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# Toward an Activist Political Theory

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By downsizing social safety programs, inducing states of crisis in developing economies, and by accelerating a process of highly asymmetrical wealth accumulation, policies and philosophies associated with ‘neoliberalism’ have destabilized the political and social worlds of many groups. The ‘neoliberal’ constellation has also destabilized political theory, which must contend with “a complex, historically and spatially grounded experience that is negotiated and enacted at every site and region of the world” (Escobar 8). ‘Neoliberalism’ is formidable precisely because it lacks an apparent nucleus. This fact has run the table in political theory and other disciplines, demanding the production of new political modes and imaginaries retooled for a strange neoliberal foe, especially those capable of reconciling the “tectonic movements of power on the broad social level and [the] micro political dynamics [unfolding] within communities” (Apostolidis xxxi). This complication of the political landscape has led contemporary political theorists on an intense quest of political scrutiny—a search for modes of the political that more generously describe the breadth and capacity of “individual and collective aptitudes for politics” (Ferguson 1). Among these new directions and approaches, “paying attention to affect has been one method; focusing on quotidian life, another; so has been interrogating the distinction between the human and the nonhuman; and a fourth could be called investigating practices of intensification. Each of these approaches denies the dualism between resistance and power, finding other channels in which politics takes place” (Ferguson 1).

It is in this vein of theoretical exploration that I locate the effort of this essay. I aim to explore a reorientation of political theory: away from an abstracted focus on discourse and toward an engaged focus on the everyday politics of communities and bodies. I argue that, by working in local settings through ethnographic theory, shifting the focus of political theory away from dis-

course and toward the everyday politics of human beings, and by engaging in theoretical projects that are both abstractly rigorous and concretely *useable*, political theory may more fully support an effort to improve, not merely to theorize, the world as it is.

The structure of this essay will be in three parts. In the first, I will criticize the focus within political theory on discursive, world ordering systems such as ‘neoliberalism,’ arguing that these constructions inhibit the work of creating divergent solutions to the political problems that characterize the historical moment. In the second section, I undertake a history of these same political problems, making steps to disassociate them from ‘neoliberalism’ in an effort to divert the focus of the reader away from discourse, toward the consequences that certain political shifts inflict on communities and people. In the third section, I look to the political theory of Paul Apostolidis, whose work provides a keen example of the potency of political theory that eschews discourse and focuses instead on the ‘ordinary’ politics of human bodies. His work, I argue, illuminates the nuanced possibilities for modes of everyday political resistance to combat maldistribution of power and resources. In so doing, Apostolidis effectively rejects the tendency of discourse-focused theory to fixate on a restrictive, dichotomous mode of political assessment. In the final section of the essay, I reconstruct the genealogical basis of Apostolidis’s theory, incorporating Gramscian ideals of the “activist theorist” into a normative vision of a political theory that aims to construct a dialectical relationship with the community on which it focuses—a theory simultaneously abstractly rigorous and concretely generative.

### ***Problematizing Discourse***

In political theory (as well as in every discipline), discourse is structured by a common set of referents—words or phrases that define conditions, realities of living, ways of thinking. In a simple human exchange, the subjects of conversation are limited by the lexicons of the participants. So it is the case in the loftier reaches of academic discourse, where sets of referents simultaneously create the common lexicon of understanding necessary for scholarly conversation and reinscribe those conversations with the imprint of one set of discreet and stable meanings (Gibson-Graham 37). In political theory, writes Jeffery Isaac, “the same theorists... establish the terms of reference, the same vocabularies and metaphors are deployed and redeployed, the same texts continually cited” (642). Thus do discourse categories—especially those ubiquitous across disciplines, such as the ‘global system of capitalism’ or, more recently, ‘of neoliberalism’—structure our individual and collective capacities to imagine the world. The consequences of this are extensive. For political theory, the singularity with which ‘capitalism’ is constructed as an irresistible, hegemonic, world-ordering system has created an acute problem for resistance within discourse. The task of imagining a viable alternative to a regime described by such daunting adjectives is itself a daunting one (Gibson-Graham 22).

The same problem arises in political theory that focuses on ‘neoliberalism,’ which, in discourse, denotes an economic project originating in the late 1970s that has deployed patterns of deregulation and privatization in order to brush back the state from society and to consolidate capital into the hands of the global elite (3). This understanding of neoliberalism is best associated with the work of the geographer David Harvey, a Marxist scholar whose *Brief History of Neoliberalism* has been for many the seminal textbook on neoliberalism. Using landmark cases of

the US and UK governments of Reagan and Thatcher, Pinochet's Chile, and various other Latin American countries under the "Washington Consensus," Harvey describes the neoliberal regime foremost as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2).

While Harvey's definition of neoliberalism focuses on the more concrete economic characteristics of neoliberalism, the phenomenon is described in more capacious terms by theorists such as Wendy Brown. Brown, a theorist of the strong Foucauldian tradition, defines neoliberalism as a subject-reorganizing "form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms" (17). According to Brown, neoliberalism reconfigures both the individual and the state

on the model of the contemporary firm ... [expecting them] to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and ... [to] do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors (22).

"Neoliberal rationality," Brown writes, "disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors..." (30). Brown focuses her definitional work on the philosophical and sociological transformations enacted by neoliberalism. To Brown, the neoliberal regime approximates a total hegemony: an inescapable package of all-pervading policies and rationalities. Both Brown's and Harvey's narratives describe neoliberalism as a continuous historical-political phenomenon

that generates predictable deregulatory political outcomes and that saturates spheres of ideology, values, and society with the rationalities of competitive market capitalism.

For the purposes of this paper, I wish to firmly reject this theoretical construction of neoliberalism as a total hegemonic power and to instead focus on the historical-political shifts in policies and philosophical attitudes that many associate with ‘neoliberalism.’ This orientation aligns with the criticism of capitalism put forth by J.K. Gibson-Graham in *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)*. In their work, the theorists argue that theorizing ‘capitalism’ as a dominant figure of “discourse rather than as a social articulation or structure” allows one to “represent economic practice as comprising a diversity of capitalist and non capitalist activities” and to “argue that the non-capitalist [practices]...are...relatively ‘invisible’ because the concepts and discourses that could make them ‘visible’ have themselves been marginalized and suppressed” (xi-xii). This framework for understanding capitalism, as a foregone discourse category whose monolithic shape obfuscates a potentially rich array of divergent and subversive practices happening within and around itself, should be adapted to our understanding of neoliberalism, which seems at times to be so ubiquitous in its discursive rendering that it is impossible to begin to imagine how or where to resist it.

Brown herself, describing neoliberalism as “an order of reason...at once a global phenomenon, yet inconstant, differentiated, unsystematic, impure” (21), seems to suggest the incoherence of the signifier—an argument given harmony in the voices of anthropologists Lisa Hoffman, Monica Dehart and Stephen Collier, whose cross-cultural study of neoliberalism concretely illustrates the disunity of ‘neoliberalism’:

In Russia... programs for budgetary ‘adjustment’ ...served to re-embed Soviet social values of welfare provisioning, even as they introduced mechanisms of calculative choice into resource distribution...In China...the replacement of bureaucratic job assignments with labor markets helped produce a self-enterprising ethos among young professionals, even as they acted in the name of a patriotism reminiscent of the Maoist era...In Guatemala...indigenous activists invoked norms of efficiency, transparency and accountability—all often associated with neoliberalism—precisely to criticize state policies frequently characterized as ‘neoliberal’ (2)

The advantages of problematizing the monolithic construction of neoliberalism—“de-heroicizing” it, in Gibson-Graham’s language—are many. The most significant benefit is perhaps that, by refusing to consider neoliberalism as a coordinated global totality, theorists are freed of the necessity to combat it all at once. “It is,” Gibson-Graham argues, “the way capitalism has been ‘thought’ that has made it so difficult for people to imagine its suppression” (4). The same is true of neoliberalism. When ‘neoliberalism’ is produced as a global force of infinite momentum and mass, there is no formula of political resistance that may bring it to a halt.

Theorizing ‘neoliberalism’ in the language of our anthropologists, on the other hand, as a set of political policies and occurrences “all *often associated with* neoliberalism,” allows theory to escape the rigid confines of a discourse that holds ‘neoliberalism’ to be a cohesive hegemony. This turn asks of political theory to focus not on global resistance, or on formulating normative schemes that take place at the level of, say, the global economy,<sup>1</sup> but instead on local, grounded resistances—to cease avoiding “mundane, practical political problems located in space and time, in particular places with particular histories” (Issac 643). By focusing on resisting *not* an abstract discursive ‘regime’ but the concrete political transformations that play out their effects on real

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey’s normative politics is one example of a political imaginary I believe fails to resonate because of the exaggerated scope of its focus. In his work *Rebel Cities*, for example, Harvey’s normative focus is trained on an “anti-capitalist” movement predicated on the “struggle [to abolish the] class relation and all that goes with it” (116).

bodies and communities, political theory might come to approach these ‘mundanities’ with verve and humanism.

While political theory should avoid an overstated focus on “heroic” discourse constructions—on world-ordering regimes—this is not to say that it should lose sight of historical appreciation. A theoretical approach that focuses on the politics of communities must be steeped in a deep understanding of not only the present circumstances that constitute the lived reality within the community at hand, but of the historical patterns that produced that present condition. But to analyze history productively, it pays (even in a written description) to be deliberate about *how* one reconstructs history—how one situates it in relation to discourse. Semantics, after all, construct the discourse that, in turn, circumscribes our ability to imagine the world, and politics, capaciously. In an effort to free our imaginations for a later consideration of political possibilities within a world often restrictively defined as ‘neoliberal,’ I turn now to the political transformations “often associated with neoliberalism”<sup>2</sup> that have redefined the terrain of lived experience for human beings globally.

### ***Political Transformations***

Since the late 1970s, economies, governments and societies around the world have undergone profound structural changes that have had brutal consequences for human beings everywhere. In this section, I will unpack transformations of economy and society often associated with neoliberalism, focusing on the way in which alterations made on high “trickle down” to af-

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the rest of the paper, I will use the phrase ‘neoliberal(ism)-associated,’ or ‘often associated with neoliberalism’ to refer to policies that might, in other analyses, be called *neoliberal*. Although this is a messy and artless convention, it effectively draws attention to the linguistic nuance separating the discourse of discursive neoliberalism that is the object of my criticism and the finite and discreet policies with which I argue activist political theory should be concerned.

fect the most prone members of the global community. These data will help to elucidate a picture of a brutalized world—a world of displaced populations, rising rates of poverty, over-powerful corporate entities, and expulsions.

Before the 1980s, the key components of Western market economies were, generally, “fixed-capital intensity, standardized production, and the building of new housing in cities, suburbs and towns” (Sassen 17). This kind of economy, which operated primarily through manufacturing and production, powered an expansion of the middle class that persisted throughout the postwar period. In the mid-1970s, however, the US economy entered into ‘stagflation,’ a period of slowed growth and rising inflation that marked for many the expiration of the macroeconomic strategy of state intervention known as Keynesianism (Sassen 18).

This crisis of capital accumulation sent economic elites into a scrambled search for a new economic formula that might restore high rates of growth to both global and domestic economies. Enter neoliberalism—a philosophy of laissez-faire capitalism that placed a high premium on free trade, deregulation, and a general exclusion of the state from the marketplace (Harvey 15). During the early 1980s, neoliberal economic values were adopted by Ronald Reagan’s US and Margaret Thatcher’s UK governments, both of which undertook campaigns of aggressive deregulation in their respective domestic economies. Organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also began to preach a table of neoliberal-associated values internationally, incentivizing developing countries to adopt deregulatory packages of ‘structural adjustment’ that created free markets in formerly state-regulated sectors (Sassen 19).

While domestic and international economies were undergoing the convulsions of neoliberalism, finance economies were beginning to eclipse their manufacturing counterparts as the ba-

sic location of capital creation. Finance capital can be understood as the total value of “outstanding derivatives, a form of complex debt that derives its value from another source, ranging from other types of debt to material goods (Sassen 117). In 2013, the total value of finance capital stood at over \$1 quadrillion, more than ten times the value of global GDP. The majority of growth in the global economy over the last fifty years has come from finance; unlike growth created by manufacturing, however, which tends to be distributed relatively equally, growth created within finance takes the opposite tact—consolidating wealth in the hands of the few (Reich).

Since the 1980s, trade has been moving gradually in the direction of “freedom.” “Free trade,” a gospel articulated in every major trade agreement since 1985, has accelerated the process by which capital is grown and globalized through a prohibition (enforced primarily by hegemonic, developed powers such as the United States, Canada, the EU, Russia and China) against trade barriers, such as tariffs and import taxes (Trade). While free trade policies have stimulated capital growth over the last several decades, the cost of this growth has been disproportionately born by citizens in developing nations for whom fluxes of globalized capital have meant the deployment by parent governments of macroeconomic strategies that capitalize on a common marginal advantage of cheap labor (Sassen 130). Otherwise, free trade agreements have served to destabilize whole industries, whisking commodity production away to wherever production costs are lowest. This translocation of capital has led to massive migratory movements and to skyrocketing rates of poverty, malnutrition and death in developed and developing countries alike (135).

Another major commonplace of the neoliberal narrative is that it has led to the evacuation of state support from social safety net programs. While this has not been the case globally, the

social safety net programs of the United States, certain nations within the EU, and much of Latin America have been gradually defunded and reduced. In Latin America, governments have reduced the size of social safety net programs by an average of forty-six percent since 1987, and similar (albeit moderately less dramatic) trends have unfolded across Europe and the United States during the same period (Sassen 140). These developments have been concomitant with a rocketing upward trend in global poverty, material deprivation, and rates of suicide and economic migrational flight (141).

These statistical evaluations of the effects of the political transformations of the last forty years illustrate a world full of bodies under duress. Importantly, while the causes of rising inequality, global spikes in poverty, increased rates of expulsion and dispossession have been fairly uniform—caused by common macrocosmic changes in financial economies, trade policies and governance—the correspondent changes in the lived experiences of the generic ‘dispossessed’ have been brutal and multifarious. Traditionally, the ambit of political theory has been exclusive of the anthropological project of ethnography, which focuses on the production of descriptive, systematic accounts of the lived realities and subjectivities of communities and individuals. Political theory, instead, has been occupied with “metatheoretical” and “hypertheoretical” pursuits, largely focusing on the production of academic and abstract recombinations of canonical political theory—eschewing the muddy subjectivities of individuals in favor of more phlegmatic, normative analyses of power and hegemony (Isaac 640). For many anthropologists, on the other hand, the inclusion of normative analyses common to political theory into ethnographic projects would constitute a bad anthropology—a departure from the discipline’s focus on objectivity and documentation into the tainted territory of personal, political bias (Simpson 96).

These tendencies—of political theory to avoid ethnography and of anthropology to avoid normative analyses—are beginning to give way. Some theorists are finding ways to deftly combine the methodologies of the two disciplines into bodies of work that effectively reconcile normative theorization and power analysis with deep attention to the lived experiences of bodies within communities grappling with the political transformations of the age. These pieces of political theory are blazing new paths for the discipline, expanding a collective imagination of the political and of possibilities for political resistance in ways that are resonant, intimate, and alive.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the first and best example of a political theory that reconciles ethnography with political analysis, and that excavates new zones of the political in seemingly depoliticized environments, consists in political theorist Paul Apostolidis's book *Breaks in the Chain: What Immigrant Workers Can Teach America about Democracy*, which focuses on a community of Mexican laborers working in a Tyson/Iowa Beef Processing (IBP) plant in Eastern Washington. In his work, Apostolidis conducts an ethnographic study that highlights both the dehumanized workplace conditions at the plant and the political struggles of a community embattled in a particularly brutal lived reality with origins in a 'neoliberal' policy turn of the 20th century.

### ***Whatever Comes, We're Ready: Resistance in the Factory***

The stories of the Mexican laborers who constitute the focus of Paul Apostolidis's *Breaks in the Chain* begin with the Mexican debt crisis of 1985. This was the period, at least, in which most of the migrants featured in Apostolidis's work migrated to the US. The seeds of the debt

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<sup>3</sup> One such exemplary theorist, in addition to Paul Apostolidis, who receives much attention in this paper, is Audra Simpson, whose work with a Mohawk band on settler colonialism and a politics of 'refusal' is emblematic of the kind of localized focus that I am interested in.

crisis were planted in 1965, fifteen years before what most recognize as the beginnings of the ‘neoliberal period,’ with the establishment of free trade zones and maquiladoras (factories that produced goods at low cost) in Latin America (Solidarity). Free trade policy during this period overwhelmingly favored Western developed nations, siphoning wealth away from less developed Latin American countries and forcing them to borrow capital from foreign lenders. Maquiladoras, which became a larger portion of the Mexican economy’s foundation and a primary conduit of international capital flows within the larger Mexican economy, simultaneously began to hollow out the integrity of the Mexican wage base (Harvey 183).

In 1985, the debt accumulated by several Latin American countries reached a critical point at which a default was triggered and followed by an economic collapse that devastated many traditional and sustainable industries. Other neoliberal-associated forces, such as a critical “lack of adequate public welfare supports” led to mounting rates of poverty during the decade; migration also increased during this period, swelling “by over thirty percent between 1980 and 1988” (Apostolidis 46). Francisco Gonzales, one of Apostolidis’s interview subjects, recounts the poverty rampant in Mexico during this period and gives a sense of the allure of migration:

...it got really hard to earn your bread there in Mexico, your daily bread... When I had the opportunity to come to the other side, then—then I gave it a try... I didn’t want to stay here. But because of necessity, the economic crisis that happened in Mexico, well, that makes us have to be here more years... Here you’ll notice people of all kinds: lawyers, doctors, teachers—we all come here out of the same necessity. If we weren’t in need, we would be there. If they paid me the equivalent of four, five dollars an hour, I’d be in Mexico, I wouldn’t be here. But there aren’t those luxuries: in Mexico, there aren’t enough sources of work to survive. (87)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This section, which includes long excerpts of the interviews Apostolidis conducted with the factory workers, parallels Apostolidis’s work, which similarly foregrounds the voices of the community of workers in order to give primacy to *their* stories.

As the subjects of Apostolidis's work make clear, the promise of American opportunity belied the more brutal reality lying in wait. To Ramona Díaz, one of the Tyson plant workers, the defining condition of life in America was, in fact,

...that here you spend all your time shut in. That's what it is—you go to work and you come back; you spend all your time shut in. It's not like in your own country. Because in your own country... you spend all your time outside. And not here. Here you do everything shut up inside. You come home from work tired and you have to do things at home... It's really hard to be a person here. (90)

For Ramona, as for many migrants, the daily work of living required honing the ability to hide—to avoid the ubiquitous gaze of a society in which you are considered 'illegal.' For others, the defining condition of life in America were the routines of pain associated with migrant life. Pedro Ruiz "stressed...the vulnerability of...bodies to discomfort, pain, indignity, and even traumatic injury":

"When my girl, my first girl, was born, I was out pruning and I don't know what it was that got us, but five of us had to go to the hospital. For five days I couldn't see anything." (119)

Ruiz goes on to say that, when his wife went into labor at home, he was unable to see the road as he drove her to the hospital, and that he could not see or hold his daughter during the period immediately after her birth. For Ruiz, life is structured by a constant threat of injury or death; the demands of work come to impede his basic ability to interact with his family.

Felipe Ortiz, similarly, describes the demands of his work as exceeding physically exhaustion:

The job sucks everything out of you—all your energy ... because the job is really hard. What a difference, when you work in a job [where] ... when you leave, you go home satisfied ... It's very different to leave work tired than to leave work in pain. That is very diffe-

rent. Because fatigue is one part of it, but the greater part isn't fatigue—it's pain, from doing the same job that is so repetitive. To the point where, the people, when we get home, we lie down, and we can't sleep—we get up right away. Our fingers, our hands fall asleep from that same pain. The next day we get up with hands that are in pain and that have fallen asleep, making little movements to try to get the blood flowing ... It's not a matter of leaving work tired. You leave work injured. (124)

These narratives are eloquent of the gut-wrenching immediacy with which political reconfigurations congeal into unfamiliar forms of living—senseless brutalities committed against human bodies. The testimonials of these individuals give voice to the brutality of a process by which, in part due to macroscopic economic reorganizations associated with 'neoliberalism,' a whole community of people were shepherded into a form of life defined by constant pain, insecurity and exhaustion.

Despite the brutal conditions experienced by the Apostolidis's migrant community, the group was nevertheless able to organize politically. Through simple, 'ordinary' acts of politics that occur in the workplace, as well as through more formal political acts, such as unionization, the migrant community was able to push back against the corporation power of Tyson/IBP. Focusing on the 'micropractices' used by the workers to resist the domination of the Tyson/IBP corporation, Apostolitis argues that the everyday experiences of the factory workers have a distinct political valence, suggesting that authentic political acts can take place within even the managed temporal routines of factory production (150). With the "responsibility for escaping injuries and health problems being thrust upon them and with no way to stay fully out of range of abusive supervisors," Apostolidis writes, "workers developed special practices for minimizing the harm that came to them" (152). Jorge Hernandez, one factory worker who worked in an unsterile area

of the slaughterhouse, and who regularly came in contact with skin ailments, describes the measures he took to combat the negligence of the factory:

[Some of the cows] come in with disease and all that. And that's what makes you break out in rashes... But I always, every break, I put alcohol on my arm, or if I don't then when I get home I put on creams and salt water, this way, so I don't get an infection. (152)

To Apostolidis, this self-preservative micropractice as a political act, an effective means of fracturing the hegemonic control of the plant over the lives of the workers. Hernandez, too, locates a kind of political ethos in the act, describing the practice of self-preservation as the basis of solidarity shared by the workers (153).

Another example of a political micropractice is demonstrated by Esperanza Soto's insistence on not tolerating verbal abuse from supervisors:

I told him no, he might be a supervisor but with me he wasn't going to go around yelling all the time... and after that they asked me to forgive them... And since then they've never said anything to me (153)

Soto's refusal to be verbally abused, and the successful response that her refusal elicited from her supervisors, represents a concrete political victory—a small yet significant redistribution of power from a dominating supervisor to a dominated laborer. Collectively, these micropractices give political animation to the daily experiences of labor in the plant, and forge a political solidarity among the workers through a lattice of shared practices of resistance and subversion of the corporate power of Tyson/IBP.

The more recognizably political actions of the group occurred when a core of the Tyson/IBP laborers mobilized themselves and their co-workers into an informal union, whose organizational efforts culminated in a strike at the Tyson plant in 1999. The story of the labor union, according to Apostolidis, began in the mid-1990s, during a period in the plant characterized by

“plummeting wages, increased speeds of production, harsher supervision, and multiplying health and safety hazards” (162). In the beginning, the union was a collective of twelve or fifteen workers, grouped around the leadership of Diego Ortega and Maria Martinez. The efforts of the unofficial union were, at the outset, low-key—amounting to informal meetings at which members would commiserate about conditions at the plant. As time passed and the group’s membership grew, they became more active, and began to coordinate collective demonstrations of a more overtly political nature (165). During a

Contract renegotiation dispute in which IBP was seeking to eliminate the workers’ pensions, tensions boiled over. One day that summer, after the company summarily fired workers who had engaged in a planned work stoppage to protest the speed of the chain, a small group of workers walked off the job. They were followed almost immediately and (somewhat) unexpectedly by most of the other workers at the factory. (163)

The strike, although it failed to preserve the workers’ pensions, vaulted the leadership of the informal union into leadership positions within the official Teamsters union local to the plant. The Teamsters union, once brought under the control of Ortega and Martinez, was “immediately democratized,” a process that “multiplied the opportunities provided by the union for participation and politicization” (Apostolidis 164)

The union provided a common political space for the organization of the workers employed at the Tyson/IBP plant. For Ortega and Martinez, it also provided a means by which to educate the workers on their legal rights and their organizational tactics. Ultimately, though the union served as a valuable venue for education, fractures in the leadership led to commensurate fractures in the union’s cohesiveness and thus its ability to sustain a unified front against Tyson/IBP (167). Nevertheless, the activist culture and organizational education provided by the union

led other workers to stage demonstrations of collective power, even without the direct support of the group. One powerful assertion of collective power is relayed by Martinez, who remembered:

We used to tell people: “at ten o’clock, we’re all going to...hit the table, the metal table, with our hooks.” Slaughter did the same thing. They would bang the knives. We used to make noise at the same time so the company knew there was...something built between us, slaughter and us....There was a time we just bought a bunch of, like, fifty balloons...and everybody signed the balloons. “Respect”—we just had one week of “respect”...a week of “safety.”

... We did it ourselves. ... We had one sticker that said, “Ready.” You know, we just put “read.” And the supervisors and the managers were, like, “‘Ready’—what does that mean” So people would respond, “We’re just ready.” You know, we taught them, you just respond, “We’re ready. Whatever comes, we’re ready” (175).

There are two immediately apparent ways of looking at these moments of political resistance. On the one hand, it is possible to imagine the ‘ordinary politics’ of the laborers and their effort to unionize as insufficient, one example of the failure of a vulnerable group to resist the overwhelming corporate power associated with neoliberalism. In such an analysis, the worker group is paired against the heroic discursive construction of ‘neoliberal corporate power.’ Its defeat becomes a tile in a fundamentally cynical mosaic of political analysis, wherein the apparent failure of small moments of political resistance redirects our attention toward what seems as the only other possibility: large moments of political resistance.<sup>5</sup> These, however, feel unsatisfactory, considering the particularized realities and acute brutalities generated by the policies associated with discursive systems, such as ‘neoliberalism,’ which political theory often seeks to dismantle.

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<sup>5</sup> Again, David Harvey’s work in *Rebel Cities* comes to mind, in which he advances a normative politics of a totalizing class-based revolution—a movement that aims to empower “laborers...[to] “democratically and collectively...manage [themselves] and [to] decide on what they will produce...” and that “engage[s] with, but also create[s] an alternative to, the capitalist laws of value determination on the world market” (119). While this vision is commendably aspirational, it seems thin when read on the heels of a lengthy exploration of the highly particular political conditions of the migrant labor union featured in *Breaks in the Chain*. It is hard to imagine how Harvey’s ambitions might be reconciled with the meager resources of myriad oppressed groups, like the migrant workers, embattled in their own brutal dynamics.

On the other hand, we might focus on the relative success of the workers' politics. An ordinary gesture of coordination—banging knives against a tabletop—was a powerful assertion of collective power within a space of brutality and vulnerability—an “episodic, isolated bout of self-assertion...[a] counterthrust against [the hegemonic]” corporate powers within the plant (Apostolidis 160). The temporary resuscitation of the union, the staging of a strike: these more formal political acts allowed the workers to achieve concrete victories in the workplace—a tremendous accomplishment, considering the extreme disparities of power between Tyson/IBP and the organizers, many of whom were illegal immigrants and thus additionally vulnerable.

These modes of assessment, however, are far from the *only* two available. They are simply the most common. The sense that resistance must be either “big” or “small,” successful or unsuccessful, is a dichotomy that stifles a potentially more nuanced appraisal of divergent political practices. While these political practices may not satisfy the discursive desiderata of mounting a ‘resistance against’ ‘capitalism’ or ‘neoliberalism,’ they may nevertheless be valuable, subversive or instructive in other ways. Apostolidis, in his focus on the political valence of the micropractices of the Tyson/IDP laborers, provides one alternative narrative of the political, refusing to assess the value of these actions by comparing them to the monolithic structure of ‘neoliberalism’ and instead focusing on the effects of the practices on the local, microdynamics of power within the workplace. While Apostolidis’s theory is far from an exemplary model of the locally-focused activist theory I aim to suggest in this essay, his work is undergirded by certain tropes fertile for the elaboration of an activist theory.

### ***Breaks in the Chain: Activist Political Theory***

The structure of Apostolidis's theory, which begins with an orientation of the circumstances of the Tyson/IBP workers within the context of macroscopic political transformations and gradually narrows down to the level of the individual voice and the lived experience, is presupposed by a rich genealogy of theoretical methodology, which, drawn from Gramsci, makes the case for an activist political theory. Throughout his work, Apostolidis foregrounds the narratives of the community from which his theory arises. By focusing on a single, politically unique community, by foregrounding the narratives of the migrant laborers who compose it and by using those narratives as the "ferment for more abstract theory regarding the more generally pervasive dynamics of power," Apostolidis is able to pass freely between the spheres of the micro- and macroscopic, the visceral and the abstract, and is thus able to orient the localized political struggle of a single group within a set of global questions about neoliberalism, hegemony and power (23). These qualities of his theoretical approach, as well as the rich theoretical genealogy that underwrites his project, make his work an excellent blueprint for imagining an activist political theory that, through focusing on local dynamics of power, can both illuminate rubrics of hegemonic power and provide a tool by which political organizers can refine their approach to resisting the particular lived realities with which they must contend. In this section, I will explore the basis of Apostolidis's theory with a mind toward explicating the important features of my concept of activist theory.

To Apostolidis, critical analyses of hegemony should be produced by theorists whose work takes place "in the midst of political struggles that bring them into routine contact with the...participants in" the formations of power that are the analytical object (6). Adapting con-

cepts from Antonio Gramsci, Apostolidis argues that the production of good theory necessitates a dialectic relationship between the theorist and the theorized, “such that intellectuals’ political engagements with the *common sense* of ordinary people” may lead to political theory that orients itself toward the most relevant and appropriate political questions (Apostolidis xxxi). Theory along these lines

thus [means] avoiding the temptation to superimpose abstractly preconceived notions of a group’s ‘real’ interests upon it and to evaluate its politics mechanistically in terms of adherence to or divergence from that template of imputed, ‘true’ concerns. (xxxii)

While this blueprint ensures that theory remains relevant and grounded, theory produced in this manner has the secondary benefit of being productive for the communities on which it focuses, “[contributing] tangibly to leadership development and political education in local spheres” and “[making] the ‘effective reality’ of that group resonate with its agenda” through “conscious, planned struggle” (xxxii).

Apostolidis, like Gibson-Graham, returns to the Foucauldian notion of discourse as a world-ordering force, criticizing the failure of discursive theorizations of power and hegemony to provide politically generative outcomes. Writes Apostolidis,

Foucault’s figuration of the subject as constituted through discourse, or as an effect of power, has sometimes made it seem that little critical insight could be gained from trying to pass theory through the crucible of ordinary people’s common sense...But approaching discourse analysis in this [way]... insulates theory from the critical leaven of common sense...” (xxxii)

By placing the voices and the ‘common senses’ of ordinary people at the center of his theoretical approach, and by molding the experiences and narratives of the theorized into a core of grounded, appropriate theory containing tactical political insights for the community at hand *and* about the abstract operationalization of world-ordering forces that simultaneously produce and are pro-

duced by individuals, Apostolidis creates a space for his real theoretical innovation: an examination of how “disparate, individual acts of freedom-within-power congeal into *shared practices for narrating the social world* and thus help to constitute it and to expose it to *collective challenges*” (emphasis added) (xxxii).

Apostolidis theory provides an example of a model of political theory that simultaneously illuminates the hegemonic rubrics of power structuring the world and that generates possibilities for resisting them. This kind of theoretical approach is made possible by a careful attention to the narrative voices of subjects-within-the-condition, whose testimonies may “swell into a tide of popular movements contesting these political regimes at their very core” (Apostolidis 10). *Productive theory*, activist theory, is that which diligently seeks to reconcile the “micrological and the macrological” in order to expose the way in which the two “may combine in large-scale transformations...of power” (9), and which pursues this objective in a way that is edifying both for the intellectual community of theorists (because the analyses contained within may illuminate the circumstantial production of a force of of hegemony or discourse valuable to the greater theoretical community) and to the actual community whose travails form the centerpiece of the work (because they may be able to extract from it some sort of strategic insight or theoretical self-knowledge). This kind of theory—which would focus on coupling full accounts of the political and social conditions of a cohesive, politically embattled community with appropriate normative visions, and would weave throughout this an analysis of the location of the community within a larger constellation of hegemony and discourse—might provide a foundation from which to reimagine what politics might resemble.

In certain ways, Apostolidis's effort does, eventually, fall short. Though he spends many pages adapting Gramscian ideals into a robust argument for engaged theory, he never directly engages with the political struggles of the community whose stories fuel his work. Apostolidis also refrains from interjecting any normative solutions to or criticisms of the organizational strategies of the laborers in his book, comes up short of the Gramscian ideal of the engaged theorist. To Apostolidis's credit, however, this tendency is probably due to his focus on avoiding playing into the dichotomy of theorist/theorized described in the introduction of his book (9). Because part of Apostolidis's goal is to elevate the voices of the laborers to the level of 'co-theorists,' it is understandable that he would be reticent to overlay his own political suggestions onto the narratives of the workers.

Nevertheless, Apostolidis's ethnographic approach congeals into a piece of work that animates the narratives of a struggling community in a way that feels both honest and incisive. Over several hundred pages in *Breaks in the Chain*, Apostolidis provides a hint of the possibilities for an ethnographically grounded political theory: to infuse political analysis with a kernel of grounded honesty, and to produce (in the theory itself) a didactic tool by which political activists and organizers might glean self-knowledge, tactical insights about their own efforts, and which might enable communities struggling within brutal conditions to self-orient within broad, shifting, discursive conglomerations of politics, sociology and philosophy. Used in this way, political theory might engage analytical and normative projects that simultaneously support movements of political resistance that take place in the intimate and fertile settings of small, politically cohesive communities.

## *Conclusion*

Ours is an age of instability, and of change. Political discontent, fueled by increasing conditions of precarity, has crept into every corner of the zeitgeist. Traditional, stable modes of politics have denatured, leaving what in their place? Concurrently, conditions have worsened for the many. These facts are intuitive, and motivate the turn of political theory I have called for in this essay. My conviction that political theory should be retooled in order to be more practical does not, I hope, seem like some kind of anti-intellectual crusade. The idea simply emerges from a belief that political theory is a discipline full of great minds engaged in projects of greater humanity—and from a desire to share that energy more directly and effectively with those in the trenches who could make use of the insight.

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