Nihilism in the Flesh

Critical Art Ensemble

While much of the current cultural discussion regarding technoculture focuses on issues emerging from new communications technology, there is an exponentially growing interest in and discussion of flesh technology. Like the discussion of new communications technologies, this discourse vacillates wildly from the intensely critical and skeptical to the accepting and utopian. However, the most significant intersection between the two discourses is their parallel critique of vision enhancement. Whether it is the development of global satellite vision or the development of micro interior vision, imaging systems are key to both apocalyptic or utopian tendencies. For example, sonography can be used to map an ocean floor, or it can be used to map uterine space. In both cases, such an imaging system functions as a first step toward the ability to culturally engineer and ideologically design those spaces. As these two spheres of technology continue to intermingle, a recombinant theory of the relationship of populations and bodies to technology has begun to emerge that conflates theories of the social and the natural. The existence of such theories under the legitimizing mantle of the authority of science is not new, and in fact the theories have fallen in and out of favor since the 19th century. They continually re-emerge in different guises, such as Social Darwinism (Malthusian and Spencerian philosophy), eugenics, and sociobiology. In each case the results of such thinking have been socially catastrophic, setting loose the unrestrained deployment of authoritarian ideology and nihilistic social policy.

Apparently theories of *deep* social evolution have come into favor again, and are rising from the grave to haunt unsuspecting populations. Socially dangerous principles of cultural development, such as fitness, natural selection, and adaptability, are again in fashion. Consider the following quote from the announcement for the 1996 Ars Electronica Symposium and Exhibition (Ars Electronica is a very prestigious annual conference for multimedia artists, media critics, scientists, hackers, and technicians)."Human evolution, characterized by our ability to process information, is fundamentally entwined with technological development. Complex tools and technologies are an integral part of our evolutionary "fitness." Genes that are not able to cope with this reality will not survive the next millennium."

This quote contains some of the most frightening authoritarian language since the Final Solution, and presents the threat of "adapt or die" as a value-free social given. To what is the reader expected to adapt? To the technology developed under the regime of pancapitalism for the purpose of better implementing its imperatives of production, consumption, and control. There is nothing evolutionary (in the biological sense) about the pancapitalist situation. It was engineered and designed by rational agencies. "Fitness" is a designated status that is relative to the ideological environment, not the natural environment. History repeats itself, as those resistant to authoritarian order must once again separate the cultural and the natural, and expose the horrific nihilistic tendency that arises when the two are confused.

Nihilism

Nihilism can have either positive or negative political associations. For example, some liberationists view nihilism as a revolutionary strategy capable of dissolving boundaries which retard the full exploration of human experience, while those interested in maintaining the status quo view it as a method of social disruption which manifests itself in destruction and chaos. Certainly the original description of nihilism, in Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons,* presented it as a revolutionary method designed to promote Enlightenment political principles. The engine of nihilism in this case was reason, and its application manifested itself in an overly deterministic and domineering model of Western science. Turgenev contrasts the nihilist position with Christian models of faith and a monarchist social order. While many who situate themselves on the left can sympathize with the nihilist's will to free he/rself from the constraints of the traditional model of church and state, there is also an uneasy feeling about this variety of nihilism, as a danger exists of replacing one tyrant with another. One cannot help but question if replacing faith and understanding with reason and knowledge could lead to an equivalent state of oppression. Nietzsche makes this point very elegantly in his assertions that movement toward purity and uncritical acceptance (in this case, of reason) always leads to hegemony and domination.

The case of Nietzsche in regard to nihilism is peculiar. While the Nietzschean notion of philosophy with a hammer seems to fit well with the nihilistic process, Nietzsche actually inverts the argument. From his perspective, the ability of humans to challenge dominant institutions is an affirming quality. It affirms life and the world. While the process has elements of conflict and destruction, acts of skepticism, disavowal, and resistance are inten-

tionally directed toward the possibility of freedom, and thereby redeem people from the horrid fate of willing nothingness, rather than not willing at all. From this perspective, the primary example of the pathologically nihilistic will made manifest is the institution of the church in particular and religion in general. Religions encourage the subject to bring about he/r own disappearance, and thereby, to eliminate the world which envelops he/r. One abhors presence, and seeks absence. The problem for Nietzsche is that he cannot accept the principles of absence (the soul, God, the heavenly kingdom) that are dictated to society under the authority of church rule, and perpetuated by an unquestioning faith. Nietzsche demands that life rest in experience and in presence. To negate the given is an unacceptable nihilistic position that undermines humanity itself.

On the other hand, if theological principles are accepted, one can easily see how the positions of secularists appear nihilistic. To sacrifice one's soul to the immediacy of experience is eternally destructive. The immediacy of the sensual world should be understood as a site of temptation that negates the joy of eternity. Those who focus their daily activities on the sensual world are doomed to the torture of privation in this life, and to damnation in the next life. To choose an object other than God is to be continuously left unfulfilled, and during this time the soul decays from neglect. In terms of Eastern theology, the situation of subject-object is mediated by the hell of desire, which can only be pacified when the subject is erased, and thereby returned to the unitary void. In both the Western and the Eastern varieties of religious life, the subject can only find peace by affirming God (as opposed to affirming the world).

The truly interesting and relevant point here in regard to evolutionary social theory is that the 19th century conflict over the nature of nihilism has a common thread. No matter what side of the debate one favors, the discourse centers around institutional criticism. Nietzsche attacks the church and its doctrines, while the church attacks secular institutions such as science. People are not the object of nihilism, no matter how it is defined. However, when nihilism is combined with notions of social evolution, the object of nihilism (whether valued as good or bad) is people! It speaks of the fitness of some, and the elimination of others. It is not a racial construction that the authoritarians of social evolution seek to eliminate, but people of a race; it is not a class that they seek to eliminate, but people of a class; it is not an anachronistic skill that they seek to eliminate, but people who have this skill.

Evolution is a Theory, Not a Fact

To be sure, evolutionary theory has become such a key principle in organizing biological information that some toxic spillage into other disciplines is almost inevitable. It commands such great authority that its spectacle is often confused for fact. At present, evolutionary theory is primarily speculative; no valid and reliable empirical method has been developed to overcome the temporal darkness that this conjecture is supposed to illuminate. Consequently, evolutionary theory circles around in its own self-fulfilling principles. It is in an epistemological crisis, in spite of authoritative claims to the contrary.

The tautological reasoning of evolutionary theory proceeds as follows: Those species with the greatest ability to adapt to a changing environment are naturally selected for survival. Those that are selected not only survive, but often expand their genetic and environmental domains. So how is it known that a species has a capacity for adaptation? Because it was naturally selected. How is it known that it was selected? Because it survived. Why did it survive? Because it was able to adapt to its environment. In spite of this logical flaw of rotating first principles, evolutionary theory brings a narrative to the discipline that makes biological dynamics intelligible. While the theory can in no way approach the realm of certainty, it does have tremendous common-sense value. If for no other reason, evolutionary theory is dominant because no one has been able to produce a secular counternarrative that has such organizational possibilities.

Evolution is an intriguing notion for other reasons too. The idea that natural selection is a blind process is certainly a turning point in Western thinking. There is no teleology, not even the guiding "invisible hand." Instead, evolution gropes through time, producing both successful and unsuccessful species. Its varied manifestations display no order, only accident. This notion is an incredible challenge to the Western desire for rational order. At best, God is playing dice with the universe. The very anarchistic strength of this notion is also its scientific downfall. How can the accidental be measured in causal terms? For example, the engine of physical adaptability is mutation. If mutation is the accidental, uncommon, unexpected, and anomalous, how can it be quantified, when the knowledge systems of science are based on the value of expectation and typicality?

Can we say with any degree of assurance that social development is analogous to this model of biological development? It seems extremely unlikely that culture and nature proceed in a similar fashion. Cultural dynamics appear to be neither blind nor accidental. While the occurrence of chaotic moments in social development cannot be denied, unlike with biological evolution, they do not render the same totalizing picture. Cultural evolution, if there is such a thing, seems for the most part to be orderly and intentional. It is structured by the distribution of power, which can be deployed in either a negating or affirming manner.

Culture and Causality

The ever-changing and transforming manifestations of power over time are the foundation of what may be considered history. Power manifests itself in countless forms, both as material artifacts and ideational representation, including architecture, art, language, laws, norms, population networks, and so on, which is to say as culture itself. When considering either culture or history, it seems reasonable to contend that evolution (in its biological sense) plays little if any role in the configuration of social structure or dynamics. For example, the history of industrial capitalism spans only a brief 200 years. In the evolutionary timetable, this span of time scarcely registers. The biological systems of humans have not significantly changed during this period, nor for the last 10,000 years, and hence it would be foolish to think that evolution played any kind of causal role in the development of capitalism. In fact, humankind's seeming evolutionary specialization (a mammal that specializes in intelligence) places it in a post-evolutionary position. With the ability for advanced communication using language capable of forming abstract ideas, in conjunction with the ability to affect and even control elements of the body and the environment, humans have at least temporarily inverted significant portions of the evolutionary dynamic. In an astounding number of cases, the body and the environment do not control the destiny of "humanity"; rather, "humanity" controls the destiny of the body and its environment. Unlike the evolutionary process, social development is overwhelmingly a rationalized and engineered process.

If the proposition that social development is a rationalized process (perhaps even hyper-rationalized, under the pancapitalist regime) is accepted, can evolutionary principles such as natural selection or fitness have any explanatory value? This possibility seems very unlikely. For instance, there is nothing "natural" about natural selection. At the macro level, the populations that have the greatest probability of coming to an untimely end are not selected for elimination by a blind natural process; rather, they are designated as expendable populations. In the US, for example, the problem of homelessness exists not because there is insufficient food and shelter for every citizen, nor because this

social aggregate is unfit, but because various power sources have chosen to let the homeless continue in their present state. The selection process in this case has agency; it is not a blind and accidental process. What is being selected for in the age of pancapitalism (and for most of human history) are cultural characteristics that will perpetuate the system, and maintain the current power structure. This process is intentional, self-reflexive, and at its worst, systematic-in other words, intensely rational.

The concept of fitness follows the same unfortunate trajectory. Once this concept is taken out of its original biological context and placed into a social context, its explanatory power evaporates. When the concept of fitness intersects an intentional environment, the idea is transformed from a relatively neutral one to one that is intensely value-laden. Unlike the biological concept of fitness, a category measured by the emergent manifestations of survival, the sociological concept of fitness functions as a reflection of a particular population that is then projected and inscribed onto the general population. The valued characteristics (beauty, intelligence, "normal" body configuration, etc.) that constitute fitness are designed and deployed in a top-down manner by power vectors which control social policy construction and image management and distribution. In a social environment which has solved the challenge of production, fitness has no real meaning other than to mark acceptable subjects, which in turn marginalizes and/or eliminates "deviant" subjects. Without question, when fitness is placed into a sociological context, it becomes a hideous ideological marker representing the imperatives of the political-economy that deployed it.

Nature as Ideology

Three decades ago Roland Barthes sent an illuminating flare into the political air to warn us of the socially catastrophic results of using nature as a code to legitimate social value. Under authoritarian rule, the social realm is divided into the natural and the unnatural (the perverse). Everything of value and of benefit to the empowered vectors of a given social system is coded as natural, while everything which negates its demands by prompting alternative or resistant forms of social activity and organization is coded as unnatural in the environment of representation. But this binary system is more complex. Given that one of these values of empowered vectors is that of militarization in all its forms, a nasty wound opens as the social fabric is ripped by contradictory ideological forces. On one hand, nature is viewed in a very gentle sense as moral and pure, and thereby good. Hence that which is natural is also good. On the

other hand, when perceived through the evolutionary ideological filter as a realm in which only the strong survive the bloodbath of life, nature becomes abject, dangerous, and amoral. Hence, that which is natural (sovereign) must be repelled. The ideological role of the code of nature is doubled, and simultaneously exists as value and as detriment, thereby allowing the code to float from one meaning to its opposite. All that authoritarian power must do is contextualize the code, and it will speak in whatever manner is desired by the social vectors with the power to deploy it. In addition, for this code of control to function, its inherent contradiction must be flawlessly sutured. This is done through spectacular narrowcasts into the fragmented condition of everyday life.

It seems rather obvious that importing legitimized theories of natural dynamics (in the case of pancapitalism, evolutionary principles) into the ideological fabric is a necessity if this overall coding system is to function. In this manner the constructive qualities of a given regime can be coded as natural, as can its pathologically nihilistic and destructive tendencies, even, and perhaps especially, when they are aimed at other people! Thus the code truly is totalizing. It does not have to be split into a binary which has a boundary that authoritarian 46 Flesh Machine order cannot cross. Authoritarian power can occupy all social space with impunity, both normal and deviant, for constructive or destructive purposes.

Biohazards

When the dark code of nature (survival of the fittest) is efficiently deployed within a given population, genocidal nihilism becomes an acceptable course of social action. While the code legitimizes and masks military aggression for the purpose of acquiring territory and resources, the will to purity has been known to function as an independent parallel goal, as in the case of Nazi Germany. Currently, there is a shift in temperament; genocide is increasingly becoming less a matter of territory and resources, and more a matter of the will to purity. In the days of early capital, when the riddle of production was still unsolved, land/resource appropriations were the primary reason for genocide. The examples are, of course, well known: the kulak genocide under Stalin, or the aboriginal genocides in the US and Australia. In these cases, the will to purity (ideological in the case of the former and racial in the case of the latter), was secondary, and functioned primarily as the rhetoric and the justification for the actions. Certainly, one can expect to see more genocides typical of early capital in the third world, where for reasons of imperial design, production cannot meet the demands of the population. The same may be said for

industrial nations in the process of restabilizing, as in Bosnia. However, in the time of first-world late capital with its consumer culture, global media, global markets, and product excess, direct military actions seem less necessary, because geographic territory is in the process of being devalued.

With economic expansion via territorial occupation in the process of disappearing, the will to purity (fitness) stands on its own as a prime reason for genocide. Currently, genocidal nihilism tends toward elimination of "deviant" subjectivity. This new form of nihilism is much more subtle. The day of the death camp designed for maximum efficiency is over, and in its place are prisons, ghettos, and spaces of economic neglect. By making it seem that the condition of extreme privation is a part of the natural order, rational authority can eliminate populations without direct militarized action. In some cases, the designated excess population will participate in its own destruction as individuals are forced by artificially produced physical need and environmental pressures to do whatever is necessary to acquire withheld resources. In turn, these actions are replayed by the media as representations of the dangerous natural qualities of given races, ethnicities, or classes that must be controlled. Ironically, activities and environments which were intentionally designed become representations of nature, and proof of fitness theory.

Accidental opportunities also have great potential for exploitation. In the early years of the AIDS crisis in the US, when the virus seemed to affect only gay men, IV drug users, and Haitians, the Reagan Administration exploited this opportunity to eliminate some "degenerate" populations; after all, they were unnatural, impure, and unfit. By refusing to intervene or even acknowledge the existence of the virus, the Reagan Administration allowed this plague to take its course from 1981 to 1985. Not until it was realized that AIDS would not stay confined to the designated deviant population was legitimized political action taken to contain the virus and control its symptoms. Engineering the death of populations by neglect is not a recent innovation. Certainly the Irish genocide at the time of the potato blight indicates that this strategy has been around for while (although it should be remembered that this genocide was also primarily done for land and resources, and less for reasons of purity). Death by neglect is a haunting reminder that Social Darwinism and the anti-welfare recommendations of Malthus and Spencer in the time of early capital are not only alive and well, but are once again gaining in strength.

For acts of passive genocide to be perceived as legitimate (natural), the public must participate in eugenic ideology. It must believe that the species is in a biological process that is striving for perfection through a selection

process. It must believe that some populations are more fit than others. It must desire to emulate the fit, and to have faith that the unfit will be eliminated. With this belief in place, social vectors of power only have to contextualize the ideological system in a particular social moment to see its design come to fruition for a political-economy that is encoded directly into the flesh. Returning to the announcement from Ars Electronica, an indicator of this process at work can be observed when we read: "Complex tools and technologies are an integral part of our evolutionary 'fitness.' Genes that are not able to cope with this reality will not survive the next millennium." Who benefits from beliefs such as this? Those who profit most from the development of technocratic pancapitalism. There is not a shred of evidence that nature selects for genes with a predisposition for using complex tools. In fact, if survival is taken as the signifier of fitness, those who use complex tools are a small and stable minority of the world's population, which would indicate that they are less fit. The majority and expanding populations do not use complex tools. (What is truly odd is that such rhetoric implies that "quality of life" is a characteristic that demonstrates fitness and adaptability. This is a peculiar return to the Calvinist belief in finding signs that one is in God's grace by one's proximity to economic bounty). It seems just as likely that complex tools are signs of devolution, or even the source of species destruction. What is clear is that the power vectors which currently engineer social policy are at the moment selecting for and rewarding those who can use complex tools and punishing those who cannot, and that this intentional process is at times passed off as a natural development.

The sweeping condemnation of those outside technoculture bodes badly for less technologically saturated societies, since they presently appear to be "unfit" according to this line of thinking. Traces of the colonial narrative replay themselves in this rhetoric, since technoculture is not accessible to the grand majority of nonwestern races and ethnicities. At the same time, the colonial narrative is being reconfigured for postwar technoculture. As women are brought into the bureaucratic and technocratic workforce, fitness designated by biological characteristics is starting to be replaced by fitness designated by behavior. This way, power vectors have an alibi which masks the traces of the colonial narrative alive in technoculture, but which can also allow them to embrace "fit" individuals that emerge from "unfit" populations.

Conclusion

Two key problems occur in attempting to use evolutionary theory in the analysis of cultural development. First, presenting cultural development as analogous to biological development is like trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole. There is little basis for likening a blind, groping process of species configuration within a chaotic, uncontrolled environment to a rationally engineered process of social and economic development within an orderly, controlled environment. Retrograde notions of cultural development, such as providence, progress, and manifest destiny, have more explanatory power, because they at least recognize intentional design in cultural dynamics, and at the very least they imply the existence of a power structure within the cultural environment. Evolutionary theory, in its social sense, is blind to the variable of power, let alone to the inequalities in its distribution.

The second problem is historical. Since the application of evolutionary theory has continuously been the foundational rhetoric and justification of social atrocity for the last 150 years, why would anyone want to open this Pandora's box yet again? At a time when biotech products and services are being developed that will allow imperatives of political economy to be inscribed directly into the flesh and into its reproductive cycle, why would anyone want to use a theoretical system with little, if any, informative power, that if deployed through pancapitalist media filters will promote eugenic ideology? While it cannot be denied that all inquiries for the purpose of gaining knowledge bring with them a high probability that the information collected could be misused in its application, in the case of social evolutionary theory, the historical evidence that it will be misused is overwhelming. This situation is not fuzzy enough to make this roll of the dice a smart gambit, and the good intentions of individuals who engage this discourse will not save it from capitalist appropriation and reconfiguration to better serve its authoritarian and nihilistic tendencies.