funds and other financial actors, and the proliferation of dozens upon dozens of new financial instruments, ranging from "puttable-adjustable tender bonds," to "synthetic convertible debt," to the now infamous "collateralized mortgage obligations," suggesting, in Henwood's apt phrase, that "money capital longs for exotic forms." See Doug Henwood, *Wall Street* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 49. Undoubtedly, financial speculation is a central factor in the contraction of capital's cycles, and at least arguably, the driving force As we will suggest, Sterling's speculative fiction explains the permanent crisis of his near-future US in terms roughly cognate with this analysis.

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modalities of capital accumulation, on the one hand, and the increasingly unreal quality of our contemporary "real world," on the other. The novel abstracts a possible future in a way that puts a specific and productive pressure on our theorization of the present.

The first part of the essay explores how the simultaneous collapse of wage labor and the privatization of all social goods – what the narrator describes as the "pitiless reign of cash" – operates in the novel to disaggregate the social field, dismantling the historical articulation of nation and state, or social body and administrative apparatus. In this section, we are especially concerned with what the novel suggests about the demise of modern mass politics in the face of this social decomposition and, especially, the attendant derealization of political life. The second part explores the articulations of technology and sociality in the production of the novel's various autonomen groups and considers whether or not the novel ultimately embraces a vision of revolutionary change without the price of struggle. In this second section, we are especially interested in how the contemporary moment of crisis in political economy is increasingly figured in terms of a newly emergent antagonism between finance capital, or the money form more generally, and social capital, especially network-mediated "sharing economies."[2] This antagonism is often theorized (and narrativized in post-cyberpunk science fiction[3]) as a contradiction between capitalist logics of competition and profit and "the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism" that is located in

[2] On the connection between Internet cultures and social capital see Marleen Huysman and Volker Wulf, eds., *Social Capital and Information Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), chapter 5; and Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 95–96; 361–62. See also Benkler's more general discussion of the sharing economy or what he calls "commons-based peer production" (ibid., chapter 3, esp. 60). The term "social capital" originates in sociology, as, for example, James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (1988), 75–120; or Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in John Richardson, ed., *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58, for whom social capital is understood as continuous with capitalism as such, in such forms as the "old boys' network." It is in relation to computer-mediated communication that social capital begins to be theorized in more conflictual terms.

[3] Sterling's novel elaborates the implications of his earlier story about network gift economies, "Maneki Neko," in Sterling, *A Good Old-Fashioned Future* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 1–19. For later works of SF responding to Sterling see Benjamin Rosenbaum, "The Guy Who Worked for Money," at www.shareable.net/blog/the-guy-who-worked-for-money, originally posted 10 July 2010, accessed 11 July 2014. Another example would be Jay Lake's story "In the Forests of the Night," which imagines a future fragmented American society where "[f]or the first time since the invention of coinage, social capital was able to trump financial capital," in John Scalzi, ed., *Metatropolis* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2009), 13–77, 39.

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networked forms of symbolic or "immaterial labor," in which "cooperation," as opposed to competition, "is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself."[4] Like Hardt and Negri, Sterling tends to interpret this antinomy as the basis for a dialectical form of resistance and a utopian impulse; specifically, this schism makes it possible for a significant fraction of the population of the future US to just walk away from the money economy, to decide that if they're not necessary to capitalism's virtualized accumulation, then it's not necessary to them.[5] We explore the promise and the problems with this vision of utopian resistance, given that the sharing economy also represents a virtualization of social relations and economic life, one that may only reproduce the logic of the financialization and virtualization of money and capital.[6]

AFTER MASS POLITICS

Although written and published in a moment of financial boom, *Distraction* presciently envisions a near-future (mid-twenty-first-century) US in which many of the features of our present historical moment persist in amplified or fully elaborated form: the economy has crashed, due, as the narrator suggests, to the loss of an industrial base; the unenforceability of copyright (the Chinese have made "all English-language intellectual property available on their nets at no charge");[7] and, crucially, the rise of financial markets that wager without compunction or restraint on social, economic, and environmental calamity – what Naomi Klein has termed disaster capitalism.[8] The middle classes have vanished: entire categories of professional labor – from programmers to dentists – have been terminated and joblessness is rampant and endemic; masses of the unemployed survive on the margins, as squatters, scavengers, and casual labor; the infrastructure of entire regions has collapsed (Louisiana is described as "underwater," the West as "on fire"); and while the perennial crisis has enabled the emergence of an entire system of ad hoc governance, the electoral process and the established structures of government persist, in the form of pure spectacle (polling is instantaneous, unceasing, and operates, like TV ratings, to constitute political celebrities and fan cultures). As the narrator observes, "The country now had two national governments, the original,

[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 294.
[5] Bruce Sterling, *Distraction* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 159.
[6] Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban–Regional Process* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 352–53.
[7] Sterling, *Distraction*, 121.
[8] See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

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halting, not-quite-superseded legal government, and the spasmodic, increasingly shrill declarations of the State-of-Emergency Cliques."[9]

In this world where, as one character puts it, "Money just doesn't need human beings anymore," a significant portion of the population have opted out of a money economy altogether.[10] Confronted with the privatization of public space, the merciless invasion of interior life by consumer culture, and the pervasive loss of income, Americans by the millions develop new modes of self-organization along "lines … deeply orthogonal" to the established culture. When "[t]he American people simply ceased to behave," many find prospects for subsistence and sociality in perpetual mobility. "They gathered to publically burn their licenses, chop up their charge cards, and hit the road. The proles considered themselves the only free Americans."[11] By appropriating biotech that can fabricate nutrition bars from scrub grass, weeds, and other valueless materials, the novel's nomad proles live off roadside detritus, which they also use to fabricate the phones and laptops central to their wired, moneyless reputation economy (a non-geographical, networked-based status culture, in which people vie for "trust ratings"). "These were people who had rallied in a horde and marched right off the map. They had tired of a system that had offered them nothing, so they had simply invented their own."[12] If the reversion to nomadism most emphatically signposts the dissolution of the social body in the novel, Sterling's representation of the nomad societies also insists that disaggregation is not the same thing as disorder. The proles are "a *lot* better organized than the government is," one character points out. "Organization is the only thing they've got!"[13]

Another segment of this immiserated population dwells in the interstices of urban space, by commandeering existing infrastructure and repurposing technologies. The resulting transformation of urban space is particularly advanced in Washington, DC:

> Nonviolent noncooperation had reached unheard-of strategic and tactical heights in the American capital. Its functional districts were privatized and guarded by monitors and swarms of private thugs, but huge sections of the city had surrendered to the squatters … In many neighborhoods of Washington, the division of streets and houses had simply dissolved. Entire city blocks were abandoned to the protestors, who had

[9] Sterling, *Distraction*, 120.
[10] Ibid., 256.
[11] Ibid., 369.
[12] Ibid., 61.
[13] Ibid., 159, original emphasis. Contrast Holland's Deleuzian elaboration of the concept of "nomad citizenship." Eugene Holland, *Nomad Citizenship: Free-Market Communism and the Slow-Motion General Strike* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 23, 65–67.

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installed their own plumbing, water systems, and power generators. Streets were permanently barricaded, swathed in camou nets and rain-streaked plastic sheeting.[14]

Elsewhere in the city, the squatters have appropriated plans originally developed by NASA with an eye to Mars colonization. "Now NASA's ingenuity had borne amazing fruit and the streets of Washington were lavishly bumped and measled with martian settlements. Slums of compacted dirt, all glue and mazy airlocks, climbed straight up the walls of buildings, where they clung like the nests of mud-daubing wasps."[15] As the novel's central protagonist, Oscar, a political campaign manager turned Senate staffer, arrives in the capital for a committee meeting, he finds that the federal office building where the meeting is scheduled has "fallen into the hands of squatters," yet tellingly, the squatters' seizure has *not* interrupted the building's operation as a venue of government. Arriving in Room 358, an apparent "sculptor's studio, reconstructed from a fire-blackened set of office cubicles," Oscar encounters the committee's secretary and tech support, who arrive in prole disguise, "their hair … dyed blue, their faces … streaked with nomad warpaint," their business attire concealed by dirty caftans and overalls, and proceed to revamp the space for a conference.[16] In the representation of the parasitical martian structures, the adaptation of public city space for human inhabitation, and the dual-purpose tenement-dwelling–federal-office building, *Distraction* envisions *not* the simple transfer of city space to a surplus population and the retreat of the powerbrokers to secure ex-urban enclaves, *nor* indeed the descent of planned urban environments into disorder (the urban proles are no less rigorously organized than their nomad counterparts), but rather a new urban infrastructure, in which multiple, autonomous actors construct discrete, customized social worlds within adjacent or sometimes coterminous physical spaces.

Politics bears to established structures of governance in this world something of the same relation that the martian settlements bear to established civic infrastructure: an eruptive bumping and measling of political designs across the residual landscape of modern political infrastructures. The novel opens on the successful conclusion of Alcott Bambakias's campaign for the US Senate under Oscar's savvy management, yet election to this dysfunctional and largely irrelevant body leaves Bambakias casting about for ongoing opportunities to enact the public political presence forged in the campaign. In this configuration of electoral politics, it seems, the campaign is not the means to the end of elected office, but rather the pursuit of elected office is the pretext

[14] Sterling, *Distraction*, 160.
[15] Ibid., 161.
[16] Ibid., 165–66.

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for the production of publicity. This is perhaps the reason why Oscar, on the road and bound for Texas, regularly reports to Bambakias about his travels in the backcountry, including an email on the predicament of a Louisiana Air Force base that has lost its federal funding. Facing lack of pay and supplies, including water and heat, desperate base personnel have road-blocked the nearest interstate and staged a "bake sale," extorting hefty ransoms from hapless motorists in return for passage and French pastries. Bambakias seizes on this particular manifestation of the government's pervasive and advanced collapse, and declares himself on hunger strike until the base's federal funding is restored. The brilliance of the gesture, as Oscar grows to appreciate, is its apparent rejection of a merely gestural, image-bound politics. "The Cambridge PR team had certainly done a thorough job surveilling the fasting Senator," Oscar muses;

> [B]lood pressure, heartbeat, temperature, calorie consumption, borborygmus, bile production – there was no possible doubt about the raw authenticity of his hunger strike. The man's entire corpus had become public domain. Whenever Bambakias had a sip of his famine apple juice, a forest of monitors twitched and heaved across the country.[17]

The protest proves as ineffectual as its target was arbitrary: federal funding is not restored, and the base is eventually commandeered by nomad proles. Meanwhile, the emotionally fragile senator-elect succumbs under the pressure of fasting to full-blown bipolar disorder. But a dissociated mental state is no impediment to the accumulation of political capital. "It's true – he's had a mental breakdown," Oscar concedes. "This is the problem: he starved himself half to death in a sincere protest, and now he's lost his mind. But our keyword here isn't 'crazy.' Our keywords are 'sincere' and 'protest.'"[18]

True to Oscar's appraisal, Bambakias's iconic appeal rises as his orientation to reality erodes. Responding to a colleague who has asked whether the senator's condition might be stabilized with continued use of antidepressants, Oscar enthuses,

> Well, the treatments make great media copy. There's a huge Bambakias medical fandom happening, ever since his hunger strike, really … They got their own sites and feeds … Lots of get-well email, home mental-health remedies, oddsmaking on the death-watch … It's a classic grass-roots phenomenon. You know, T-shirts, yard signs, coffee mugs, fridge magnets … I dunno, it's getting kind of out of hand.[19]

Bambakias's medical fandom is "grass-roots" not because it originates in a popular mobilization of ordinary citizens who have summoned this

[17] Ibid., 58.
[18] Ibid., 229.
[19] Ibid., 245.

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representative to stand for their political aspirations, but rather because his hungering corpus offers a virtual rallying point for political aspirations that cannot be realized or even developed within national political structures (or what remains of them in the novel). Oscar's invocation of "grassroots" politics is *not* cynical, but simply registers with indifference the shift from *representative* to *simulacral* politics that appears already completed and mundane in *Distraction*'s near future. Bambakias's mania and depression *represent* nothing, but they infuse a small, self-contained world of political feeling – *a spectacle of craving* – in which people have opted to dwell.[20] The senator's curious career, in which political failure (military funding is not restored) bears no relation to the accumulation of political capital (the market value of his iconicity), signposts the derealization of political life pervasively evident in *Distraction*.

In this saturated and saturating mediascape, then, politics is the competition for attention, a struggle against distraction (immersion in information flows and the diffusion of attention it entails) that proceeds via distraction (siphoning off attention into relatively discrete, relatively autonomous, sites, feeds, and networks). The other meaning of distraction follows: there is no distinction – no ground for distinguishing – between political substance and political smoke, the "real" aim and the "diversionary" tactic. As Bambakias's hunger strike suggests, the political objective is an appearance, while the cultivation of the diversionary opportunity *is itself* the political yield. Along these lines, the major plot development of the novel concerns Oscar's takeover of a federal science laboratory in East Texas, for purposes that are, at best, fluid and emergent over the course of the narrative. Initially, his interest in the lab appears vaguely linked to Oscar's new position as a staffer on the Senate Science Committee. Barely arrived in Buna, with only the faintest sense of how the laboratory operates or the kinds of research it supports, Oscar announces to his assistant, Pelicanos, the beginning of a new "campaign":

> "It's going to be just like the campaign was. First, we're going to lowball expectations, because nobody will really believe we have a serious chance here. But then we're going to succeed on such a level – we're going to exceed expectations to such a huge extent – we're gonna bring so much firepower into this campaign that we just blow the opposition away."
>
> Pelicanos smiled. "That's you all over, Oscar."
>
> Oscar lifted one finger. "Here's the plan. We find the major players here , and we find out what they want, and we cut deals. We get our people excited, and we get their

[20] Bambakias's medical fandom is "grass-roots," we suggest, in precisely the same way as Barack Obama's 2008 campaign. The innovation and brilliance of the Obama campaign was to offer the liberal–left electorate a simulacral alternative, steeped in the affect and iconicity of progressive social movement, but absent the political referent.

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people confused. And in the end, we just out-organize anyone who tries to stop us. We just outwork them, and we swarm on them from angles they would never, ever expect, and never, ever stop, and we just beat them into the ground!"[21]

This speech is remarkable in a number of ways, not least because nothing anyone in the novel has said or insinuated suggests that the Science Committee, or any other "people" ("theirs" or "ours") actually *have* "expectations" for Oscar's exploratory visit, much less criteria for measuring "success." Oscar's determination to mobilize has no recognizable objective; the rallying cry precedes the cause, as the point of the mobilization is to generate the field in which an objective might (eventually) be imagined. In this sense, Oscar operates essentially like the nomad proles, bypassing (the elements of) a system that offers nothing in order to invent a situation where a tally of gains and losses becomes newly possible. Like the nomad proles, as well, Oscar traffics in "organization" – the management of people and resources, to be sure, but most fundamentally, the management of information that makes for the accelerated and intensified organization – the "swarming" – that gives Oscar the edge in this oddly evacuated and gratuitous "campaign."

Distraction envisions the practice of political life after the dissolution of a national people – after the collapse of the civil and governmental institutions that sustained it – and on this new terrain, Oscar recognizes, politics is no longer about securing the form of a mass political subject. His task as an organizer – someone who manages "campaigns" – is not to organize particularities so as to stake a position in a broader social field, but simply to organize particularities according to *whatever* internal calculus – whatever ethos and whatever protocols – will enable their political self-elaboration. In Oscar's preferred formulation, the point is to determine what is "doable," *not* "doable" within a preestablished political order of licit and illicit action, but "doable" insofar as it *imposes* some way of reckoning value, of marking a political good in the absence of any encompassing, institutionalized determination of progress or prosperity or the reasoned behavior of political subjects to these ends. Even as Oscar appears to operate within the residual infrastructure of national government, his understanding of political organizing finally aligns him with the nomad proles and others who bump and measle the ruined terrain of the nation-state with smaller collectives: hordes, occupations, or fandoms living by "orthogonal" principles of communal self-realization and civic virtue.

So it is notable that we find Oscar in the novel's opening chapters baffled by and thoroughly fixated on a particular prole action, captured on video, which he rewatches again and again: the ransacking of a federal bank in Worcester,

[21] Sterling, *Distraction*, 35.

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MA. The action strikes him as "absolute madness" – the sudden coalescence of a mob, its bare-handed destruction of the bank, then equally sudden disappearance. Sometime later, he discovers that his newly hired security specialist, Kevin, was present at the event:

"Who ordered all that?"

"Nobody. Nobody ever orders it. That was a fed bank, they were running cointelpro out of it. The word bubbled up from below, some heavy activism accreted, they wasp-swarmed the place. And once they trashed it, they all ducked and scattered. You'd never find any 'orders,' or anyone responsible …"

"Why did you do that, Kevin? Why would you risk doing a crazy thing like that?"

"I did it for the trust ratings. And because, well, they stank." Kevin's eyes glittered. "Because the people who rule us are spooks, they lie and they cheat and they spy. The sons of bitches are rich, they're in power. They hold cards over all of us, but they *still* have to screw people over the sneaky way. They had it coming."[22]

For Oscar the fascination of this episode lies in the manifestation of a new kind of political agency, coordinated, purposeful – in fact, quite remarkably so – but acting on a fully internalized set of priorities that seem not to communicate with the broader world, even as it rearranges that world in material ways. From the first, the Worcester mob intrudes its difference on Oscar's rationalist understanding of politics as chess, "curing him" of the metaphor. "Because this phenomenon on the tape was a not a chess piece," Oscar thinks:

It was on the public chessboard all right, but it wasn't a rook or a bishop. It was a wet squid, a swarm of bees. It was a new entity that pursued its own orthogonal agenda and vanished into the silent interstices of a deeply networked and increasingly nonlinear society.[23]

As Oscar perceives, the attack on the bank is *not* a move on a public game board. The proles (or rather the prole server) target(s) the bank as a matter of deep-rooted political *orientation* – the fed bank is antithetical to prole constructions of value – but not as part of a coordinated effort to bring down the edifice of finance capital, or to oust the spooks from power (though no doubt the proles would be happy enough to see those things occur). The attack on the bank is not a bid for political advantage in an integrated social field, but a moment of communal self-elaboration – not about opening a front in a war on autocratic power, but about testing and developing the strength of the prole network, by marking its capacity to exist and operate *on its own terms* within the very material precincts of the system it leaves behind. The attack is a declaration of autonomy by a collective that has fled the ruined nation, immigrated not to another geographic location, but to an alternative,

[22] Ibid., 258, original emphasis.
[23] Ibid., 4.

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noncommunicating social plane. As he learns how to understand the Worcester video and the redrawing of the political field it indexes, Oscar's sense of the "doable" veers from a realist orientation to an already constituted world governed by relatively fixed, relatively durable rationalities to an appreciation that other, perhaps better, worlds are possible in the derealized spaces of autonomous organizing. In this way, *Distraction* traces and elucidates the connections between the rise of finance capital, the ruination of political modernity, and the derealization of political life as it comes to transpire on a set of nonintersecting social planes.

SMART PROLES AND DIGITAL SOCIALISM?

The Worcester mob video which preoccupies Oscar demonstrates a mode of ad hoc assembly in which the participants "weren't even aware of one another's existence as members of the same group" and "many of them … didn't know what they were about to do."[24] They are linked exclusively through participation in an invisible information network. In the video, the mob is linked despite their lack of individual intentionality or direct, face-to-face recognition. This direct action taken against a bank by a flash or smart mob shares a great deal with the new form of sociality practiced by the squatters in the federal office building. That group uses "universal tagging" of objects and people by location-tracking devices that register on the home's computer system, creating a "theftproof" form of communal property, since the "locale, condition, and history of every tool was logged and displayed in real time"; similarly, children can live in the halls of the home, since they are also "bugged and safety-tagged."[25] In an example of what Sterling would later theorize as "the Internet of Things," these squatters turn a mode of surveillance into a mode of resistance and subversion of capitalist assumptions about private property, while at the same time their practice uses network technologies to make visible their embeddedness in a web of social relations and dependencies.[26]

The squatters' appropriation of surveillance technologies is also described as having the "major side effect" of turning "people's lives inside out."[27] This comment refers most immediately to the decentralization and sharing of living space that becomes possible when both property and family members can be constantly tracked through a network, but we argue that this metaphor of turning lives inside out also characterizes the general effects of computer

[24] Ibid., 3.
[25] Ibid., 162.
[26] Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), chapter 12.
[27] Sterling, *Distraction*, 162.

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networks on social relations. In Sterling's novel, the effect of living in a ubiquitous or pervasive computing environment, with computer chips embedded throughout the social landscape, is to materialize a subjective sense of belonging, ironically represented by these squatters' relationships with their literal belongings, but more importantly with their children, their kinship circles. As embodied in the network, social relations become more accessible but also manipulable. At the same time, the effect is to reconstitute all social bonds as relations of perceived affinity, rather than more traditional modes of social affiliation, such as kinship, ethnicity, or geographical proximity. Families, communities, and even races become interest groups, more provisional and open-ended formations whose value lies in their flexibility and responsiveness to popular needs at the same time as those positive benefits are also a function of the relative weakness and temporariness of the social bonds produced compared to earlier social modes.

Sterling's digital socialism is an example of the effects of what his cyberpunk comrade William Gibson called the "eversion" of cyberspace, its turning inside out, so that the fantasy that computer networks exist in a separate, phantasmatic space on the "other side" of our computer screens is undermined, and information and materiality infiltrate one another.[28] Social reality therefore stands revealed as being just as much a "consensual hallucination" as cyberspace or virtual-reality computer simulations.[29] Sterling's vision of a network society, however, is also a reworking of Sterling's own earlier trope of "fluidarity," a term coined in the novel *Schismatrix* to define the politics of posthuman technologies of body modification (cyborgs, genetic engineering) which stand in a complex relation of replacement and analogy with models of political solidarity or ethnic identity.[30] The "fluidarity" of social relations is dramatized in *Distraction* in a description of a crowd scene, where people ignore traffic signals but still move "in rhythmic gushes and clumps … in a massive folk dance."[31] It is their network that makes these people a "folk." Each member of the crowd wears an earclip that hums when wearers are moving in the overall desired direction and "grows querulous" when they are not; the narrator points out that "somewhere a system was mapping out the flow of people, and controlling them with these gentle

[28] William Gibson, *Spook Country* (New York: Putnam, 2007), 20.

[29] The metaphor of cyberspace computer networks as consensual hallucinations originates with Gibson's first novel. See William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), 51.

[30] Bruce Sterling, *Schismatrix* (New York: Ace Books, 1986), 264. For a reading of this trope see Thomas Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xix–xxi.

[31] Sterling, *Distraction*, 326.

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hints … so computation was arranging human beings like a breeze blowing butterflies."[32]

This crowd scene takes place in a "nomad" camp of radical proles, who represent the phenomenon of smart mobs as a countercultural mass movement. What replaces the mediating structures of citizenship, state protection of civil rights, and a national currency is a particular use of computer networks. In another scene, Bambakias (who was an architect before he became a politician) recalls designing smart chairs that used embedded computer chips to make a seemingly rickety collection of sticks and cables function to support weight as a chair; he notes that they "never caught on," though, because, "for some reason, people just don't trust computation enough to sit on it."[33] Sterling's nomads, on the other hand, trust computation enough to sit their entire social organization on it. As one character puts it, by the end of the book, "We don't have roots. We're network people. We have aerials."[34] The novel's representation of the nomad's network gift society implies that this dependence on computer networks as the basis for sociality materializes, indeed quantifies, the trust, the social contract, that any such organization ultimately requires of its members.

The question here is whether Sterling's narrative of the emergence of digital socialism shares more than its terminology with Kevin Kelly's use of that same term in a famous essay in the May 2009 issue of *Wired*, where Kelly associates it with the possibility of a "third way" between capitalism and communism.[35] Kelly's essay clearly demonstrates a tendency critiqued by Nick Dyer-Witheford. In *Cyber-Marx*, Dyer-Witheford argues that the relation of futurist, utopian speculations about postindustrial society to Marxism is "not just one of antagonism but of appropriation," which "retains the notion of historical progress toward a classless society but reinscribes technological advance rather than class conflict as the driving force in this transformation."[36] Dyer-Witheford's critique is aimed at writers like Daniel Bell or Alvin Toffler; in *The Third Wave*, Toffler is in fact willing to imagine that the shift to an information society means the end of the marketplace (an imaginative leap that may seem more radical in these neoliberal times), just as Sterling

[32] Ibid., 327.
[33] Ibid., 215.
[34] Ibid., 491.
[35] Kevin Kelly, "The New Socialism: Global Collectivist Society Is Coming Online," at www.wired.com/culture/culturerreviews/17-06/nep_newsocialism?currentPage=all, originally published in *Wired*, 17, 6 (May 2009). Kelly acknowledges Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, as a source for this "third way" trope. Compare Holland, *Nomad Citizenship*,100–4, on "free-market communism."
[36] Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 37.

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is willing to imagine the irrelevance, if not abolition, of the money form, but seemingly only as Dyer-Witheford would have it, through the imagined agency of technological determinism rather than class struggle: the lesson of the nomad society is, "You *can* live without money, if you replace it with the right kind of computation."[37]

Dyer-Witheford's critique seems as relevant to Sterling's novel as to the futurist and postindustrial sociological discourses at which the critique is aimed, to the extent that the novel can be read as bypassing class conflict to generate its "digital socialism." But as Dyer-Witheford acknowledges, there is another framework in which Sterling's speculations about abandoning the money form entirely can be read, emerging out of the Italian autonomy movement, a reading in which what appears to be the technological avoidance or obsolescence of class conflict might instead constitute a transformation in it, and indeed a transformation anticipated by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, in the famous "Fragment on Machines."[38] Paolo Virno, a member of the Italian autonomy movement, offers one of the best explications and critiques of this fragment of Marx's, in Virno's essay "General Intellect." In this fragment, Marx suggests that the development of fixed capital, especially automated machinery, means that "general social knowledge" or general intellect "has become a direct force of production." The result, as Virno points out, is that Marx "suggests an emancipatory hypothesis radically different from those in his more familiar texts."[39] Moving away from a focus on the "disproportions" inherent in wage-labor processes, Virno argues that the question of technology moves Marx toward an analytic focus on "the rending contradiction between productive processes that now directly and exclusively rely on science" embodied in technology "and a unit of measure of wealth that still coincides with the quantity of labor embodied in the product" – that is, the money form. The financialization of capital can be read as another version of this contradiction, from the point of view of exchange value rather than of production. "According to Marx" in the *Grundrisse*, Virno writes, "the development of this contradiction leads to the "breakdown of production based on exchange value," and therefore to communism.[40] This contradiction

[37] Sterling, *Distraction*, 256.

[38] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973; first published 1858), 690–712.

[39] Paolo Virno, "General Intellect," trans. Arianna Bove, at http://autonomousuniversity.org/content/general-intellect, accessed 7 Nov. 2013, originally published in *Futur Anterieur*, 10, 2 (1992), n.p., and rewritten for A. Zanini and U. Fadini, eds., *Lessico Postfordista: dizinario di idee della mutazione* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2001), 146–52. We will be quoting throughout from the online version of this essay, which is unpaginated.

[40] See, for example, Marx's formulation in the "Fragment on Machines" from the *Grundrisse*: "to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less

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between general intellect as embodied in technology and the money form points us back to Sterling's nomads.

Virno is careful to note that, rather than leading to communism, or even to some preliminary "plethora of crises," "the disproportion between the role of the knowledge objectified in machines and the decreasing relevance of labor time has given rise to new and stable forms of domination." Virno agrees with Dyer-Witheford that "the postfordist period is," in contrast, "the full factual realization of the tendency described by Marx, but with no revolutionary or even conflictual consequences." Dyer-Witheford acknowledges the kind of passage in Marx that Virno foregrounds, when Dyer-Witheford summarizes Marx as arguing that "capital undermines the basis of its own rule" by "setting in motion the powers of scientific knowledge and social cooperation."[41] Dyer-Witheford follows Ernest Mandel in arguing that "Automation, by massively reducing the need for labor, will subvert the wage relation."[42] In turn, Mandel was following Marx in, as Virno points out, arguing for the reification of fixed capital; Mandel understands this reificiation as in itself enough to generate a crisis of accumulation; automation ties up capital in its fixed form (machinery, infrastructure) rather than its variable form – that is, wage labor – and since machinery can't be squeezed for profit the way workers can, automation "automatically" (or scientifically) generates a crisis for capital. In contrast to Mandel, Virno opposes the autonomist concept of the "social factory," in which late capital escapes or defers this crisis by exploiting precisely the ways in which automation seems to free individuals in Marx's account. As Virno puts it,

> the postfordist labor process actually takes advantage in its way of this very transformation, albeit depriving it of all emancipatory qualities. What is learned, carried out and consumed in the time outside of labor is then utilized in the production of commodities, becomes a part of the use value of labor power and is computed as profitable resource. Even the greater "capacity to enjoy" is always on the verge of being turned into a laborious duty.

Dyer-Witheford sounds more like Virno on the significance of Marx's "general intellect" concept (and Sterling, in his representation of the

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on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose 'powerful effectiveness' is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production." Marx, *Grundrisse*, 700. Other commentaries on the "Fragment" include Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 35–40; Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx*, chapter 9, esp. 219–21; and Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 29.

[41] Dyer-Witherford, 4.

[42] Ibid.

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nomads) when Dyer-Witheford goes on to argue that "the profoundly social qualities of the new technoscientific systems … will overflow the parameters of private property."[43] In turn, Sterling generalizes this tendency further, to the abolition of money. Virno's key departure from Marx on the machine and Mandel's theory of late capitalism comes when Virno suggests that the reason why post-Fordism succeeds in maintaining capitalist control of information societies can be explained by the way in which Marx's analysis was flawed: he objectified general intellect in machinery rather than in "living-labor" practices, which, in information societies, are grounded in communicative and linguistic – i.e. intellectual – competence. The result is a flawed understanding of resistance and struggle in such informational contexts. "In order to grasp the mainspring of conflict in this new situation," Virno writes, it is necessary to attend to "the way in which the general intellect manifests itself as living labor," including

> formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical tendencies, mentalities and "language games." Thoughts and discourses function in themselves as productive "machines" in contemporary labor and do not need to take on a mechanical body or an electronic soul. The matrix of conflict and the condition for small and great "disorders under heaven" must be discerned in the progressive rupture between general intellect and fixed capital that occurs in the process of the former's redistribution within living labor.

The central conflict here is no longer class struggle in the traditional sense, but this conflict between general intellect and fixed capital, between how technology facilitates productive "thoughts and discourses" and how technology can be defined by capital investment and exchange value.

In this context, it seems reasonable to ask whether Sterling's novel is participating in a fantasy of getting revolutionary change (or "disruption," in today's tech jargon) without the price of struggle, or whether Sterling is accurately charting a change in the nature of class struggle, of the sort Virno suggests here. In *Distraction*, Sterling's protagonist Oscar tropes the new form of sociality recorded on his video of the bank's destruction as "a wet squid, a swarm of bees."[44] This passage strikes us as a more dramatic restatement of Virno's reading of Marx's "Fragment on Machines," as a text in which Marx shifts the basis for communism's emancipatory narrative and redefines the engine of history, the key contradictions that constitute class struggle. Sterling is in fact a longtime reader of the Italian autonomy thinkers, having referenced their utopian concept of the zerowork (the flip side of the social factory) as early as his 1988 novel *Islands in the Net* (in the form of workers who

[43] Ibid.
[44] Sterling, *Distraction*, 4.

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aggressively assert that they are "lazy" and "stupid";[45] Sterling has also lived in Italy). As dramatized in Sterling's novel, the debate over whether this new situation constitutes an evacuated reappropriation of utopian thought by capital or whether it constitutes the emergence of a new phase of class struggle registers today, in both theory and everyday life, as a debate about the relation between financial and social capital.

An example from Sterling's nonfiction book *Shaping Things* (2005) succinctly defines his difference from Kevin Kelly and *Wired* magazine's more naive utopianism and celebration of seeming technological alternatives to capital, as well as indicating how Sterling might move from fiction to actually existing technologies. *Shaping Things* offers an analysis of the Internet of Things, or the forms of ubiquitous computing made possible by the embedding of computer chips in the built environment; specifically, this book focuses on the imbrication of the material and the virtual and the tendency in contemporary technoculture to undermine or reverse the hierarchy in which made objects are supplemented and annotated by information, by regarding objects as instantiations of prior informational patterns and designs. At one point in this argument, Sterling turns to consider exactly what it is that Amazon.com sells: books or data-mining services, especially user-generated reviews and other kinds of "content." Sterling notes that "You are heartily invited, even seduced at every opportunity, to contribute to this labor yourself," but he also points out that there are many questions about the products Amazon sells, especially their environmental costs and health impacts, that are "missing from the spectrum of services provided by Amazon.com." Sterling invites the reader to "imagine that we establish an Amazon.org, a social-software entity that hangs around the fringes of Amazon," providing an alternative to its "profit-centric" focus.[46] In relation to *Distraction*, the transformation of Amazon.com into Amazon.org reads as a step toward the trust-based network economy of the nomads, a revitalization of the commons organized around questions of the public good rather than profit. In this passage, Sterling certainly shares with Kelly and other liberal apologists for postindustrial society the tendency to translate class conflict into a conflict between producers and "end-users," as in Alvin Toffler's concept of the "prosumer" made possible by greater two-way communication between producers and consumers.[47] This translation tends to reproduce the

[45] Bruce Sterling, *Islands in the Net* (New York: Ace, 1988), 195, 210, 228.
[46] Sterling, *Shaping*, 110–11.
[47] Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980), 274. For a more recent, Marxist argument for precisely such a rethinking of class and class conflict in information societies see Christian Fuchs, "Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet," *Information Society*, 26 (2010), 179–96.

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problem Dyer-Witheford identifies, of attenuating or evacuating class conflict in favor of a more purely technologically determined process of social change. However, it is clear that Sterling is more self-conscious about the problem of "free labor" and how corporate entities like Amazon.com both "seduce" and exploit that labor for profit.[48] In contrast to Dyer-Witheford's critique of techno-utopianism, Sterling's utopian speculation about turning Amazon.com into Amazon.org is more properly dialectical, like the Italian autonomists, for whom post-Fordism is both a new "social factory" and the basis of the utopian practice of the zerowork or the refusal of labor. Crowdsourcing as a mode of network sociality and symbolic labor is also both an intensified form of capitalist exploitation and accumulation and the basis for an alternative to capitalist society.

In this essay, we have sought, with and through *Distraction*, to suggest the ways in which financial speculation aligns with the disaggregation of the social body and its reorganization along "orthogonal," autonomist lines; with a politics of the "doable" that, much like financial speculation, abdicates the world in preference for whatever internal (group-specific) calculus of losses and gains; and with forms of technosociality that ambivalently reclaim the "general intellect" for the networked group or transform human sociality itself into so many arenas of capital accumulation. If the novel ultimately veers towards a kind of technological determinism, substituting networks for nations, and nonlinearity for a revolution in social relations, it nevertheless diagnoses with canny precision the *terrain* – economic, political, technological, and cultural – with which any transformative movement towards an other-than-capitalist future must learn to reckon.

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[48] See Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text*, 18, 2 (Summer 2000), 33–58; and Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Electronic Book Review*, 20 June 2003, at www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/voluntary, last accessed 2 Feb. 2015.

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